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DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

MASTER'S THESIS

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**ON THE NATURE OF EMOTION:
A SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS**

O POVAZE EMOCE:
SYSTEMATICKÁ ANALÝZA

I hereby wish to express my sincere gratitude to doc. Daniele De Santis for his enduring support in the course of my master's studies and for letting me explore and express my ideas freely and openly.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of the present work, that I have duly cited all used sources and literature, and that this text has not been used in the course of another university program or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

Prague, 6th of August 2024

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present thesis is to work out, in a systematic manner and in as clear and accurate terms as possible, an answer to the question: *what is emotion?* Many answers to this question have already been proposed, but, as I endeavor to show, none of them are adequate. The available theories either fail to recognize what sort of “thing” emotion is and therefore miss the mark completely, or they determine this accurately, albeit not explicitly, but then reduce emotion to some other phenomenon within the same domain, such as perception, thought or motivation. In contrast, I endeavor to show, firstly, that emotion is a *mental phenomenon*, and not, say, an experiential state, a brain process, or a complex event that involves the entire organism; secondly, that emotion is a mental phenomenon *sui generis*, that is, a mental phenomenon that has its own unique nature and role and is, as such, irreducible to any other mental phenomenon; and, finally, what exactly emotion, as a mental phenomenon *sui generis*, is as far as its specific nature is concerned. As such, I work out a complex and systematic account of the nature of emotion.

KEYWORDS

Theory of Emotion, Philosophy of Emotion, Psychology of Emotion, Phenomenology of Emotion, Emotional Experience, Mood

ABSTRAKT

Cílem této práce je systematickým způsobem a v co nejjasnějších a přesných termínech vypracovat odpověď na otázku: *co je emoce?* Mnoho odpovědí na tuto otázku již existuje, ale, jak se pokusím ukázat, žádná z nich není adekvátní. Již dostupným teoriím se totiž buď nedaří správně určit, co za „věc“ emoce je, a tudíž se zcela mýjí s cílem, anebo to určí správně, byť ne explicitně, ale vzápětí emoci redukuje na jiné jevy v rámci stejné domény, např. na vnímání, myšlení nebo motivaci. Já se v této práci naopak pokusím ukázat, že, za prvé, emoce je, co do své generické povahy, *mentální jev*, a ne třeba zkušenostní stav, proces v mozku, nebo komplexní událost která se odehrává v celém organismu; za druhé, že emoce je, co do své specifické povahy, *mentální jev sui generis*, tj., *mentální jev* který má svou vlastní, jedinečnou povahu a roli, a který je tudíž neredukovatelný na jiné *mentální jevy*; a, za třetí, co přesně tedy emoce, jakožto *mentální jev sui generis*, je co do své specifické povahy. Celkově tak vypracovávám systematický a komplexní výklad povahy emoce.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Emoce, Teorie emocí, Filosofie emocí, Psychologie emocí, Fenomenologie emocí, Emoční zkušenost, Nálada

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of the present text is to provide a systematic account of the nature of emotion. In other words, in the present text, I endeavour to work out, in a systematic manner and in as clear and accurate terms as possible, an answer to the question: *what is emotion?*

To be sure, a great many answers to this question have already been proposed. However, as it seems to me, none of the available answers adequately describe what emotion is. Firstly, many theories of emotion fail at the very outset, because they fail to recognize even what sort of “thing” emotion is, or, in more technical terms, what the *generic nature of emotion* is. As I discuss in the first part of the present work, emotion, as far as its generic nature is concerned, is a *mental phenomenon*. Many theories of emotion, however, speak of emotion as if it belonged to an entirely distinct *genus* of phenomena, such as bodily processes (e.g., Damasio 1994) or experiential states (e.g., James 1890; Tappolet 2016), and many theories even speak of emotion in terms of multiple genera of phenomena at once, as is the case, e.g., in most of emotion science, where emotion is typically defined at a highly abstract level as a complex event constituted of various components, e.g., a mental component, a physiological component, a behavioral component, and an experiential component (see Moors 2024). Such theories cannot provide an adequate account of the nature of emotion even in principle, because they are looking for it in the wrong place, so to speak. Indeed, a proper determination of the generic nature of emotion is not only a prerequisite for providing an adequate account of the specific nature of emotion, but already itself an essential part of answering the question concerning the nature of emotion.

Secondly, essentially all theories of emotion that operate on the proper level of analysis, namely that of mental phenomena, or *psychology* properly understood, and that, accordingly, may be taken to truly constitute theories of emotion, define emotion in terms of some other mental phenomenon. That is to say, while theories within this category get the *generic* nature of emotion right—although, to my knowledge, it is always merely taken for granted and never explicitly established—they get the *specific nature of emotion* wrong. In the most general terms, emotion is defined either as a form of *thought* (e.g., Solomon 1976; Nussbaum 2001), as a form of *motivation* (e.g., Frijda 1986; Scarantino 2014), or as a form of *perception* (e.g., de Sousa 1987).¹ The first two views have a very long tradition, as each of them has its roots in the work of Ancient Greek philosophers, in particular Aristotle and the Stoics, and have—especially the motivational view—been advocated in numerous ways throughout the medieval period (see, e.g., Knuuttila 2004; Newmark 2008; King 2009). The third is, to my knowledge, a more recent theory, but it is not at all unlikely that a similar view is buried somewhere in the sea of scholastic tomes. Nevertheless, as I endeavour to show in the present text, neither of these proposals is correct. In particular, I shall attempt to show that emotion is a mental phenomenon in its own right, or, in other words, a mental phenomenon *sui generis*, that differs in important respects from perception, thought and motivation and must, therefore, be clearly distinguished from them.

¹ Cf. Brady 2024 for a recent overview.

In sum, I believe that, despite the enormous amount of literature on the topic of emotion, an adequate systematic account of the nature of emotion that would, firstly, explicitly determine and characterize the generic nature of emotion as well as point out the implications that the insight into the generic nature of emotion has for the study of emotion, and, secondly, provide an adequate characterization of the specific nature of emotion, remains a *desideratum*. The present work is an attempt to provide such an account.

The text is divided into three parts. In the first part, which constitutes the theoretical fundament for the rest of the work, I concern myself with what I have called the generic nature of emotion. Here, I endeavour to show that, as far as its generic nature is concerned, emotion is a *mental phenomenon*, and discuss the properties that appertain to emotion *qua* mental phenomenon. Specifically, I discuss the difference and relation between emotion, emotion experience and brain activity, point out the inadequacy of alternative notions of the generic nature of emotion, and endeavour to show that, *qua* mental phenomenon, the proper nature of emotion can only be ascertained on the basis of an analysis of the experiential states associated with it. Accordingly, in the second part, I carry out a detailed phenomenological analysis of emotion experience, and, in the third and final part, I systematically derive an account of the proper nature of emotion on its basis and discuss the unique role that emotion plays in our lives, as well as lay out the differences and relation between emotion and drive, judgement, perception and mood.

PART ONE

ON THE GENERIC NATURE OF EMOTION

§1

Introduction

As I have discussed in the above introduction, the first thing we must consider before we go on to attempt to determine the specific nature of emotion is the generic nature of emotion. That is to say, before we can discuss what defines emotion and distinguishes it from the other phenomena within the same domain, we must first determine what that domain is, or, in other words, what *genus* of phenomena emotion belongs to. This is, in fact, of great importance, for, as I have already pointed out, and shall discuss in more detail below, many prominent “theories of emotion” describe phenomena that not only have nothing to do with emotion *per se*, but do not even belong to the same *genus* of phenomena in general, and therefore miss the mark completely.

Now, the word ‘emotion’ is a *psychological category*, or, in other words, a *mental term*. As such, to understand the generic nature of emotion, we must understand what it is that mental terms properly understood refer to. In the following, I point out that all mental terms in their proper sense refer to a particular class of abstract functions known as *mental phenomena*, and that, accordingly, emotion, as far as its generic nature is concerned, is a mental phenomenon in this sense. Then, I draw the general implications of this analysis, such as the need to distinguish theories of emotion from theories of emotion experience, and the inadequacy of alternative accounts of the generic nature of emotion.

Afterwards, I discuss in more detail the two fundamental properties that define emotion *qua* mental phenomenon. Firstly, I turn to the relation between emotion and brain activity. Here, I point out that mental phenomena, that is, the various abstract functions, are, in each particular case, realized by the brain, and apply this analysis to the more specific case of emotion. I also argue that and why, even though the above is the case, emotion cannot simply be *identified* with brain activity.

Secondly, I discuss the nature of the relation between emotion and emotion experience. As I endeavor to show, in each particular case, the relation between the two is such that emotion experience is the subjective aspect of the output of the brain process that implements the given instance of emotion.

Finally, I discuss the manner in which the nature of emotion is to be ascertained. In particular, I endeavor to show that the nature of emotion can only be ascertained on the basis of a phenomenological analysis of the experiential states associated with it.

§2

On the Proper Meaning of Mental Terms, or Mental Phenomena and Conscious Experience

All mental terms, in their proper sense, designate *abstract functions*. In other words, the proper meaning of mental terms is always fixed by reference to a particular causal role.² Roughly speaking,

² As far as I know, the contemporary articulation of this insight goes back to David Lewis (1966) and David Armstrong

what else is *perception*, for instance, than the function of informing us about the properties of the environment and guiding action in it? What else is *pain* than the function of informing about stimuli harmful to the body and moving us to respond to it? What else is *thinking* than the function of operating with available information in various ways and influencing, or guiding, other aspects of mental activity and behavior? Indeed, what else is the *mind* (previously ‘soul’) itself than the sum of our capacities, or faculties, personal propensities, dispositions and so forth that we possess *qua* ‘ensouled’ or ‘minded’ beings?³

We can, however, be a little more specific. For, mental terms do not simply refer to functions in general, but rather only to a very specific class of functions which we, in virtue of their specific properties, call *mental phenomena*. Mental phenomena are a particular subset of functions that naturally occur in higher biological organisms and that are characterized by at least three significant properties, namely, firstly, that they are realized by the complex activity of the brain, secondly, that their realization influences or determines behavior as well as other mental phenomena, and, thirdly, that their realization is typically accompanied by experiential states.⁴ In short, then, we may say that mental terms in their proper sense refer to mental phenomena, where mental phenomena are to be understood strictly as the particular kind of function just described.

Of course, subjectively, we are inclined to understand mental terms as referring not to functions, but rather to the experiential states that we have when the given functions that constitute the proper meaning of mental terms, namely, mental phenomena, are being realized in us. For instance, when we think of vision, we sooner think of the particular experience of *what it is like to see something* (Nagel 1974), rather than the function properly denoted by the term vision, and the same applies to all other mental terms that denote mental phenomena which there is something it is like to experience.

As a consequence, for most people, mental phenomena simply *are* experiential states, and mental terms therefore labels for experiential states. This is, indeed, entirely natural, as experiential states are the only aspect of mental phenomena that is actually “given” to us, so to speak: when we are afraid, for instance, we are not aware of the function being realized in us, but rather of a particular subjective experience. As such, the term ‘fear’, for us, simply comes to mean that experiential state, and the same goes for all other mental terms.⁵

For the purposes of ordinary communication, this is not a problem. We are, in general, able to communicate with others about our mental goings-on without any issues if we take mental

(1968).

³ Cf. Kim 2011, p. 6.

⁴ It is, of course, possible to consider further properties as essential to mental phenomena. For instance, it is often said that “intentionality” constitutes an essential feature of mental phenomena (Kim 2011, pp. 23–26). For our purposes, it is unnecessary to determine these properties exhaustively. It is, I believe, certain that mental phenomena, as they occur in biological organisms, possess the above three properties, and it is, as far as I can tell, not unjustified to consider them to be the most significant with regard to their status as ‘mental’. Let it be noted that the above characterization is not meant to pertain to the unnaturally occurring realizations of mentality, as, for instance, in artificial intelligence systems. It is, in this sense, a purely *empirical* characterization.

⁵ Cf. Jackendoff 1987, ch. 1 and, more notably, Chalmers 1996, ch. 1 for more detailed discussions of this ambiguity of mental terms.

phenomena to be experiential states. However, it *is* a problem in scientific and philosophical endeavors, where precision is necessary. In such contexts, we cannot afford to identify mental phenomena with what is merely their *subjective aspect*. The subjective experience we have when we are afraid is, strictly speaking, not *fear*, but rather *what it is like to be afraid*; similarly, the subjective experience associated with visual perception is not *vision*, but rather *what it is like to see*; and so forth in all such cases. Mental phenomena and the associated experiential states are, to be sure, most intimately related, as I discuss below (§5); however, they are not simply the same.

In short, the fact that mental terms are commonly used to refer to experiential states changes nothing whatsoever about their proper meaning, which, as I have said above, consists in the designation of that class of abstract functions that we call mental phenomena.

§3

Exposition of the Generic Nature of Emotion

Having analyzed in general terms the proper meaning of mental terms, we may now articulate the generic nature of emotion. Emotion, as far as its generic nature is concerned, is nothing else but a *mental phenomenon* in the above sense. In other words, emotion, much like pain, perception or thought, is a *naturally occurring function* which is realized by the brain, which influences or determines behavior as well as other mental phenomena, and whose realization is typically accompanied by specific experiential states, namely, as I discuss in detail in the following chapter, affective feeling.

Importantly, it follows from this determination of the generic nature of emotion that a proper characterization of the *specific* nature of emotion will consist in the characterization of the specific function whose realization we refer to as ‘emotion’.

Consequences for the Study of Emotion

1. Theory of Emotion and Theory of Emotion Experience. An important consequence of the above is that a *theory of emotion* is not the same thing as a *theory of emotion experience*. In other words, to give an account of the nature of emotion experience is not the same thing as to give an account of the nature of emotion itself. As such, many so-called theories of emotion are actually not theories of emotion at all, but rather accounts of emotion experience (cf. Reisenzein and Döring 2009). This pertains especially to the early psychological tradition (e.g., James 1890; Stumpf 1899; Wundt 1896; Titchener 1908) and the phenomenological tradition (e.g., Brentano 1874; Husserl 1901; Pfänder 1904; Scheler 1916; Sartre 1939). However, the two kinds of theories often remain conflated to this day (e.g., Russell 2003; Solomon 2004; Döring 2007; Slaby 2008; Vendrell Ferran 2008; Tappolet 2016). At the same time, however, as we shall see further below (§6), the two kinds of theories are most intimately related, as a proper theory of emotion can only be arrived by means of an analysis of emotion experience.

2. On Theories of Emotion as Experience. As we have seen, mental phenomena are distinct from experiential states. As such, it follows that the view which explicitly claims and defends the notion that emotions simply *are* experiential states is false.

Perhaps the most influential and well-known articulation of this view is to be found in the texts of William James, who famously defined emotion as the “feeling of [bodily] changes as they occur” (1890, p. 449), and with whom the view on which emotion is defined as a particular kind of experience is typically associated. However, we find, although much more scarcely, views akin James’ feeling theory even in contemporary literature. For instance, in 2011, Uriah Kriegel published a paper where he argued in favor of a “new feeling theory of emotion” (2011), which he further defended in a later publication (2015, sec. 4), and, in 2018, the prominent neuroscientist and emotion researcher Joseph LeDoux stated, along with the clinical psychologist Stefan Hofmann, that “subjective emotional experience, the feeling, is the essence of an emotion” (2018, p. 67).⁶

Note that this theory of emotion is not necessarily identical with a “feeling theory” of emotion. One can identify emotion with emotion experience *without* also holding that emotion experience consists in feeling. For instance, Sabine Döring defines emotion as “an occurrent conscious state” (2007, p. 372), but understands the nature of said state in perceptual terms (cf. Tappolet 2016).

3. On Holistic Theories of Emotion. In emotion science, emotion is typically defined in a holistic manner, namely, as a complex event that involves, in essence, the whole organism. More specifically, as I have already said in the introduction, emotion in this sense is conceived as a complex response of the whole individual that is constituted by a synchronized occurrence of a variety of distinct components, namely, typically, a cognitive component, a motivational component, a bodily component, a behavioral component, and an experiential component. The well-known psychologist of emotion Klaus Scherer, for instance, defines emotion as “an episode of interrelated, synchronized changes in the states of all or most of the five organismic subsystems in response to the evaluation of an external or internal stimulus event as relevant to major concerns of the organism” (2005, p. 697), which subsystems correspond to the five above-mentioned components (*op. cit.*, p. 698).

The various scientific “theories of emotion”, then, consist in providing distinct accounts of the various components and their interrelations (Moors 2024). Scherer’s theory, for instance, is known as a kind of “appraisal theory”, because it considers the cognitive component, namely, appraisal, to be that which determines the occurrence and shapes the realization of the remaining components. In contrast, an advocate of a “network theory”, for instance, would say that the distinct emotion components are encoded in a network, and that each component constitutes a potential entry point for its activation, wherefore an emotion—the given response pattern—can be elicited not only via appraisal, but, e.g., also via particular patterns of behavior (Moors 2024, pp. 238-239). A very prominent strand of scientific “theories of emotion” is the “affect-program” tradition, according to which emotions—understood in the above described holistic sense as complex response patterns—are encoded in the brain in the form of hardwired neural “programs”, carved, as it were, by evolution (e.g., Tomkins 1962; Izard 1977; Ekman 1993; Panksepp 1998).

It is clear, however, that, if emotion is a mental phenomenon, such theories cannot be truly considered theories of emotion: for, mental phenomena simply are not such complex, holistic events

⁶ See also, e.g., Laird 2007; Prinz 2005; Whiting 2011.

that involve the entire organism. Thus, while, as I shall discuss further below, the occurrence of emotion *sensu proprio* is indeed typically accompanied by all or many of the components enumerated and discussed in scientific theories, and it is an interesting question how all these phenomena are related to emotion, emotion itself certainly cannot be defined in terms of their occurrence. In short, holistic definitions of emotion do not really tell us anything about what emotion truly is. The definitions employed in the science of emotion are, in essence, of a purely “working” character, namely in the sense that they are employed merely as tools for the development of theory.

4. On Physiological Theories of Emotion. Some authors characterize emotion in terms of physiological processes occurring in the body. For instance, the behaviorist John Watson defined emotion in the following way: “An emotion is an hereditary ‘pattern-reaction’ involving profound changes of the bodily mechanisms as a whole, but particularly of the visceral and glandular systems.” (1924, p. 215). In more recent literature, this view has been advocated primarily by the well-known neurobiologist Antonio Damasio. For instance, in 1994, Damasio writes: “I see the essence of emotion as the collection of changes in body state that are induced in myriad organs by nerve cell terminals, under the control of a dedicated brain system” (1994, p. 139), and, in a 2013 paper, he, along with Gil Carvalho, defined emotion in the following way: “A set of innate physiological actions triggered by changes in the internal or external environments and aimed at maintaining or restoring homeostatic balance.” (Damasio and Carvalho 2013, p. 145). Strictly speaking, such definitions have nothing to do with emotion properly understood: from a biological perspective, emotion occurs exclusively in the brain, and, even so, *qua* mental phenomenon, emotion cannot simply be identified with brain activity, as I discuss below (§4).

5. On Theories of Emotion as Behavior. Finally, some authors identify emotion with *behavior*. To my knowledge, this view is not very prominent in emotion literature, but it does have some advocates. For instance, Sartre’s theory of emotion (1939), as well as a number of remarks on the concept of mind and emotion by Merleau-Ponty (1945, 1964), can be interpreted along these lines. In contemporary literature, a view similar to that of these two authors has been proposed by Julien Deonna and Fabrice Teroni, who explicitly define emotion as bodily “attitudes” towards the world (2015), and the view that emotion is to be defined in terms of behavior, or conduct, has been explicitly put forth by Ondřej Švec (2013, 2023). While it is certainly true that emotion is intimately related to behavior, it is clear, I believe, that, as a mental phenomenon, emotion cannot, even in principle, be *defined* as behavior.

§4 Emotion and Brain Activity, or Psychology and Neuroscience

As I have discussed above, emotion is a mental phenomenon, i.e., in essence, a particular function that is realized by the complex activity of the brain. That is to say, in other words, that each token emotion occurrence is instantiated in the brain in the form of a particular complex pattern of brain activity. Thus, when we say, for instance, that we are *afraid*, which is to say, *undergoing fear*, the real world

correlate of this statement is nothing but a particular complex pattern of activity in the brain. The same analysis applies to all particular instances of emotion in general.⁷

It is, however, crucial to recognize that, although emotion is, in each particular case, realized by brain activity, it cannot simply be identified with brain activity. That is not to say that there is some mysterious entity called emotion that exists “over and above” brain activity. It is merely to say that the term emotion belongs to an entirely different level of analysis *of the brain* than that at which neuroscience operates, namely the level of analysis proper to psychology, or science of mind.

Generally speaking, at the level of analysis proper to psychology, we are not at all concerned with brain activity as such, that is, in a literal sense, but rather only with *what the brain does* in a purely abstract sense, namely in complete abstraction from the actual manner in which the brain does it. Consider, for instance, the word *pain*. From a psychological perspective, we may, as I have already done above, say that pain is the function of informing about harmful stimuli and moving us to respond to it in an adaptive manner. This, however, as per the present analysis, is nothing but an abstract description of *what the brain does* when a signal about a harmful stimulus is communicated to it from somewhere in the peripheral nervous system. Similarly, in searching for a description of the nature of emotion, we shall, in essence, be investigating what it is exactly that the brain does in situations in which we take ourselves to be undergoing emotional episodes.

Of course, psychological descriptions can be “translated”, so to speak, into the language of neuroscience, namely by studying and describing the precise manner in which the brain accomplishes the execution of the function in question. However, then, we would, strictly speaking, no longer be speaking of, say, *pain*, as which is a psychological term and exists only at the level of analysis proper to psychology, but rather merely of the implementing mechanisms that realize pain. In other words, what we find in studying the brain is, very roughly speaking, merely neurons and synapses, not thoughts, beliefs, emotions and desires.⁸

As such, we cannot say that emotions are “psychological-physiological phenomena” (Levenson 1994, p. 123) and describe them as such, as is so often done; emotions are purely *psychological*, which is to say that, strictly speaking, talk of emotion only makes sense on the level of psychology and in psychological terms. A mental phenomenon is *not* a physiological phenomenon, much like a physiological phenomenon is *not* a mental phenomenon. As I have described above, physiological, or, more specifically, neurophysiological phenomena realize mental phenomena, but that is far from saying that mental descriptions are identical to, or replaceable by, neurophysiological descriptions.

⁷ The neural activity underlying emotion has been extensively studied. For classical book-length investigations, see, for instance, Gray 1982, LeDoux 1996, and Panksepp 1998. For more recent material, see, e.g., Lindquist et al. 2012; Panksepp and Biven 2012; Pessoa 2017; Adolphs and Anderson 2018; Kandel et al. 2021, Part VII, ch. 42.

⁸As regards the latter point, cf. Cummins 2000, p. 128. The point goes back to the famous §17 of Leibniz’s *Monadologie*.

§5

On the Relation between Emotion and Emotion Experience

As I have said above, the realization of emotion is typically accompanied by particular experiential states. In other words, there is something specific it is like to undergo particular emotions: there are specific experiential states associated with being, say, afraid, elated, or sad. In the present paragraph, I shall endeavor to lay out in more detail the nature of the relation that obtains between these experiential states and emotion.

In the most general terms, the relation between emotion and emotion experience can only be properly stated as follows: in each particular case, emotion experience is the subjective aspect of the output of the process that implements emotion in the brain, or, in other words, that output given subjectively. This thesis may be analyzed into two distinct claims, namely, firstly, that (a) emotional experience is the *subjective aspect* of the implementing process, and, secondly, that (b) emotional experience is the subjective aspect of the *output* of the implementing process. In the following, I shall discuss these points in turn.

(a)

As we have seen above (§4), each particular realization of emotion, which is nothing but an abstract function, is instantiated in the brain in the form of a particular pattern of brain activity. In other words, in each particular case, emotion is implemented by a particular brain process. As a consequence, the question concerning the nature of the relation between emotion and emotion experience amounts to the question concerning the nature of the relation between emotion experience and the brain processes that implement emotion. In other words, the relation between emotion experience and emotion is, as far as its nature is concerned, the same as the relation between conscious experience and brain activity in general. The relation between conscious experience and brain activity, however, can only be accurately described in the following way: conscious experience is the *subjective aspect* of brain activity, or, in other words, brain activity *given subjectively*. Thus, since, as per the above, the relation that obtains between emotion experience and emotion is the same as that between conscious experience and brain activity in general, it follows that emotion experience is the subjective aspect of emotion.

That the relation between conscious experience and brain activity can only be accurately described in the above laid out way, which, of course, constitutes the crux of the above analysis, is a fundamental, and therefore logically nondemonstrable, fact. However, it is, as far as I am concerned, completely evident on proper consideration, provided we are unburdened by specific theoretical aims. In the following, I attempt to demonstrate the fact in the literal sense, that is, bring it to light, so to speak.

We know for a fact that conscious experience is dependent on the activity of the brain. More specifically, we know for a fact that whether we are conscious or not, as well as, when conscious, what

particular conscious experiences we have, depends on what is happening in the brain.⁹ At the same time, however, it is (i) evident on reflection that conscious experience is, as far as its nature is concerned, a non-substantial, non-physical ‘subjective’, or ‘first-person givenness’, for lack of better terms, and (ii) as a consequence of this being the case, it is entirely inconceivable that conscious experience should either be *produced by*, or *emergent from* neural activity.¹⁰ Neural activity is namely fundamentally physical in nature, and it is inconceivable how conscious experience, which, as per the above, is evidently non-physical and non-substantial, should be produced by, or emerge from, something physical. This fact, in combination with the observation of the systematic co-occurrence of changes in the brain and changes in conscious experience (or, in technical terms, the fact of the supervenience of conscious experience on brain activity), makes it very clear that the only proper analysis of the nature of the relation between conscious experience and brain activity is precisely that conscious experience is nothing but particular patterns of brain activity given subjectively, or, which is the same thing, what it is like *to be* an organism—or, more precisely, a brain—in which those patterns of activity occur.¹¹

In short, ontologically speaking, at each particular moment in which we are undergoing some particular experience, only *one* phenomenon is actually being instantiated, namely some particular pattern of brain activity which is implementing some mental phenomenon. Conscious experience, then, is simply this very same phenomenon given subjectively.¹²

(b)

In general terms, that only the *output* of a given implementing brain process, and not the process itself, “projects into consciousness”, to borrow Ray Jackendoff’s phrase (1987), or, in other words, that conscious experience is a subjective aspect solely of the *output* of the implementation of a given mental phenomenon, is simply a straightforward fact both completely evident on simple reflection as well as empirically evidenced.¹³

Consider perception, for instance. In our visual experience, for example, what we see are

⁹ See, e.g., Schiff 2007; Brodal 2010, pp. 383–384; Nir et al. 2013.

¹⁰ Cf. Strawson 2006, sec. 3.

¹¹ The notion ‘particular pattern of brain activity’ is here employed merely as a placeholder for the actual brain substrate of a given experience, which is, in each particular case, unknown to us, as we do not actually really know anything about what it is *exactly* in the brain that supports conscious experience (be it consciousness in general, or particular contents of consciousness). We do, of course, have much data pertaining to the so-called ‘neural correlates of consciousness’ (e.g. Koch et al. 2016), but this entire enterprise is highly problematic, both conceptually and methodologically (see, for instance, Noë and Thompson 2004; Hohwy 2009; Fink 2016; Owen and Guta 2019; LePauvre and Melloni 2021), and, indeed, largely based on a dated, ultimately phrenological notion of brain function (Anderson 2010, 2014; Pessoa 2022).

¹² This insight, which is the core of the just carried out exposition, has been inspired by Schopenhauer, in particular the second book of his *magnum opus*. In it, he introduces the idea that the body is “given” in two completely different ways, namely either as an object by medium of the senses, or completely immediately, that is, subjectively (1859, §18). To be sure, the details of his analysis are false, since, firstly, only the activity of the brain, not the organism as a whole, has a subjective aspect; and, secondly, this subjective aspect certainly is not ‘the will’, as Schopenhauer maintains. Nevertheless, the fundamental insight is present.

¹³ Accordingly, the notion has a long tradition in psychological thought (see, for an overview, Morsella and Bargh 2010).

“ready-made” percepts, so to speak, that is, percepts with particular, stable properties. At the same time, however, we know that the process of perception is a highly complicated process that consists in decoding information about the environment from the stimuli received via the senses and arriving at a complex representation of the source of said stimuli (Palmer 1999; Goldstein and Cacciamani 2022). From these two facts, it is simply evident that the visual experience correlates solely with the *result* of the perceptual process, that is, the representation of the environment actually arrived at, and not at all with the process itself.

This state of affairs is even more evident in the case of such phenomena as ambiguous figures, such as the Necker cube (*Fig. 1*), and binocular rivalry, as, in both cases, we can observe in real-time an alternation of the contents of our visual experience, even though the stimulus remains constant. Such phenomena are namely, precisely because the stimulus is constant, *only* explicable by reference to the perceptual process alternating between two different interpretations of the very same stimulus; wherefore, since what we visually experience alternates, and we have no awareness whatsoever of the underlying process responsible for this alternation, it is clear that, in each case, the content of our visual experience correlates solely with the interpretation arrived at, or, which is the same thing, the output of the perceptual process.

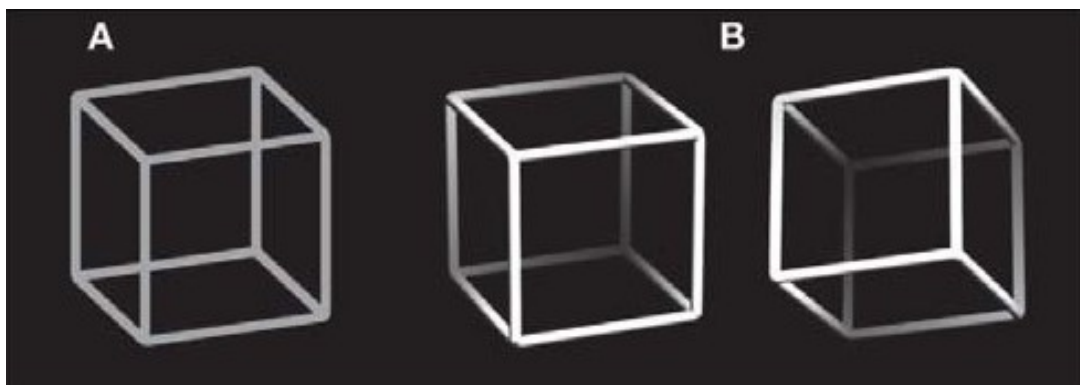


Figure 1 The Necker cube (A) and a disambiguation of the two ways it may be seen, namely, as it were, ‘from above’ or ‘from below’ (B) (from Kornmeier and Bach 2012, 2). Simply look at A alone to experience the alternation.

It is not difficult to see that the same applies to emotion as well. In general terms, when we experience an emotional response in relation to something, we are only aware of the particular modification of our “felt mental state” that it elicits in us, not at all the process underlying the given modification. Accordingly, we may indeed say that emotion experience also only correlates with the output of the implementing brain process, and not the process itself. If we combine this with the fact that, as we have seen above, emotion experience is, in relation to a given implementing brain process, its *subjective aspect*, it follows that emotion experience is the subjective aspect of the output of the implementing brain process, *quod erat demonstrandum*.

§6

On the Method for Ascertaining the Nature of Emotion

It remains to consider how the nature of emotion is to be ascertained. How are we to uncover what emotion is? In truth, the method follows directly from the above consideration of the relation between emotion and emotion experience: the proper nature of emotion can only be ascertained on the basis of reflection on the experiential states associated with it, or emotion experience.

This statement is really comprised of two distinct statements, namely, firstly, that the nature of emotion *can* be determined by reflecting on the given conscious experiences, and, secondly, that it can *only* be determined by reflecting on the given conscious experiences.

The first statement is a direct consequence of the relation that obtains between emotion and emotion experience. As we have seen, in each particular case, emotional experience is nothing but the subjective aspect of the output of the brain activity that implements emotion. That is to say, in other words, the properties of emotional experience do not come out of thin air, but are rather informed by the properties of the output of the implementing process—since they are this result given subjectively. This means that the nature of the function being implemented can be inferred on the basis of the properties of the experiential state associated with it. In short, since mental phenomena are functions implemented by the brain under certain conditions, and experiential states are nothing but what it is like to be the brain in which said functions are implemented, it is clear that we can infer, from the properties of our experiential states, the nature of the functions being implemented. Experiential states are namely, roughly speaking, simply the subjective aspect of these functions.

The second statement is a consequence of the fact that experiential states, or, more precisely, reflecting on experiential states, *alone* provides us with knowledge of the nature of mental phenomena. There are, of course, ‘objective’ psychological methods, but these, in truth, have no intrinsic relation to mental phenomena: they only concern objective, or observable, correlates of mental phenomena. Thus, for instance, the objective approach to emotion tells us, among other things, what neural processes emotion experience—and therefore also, although only to a certain extent, emotion—is associated with, what physiological variables are involved, and how emotion is expressed behaviorally. These data do not, however, tell us anything at all about the proper *nature* of emotion, or, in other words, what emotion as such *is*. Objective data can help us meaningfully elaborate our reflectively acquired understanding of emotion, but they can never directly provide the insight reflection provides, and their psychological meaning is dependent on the light cast by the former.¹⁴

§7

Summary

Thus concludes our concise exposition of the most general properties of emotion. To summarize, we have seen that, as far as its generic nature is concerned, emotion is an abstract function, and, more

¹⁴ Of course, I am using the term ‘psychology’ in its proper sense, namely as a designation for the study of mental phenomena, not the study of the causes of behavior, as which is also often, and, strictly speaking, falsely, referred to as ‘psychology’.

precisely, a specific kind of a particular subset of abstract functions which we, in virtue of their particular differentiating properties, refer to as *mental phenomena*. That is to say, emotion is a naturally occurring function which is realized by the brain, which influences or determines behavior as well as other mental phenomena, and whose realization is typically accompanied by specific experiential states, namely, as I shall discuss in more detail below, emotional feelings. We have also seen that, even though each particular instance of emotion is implemented in the brain in the form of a complex pattern of brain activity, emotion cannot simply be identified with brain activity, and that the relation between emotion and emotion experience is such that emotion experience is the subjective aspect of the output of the brain process that implements emotion. Finally, we have seen that the proper nature of emotion can only be ascertained on the basis of analyzing emotion experience, or, in other words, by carrying out a phenomenology of emotion.

PART TWO PHENOMENOLOGY OF EMOTION

§8 Introduction

As we have seen above, to ascertain the nature of emotion, we must study the experiential states associated with it. There can be no doubt, I believe, that there are such states. We all know from our experience that there is something it is like to be afraid, upset, sad, jealous, joyful, and so forth. In other words, it is clear that to experience emotion is to be in an experiential state of a specific quality, or phenomenal character. To study emotion experience, then, is nothing else than to study the nature of these experiential states.

It is likewise evident on reflection, it appears to me, that these states belong to the general domain of *feeling*. In other words, it is, as it seems to me, clear on reflection that to experience an emotion is to feel a certain way, namely, sad, angry, joyful, and so forth.¹⁵ Thus, it follows that the investigation of the nature of emotion must proceed by a phenomenological analysis of the domain of feeling, and, more specifically, by delimiting and pinpointing the nature of emotion feeling. In short, to understand emotion, we must work out a phenomenology of emotion, which is to say, a phenomenology of emotion feeling.

Phenomenology, understood here as the study of experience, is a purely descriptive endeavor based entirely on observation. As such, everything in it hinges on the *accuracy of description*. In essence, all one can do in carrying out a phenomenological analysis is describe what one sees, so to speak, and, if necessary, attempt to make clear where other descriptions went wrong. In the following, I endeavor to carry this task out. First, I provide a systematic conceptualization of the domain of feeling as a whole, or, in other words, an overview of how the domain appears to me to be constituted. This overview will provide the conceptual framework for the following considerations, and also already make clear where I take emotion feeling to be situated within the domain of feeling. Then, I discuss the nature of emotion experience in detail, and endeavor to refute what I consider to be false views pertaining to it.

In particular, I endeavor to refute the widespread notion that emotion experience, or at least the “emotional character” of emotion experience, is constituted by bodily feeling, and that emotion experience *per se* is intentional, i.e., somehow pertains to the world. As I shall endeavor to show, emotion experience *per se* pertains exclusively to ourselves, as opposed to our bodies, or the world. At the same time, I provide an alternative conceptualization of the relation between emotion experience and the world that is in accordance with the just outlined account thereof. Furthermore, I discuss the difference between emotion feeling and felt action tendency, and, finally, endeavor to characterize emotion feeling as to its specific nature.

¹⁵ The inadequacy of alternative views regarding the general character of emotion experience—such as those that consider emotion experience to be perceptions of sorts—should become clear in the course of the following analyses, and, in particular, from the critical discussions in §10, where I address them directly.

§9

Outline of the Phenomenological Structure of the Domain of Feeling

The domain of feeling is a notoriously complex and vague one.¹⁶ However, as it seems to me, close phenomenological reflection reveals that the domain of feeling is constituted by two fundamental genera of feeling, namely *feeling pertaining to our body*, or *bodily feeling*, and *feeling pertaining to ourselves*, or *psychic feeling*.¹⁷

Bodily feeling is a very broad and, as we all know from our own experience, phenomenologically highly significant and salient domain. It involves a large palette of feelings, from the most general and diffuse vital feelings, such as feeling alive, healthy or ill, strong or weak, fatigued or vigorous, cold or warm, and so forth, through the more specific feelings of posture and movement as well as the various visceral sensations pertaining to the activity of our organs, to, finally, the localized sensations throughout one's body, such as a tingling sensation in one's arm, or a sharp pain in one's knee. In the most general terms, bodily feeling is the projection to experience of the outputs of the various complex processes monitoring our general bodily condition and homeostatic state as well as particular bodily processes occurring in specific parts of the body.¹⁸

Psychic feeling is likewise a broad and phenomenologically greatly significant domain, but it is, in virtue of its non-bodily nature, generally less phenomenologically salient. There are, as far as I can tell, two fundamental subgenera of psychic feeling, namely: *cognitive feeling*, or feeling pertaining to our cognitive activity, or the "cognitive self", and what I call *thymic feeling*, or feeling pertaining to ourselves *as such*, that is, in the most proper, intimate sense.¹⁹

The domain of cognitive feeling is constituted by such feelings as the feeling of knowing something to be true or untrue, or, more generally, the feeling of certainty or uncertainty (cf. Jackendoff 1987, p. 322); the tip-of-the-tongue feeling, or the feeling that "memory retrieval of a word is imminent" (Price and Norman 2009, p. 141); or the feeling of familiarity, that is, the feeling that we have already encountered something previously without being able to remember when.²⁰ In general terms, cognitive feelings seem to play an "online" metacognitive role: they appear to be projections to experience of processes monitoring cognition *as it is occurring*.²¹

The domain of thymic feeling is, as I have said above, constituted by experiences that pertain to ourselves *as such*. At its core, thymic feeling is simply the experience of the various degrees of "feeling

¹⁶ See, however, Ryle 1951 and Alston 1969 for good initial overviews of the different meanings of feeling terms and phrases.

¹⁷ The notion of psychic feeling has, in contrast with bodily feeling, been originally used by Michael Stocker (1983).

¹⁸ These processes have been extensively empirically studied. See, e.g., Damasio 1994; Cameron 2002; Gallagher 2005; Craig 2014; Tsakiris and Preester 2019; Ataria et al. 2021.

¹⁹ I employ the term 'thymic' in the sense of 'pertaining to the self'. In doing so, I am drawing on the Homeric meaning of the term θυμός, as which meant 'heart' in the metaphorical sense of, e.g., 'seat of emotion' (LSJ, s.v.). As far as I know, the adjective 'thymic' (*thymisch*)—although, of course, not in the exact same sense—has originally been used by the phenomenologist Stephan Strasser in his *Das Gemüt* (1956) (but cf. Lersch 1939/1966, who employed a similar term, namely "*endothym*", before Strasser, and whose views Strasser discusses in some detail in his book).

²⁰ See, for a concise discussion of the domain, Price and Norman 2009.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

awake” that we go through during the day, from being half-asleep to being wide awake and alert. From another angle, this feeling may also be described as the general feeling of “mobilization”, and, accordingly, readiness to act.²² This form of thymic feeling is always present, as we are always somewhere on the sleep-wake continuum: as such, it is the very fundament of thymic feeling in general, and is present in all other, less fundamental kinds of thymic feeling. Let us call this *core thymic feeling*.²³

Then, there are, as far as I can tell, two fundamental subkinds of thymic feeling, namely, *affective feeling* and *conative feeling*. Affective feeling encompasses all the various ways we, the self, can feel in an emotional sense. In other words, it encompasses, roughly speaking, the various feelings subsumed under the categories of mood and emotion, such as feeling sad, depressed, afraid and upset, or joyful, excited, elated and awestruck. In accordance with an old tradition, I refer to it as “affective”, because, in experiencing affective feeling, we feel ourselves to be *affected* in a particular way by something. Conative feeling encompasses the various forms of felt desire and action tendency, such as the felt urge to engage in consummatory behavior, approach, withdraw, strike, jump, and so forth (see, e.g., Fontaine and Scherer 2013 for a list of various action tendencies). I call it conative, because, in experiencing conative feeling, we feel ourselves to be *striving*. Affective feelings often co-occur with felt action tendencies. However, they are, as I discuss in more detail below, not to be confused: they are clearly phenomenologically distinct, and, furthermore, they can occur independently of each other.

As evident from the present overview, emotion experience is taken to be constituted by “affective feeling”, which takes its own place within the overall domain of feeling. In other words, it is suggested that emotion experience cannot be reduced to any other kind of feeling. In the following, I discuss the nature of emotion experience in more detail, and endeavor to show that it in fact consists in affective feeling, as well as argue for its irreducibility not only to other kinds of feeling, but to all other kinds of experience in general.

Note

The distinction between bodily feeling and psychic feeling is, in essence, a modified version of the distinction between *Empfindung* and *Gefühl* that was commonplace in the early days of modern psychology in Germany. In her 1917 dissertation on empathy, Edith Stein writes: “*Es ist alte psychologische Tradition, daß das Ich konstituiert sei in Gefühlen. [...]. Man unterscheidet – in der Sprache der herkömmlichen Psychologie – Empfindungen, in denen ich ‘etwas’ empfinde [...], und Gefühle, in denen ich ‘mich’ fühle, [...].*” (1917, p. 109). Nearly two decades earlier, Alexander Pfänder declares emphatically: “*Der Unterschied zwischen Empfindung und Gefühl erweist sich als so fundamental, daß es unbegreiflich erscheint, wie man Gefühle als Eigenschaften von Empfindungen hat*

²² The term typically used in this context is “activation” or “arousal” (e.g., Frijda 1986; Thayer 1989).

²³ Core thymic feeling has already been very well described in psychology under the name “core affect” (Russell 2003, 2005, 2009).

auffassen können." (1900, p. 65).²⁴ The clearest, most detailed and most insightful exposition of this distinction I know of is to be found in Theodor Lipps' brilliant short text entitled *Das Selbstbewusstsein; Empfindung und Gefühl* (1901), but many psychologists, as well as phenomenologists, of the time seem to have held the same or a similar view.²⁵

Of course, as far as the terminology is concerned, the distinction is not exactly the same as the one I have drawn above, for I keep the general designation "feeling" for both what the above authors called "*Empfindung*" as well as "*Gefühl*", since this agrees best with ordinary linguistic practice. Furthermore, there are some important differences with regard to content. Firstly, I do not subsume perception of the world under bodily feeling: I distinguish between experience *of* the body and experience of something in the world by means of the body, particularly the external senses. Secondly, my concept of psychic feeling agrees with the notion of *Gefühl* as presented by the authors that drew this distinction only in that *Gefühl*, like my psychic feeling, alone pertains to the (cognitive and thymic) self. Other than that, the details of the various *Gefühlstheorien* worked out in this period are often quite different from my understanding of the nature of psychic feeling. –

§10

On the Nature of Emotion Experience in General

On the present analysis, emotion experience, or, in other words, emotion feeling, is a particular kind of thymic feeling.²⁶ In general terms, the content of emotion experience is, as it seems to me, best described as *a temporary modification of how we–the self–feel in relation to some particular stimulus.*²⁷ In other words, on the present analysis, emotion experience *per se* is best conceptualized as a felt modification of our thymic state.

As such, emotion experience is to be understood in continuity with our overall thymic experience. We *always* feel a certain way, although, typically, either only in the form of core thymic feeling, or, albeit less commonly, in the form of what is known as "mood-experience", which is, in essence, low-intensity and relatively enduring affective feeling that is not, however, related to any particular stimulus.²⁸ These forms of thymic feeling tend to be phenomenally thin, i.e., not very phenomenologically salient. However, when we encounter a stimulus that affects us emotionally, a

²⁴ Pfänder is here referring to a view held by some psychologists of his time that "feeling" is merely a property of sensation, namely, that of being pleasant or unpleasant.

²⁵ See Oesterreich 1910, pp. 8–11, for several other references. Perhaps most notably, see Scheler's classification of feelings in his perspicacious discussion of the "stratification" of the domain of feeling (Scheler 1916, pp. 340–357).

²⁶ In the present paragraph, I am concerned exclusively with what is known in the literature as first-order emotion experience (on the distinction between first-order and second-order emotion experience, see below, note 2).

²⁷ "Stimulus" is a great simplification. As Nico Frijda pointed out, "Emotions are rarely, if ever, elicited by an isolated stimulus." (1986, p. 267). Instead, it seems to be the case that emotions are elicited by a constellation of an event and, e.g., a particular concern for which it is relevant (*op. cit.*, p. 277). Nevertheless, for the sake of simplicity, I follow Frijda in using 'stimulus' as a "shorthand" for whatever it is that actually elicits emotion.

²⁸ Note that, what is here meant by affective feeling a certain way in general, or "mood-experience", has nothing to do with the phenomenon of mood as such. The term 'mood' is used ambiguously: what it is used to refer to in experience, namely, feeling a certain way in general, has nothing to do with mood in the proper sense (cf. Siemer 2009, p. 257). On mood, see §22 in the following chapter.

particular, more intense, and more focused affective feeling—such as that we associate with episodic sadness, fear, joy, or anger—comes to the fore and becomes more prominent in our experience, but only for a limited amount of time. Typically, it gradually dissipates—in accordance with the development of the relevant events in the world—until the way we feel returns to its original low intensity, or affective neutrality (although, of course, very intense emotional responses tend to have long-lasting effects).²⁹

In the most general terms, then, each instance of emotion experience, taken in isolation, consists of two fundamental structural elements: the subjective affective feeling state, such as feeling sad, afraid, or angry, characterized by a particular phenomenal character, and the objective correlate of this feeling state, *in relation to which* we feel the way we feel, such as the figure in the dark we are “afraid of”, or the remark we are “upset by”.³⁰ In the following, I discuss the nature of emotion experience in more detail.

First, I endeavor to show that emotion experience is entirely thymic in nature, and, therefore, irreducible to other, non-thymic forms of experience. Then, I discuss the affective nature of emotion experience, and, in doing so, the difference and relation between emotion experience, core thymic feeling and conative feeling. Finally, I discuss the nature of the relation between emotion experience and the world.

For the sake of simplicity and clarity, I set aside the *dynamic* character of emotion experience, namely, the complex manner in which emotion experience develops and changes over time in the course of an emotion episode, e.g., due to cognitive regulation or our own coping with a given situation. While considerations of such factors reveal the intimate relation between emotion and other phenomena, e.g., in this case, cognition and behavior, they are, strictly speaking, irrelevant with regard to determining the phenomenological nature of emotion experience *per se*.

(a)

On the Thymic Nature of Emotion Experience

The most general claim of the present analysis concerning the nature of emotion experience is that emotion experience is a particular kind of *thymic feeling*. That is to say, emotion experience—that is, the first-order experience associated with being sad, joyful, angry, afraid and so forth in response to something—is, in each case, constituted by a feeling state *sui generis*, namely, a thymic feeling, which is characterized by the fact that it pertains to ourselves in a most immediate manner, and cannot, as

²⁹ The view that emotion experience is continuous with thymic experience in general is by no means new. It has been described already by the phenomenologists, e.g., Bollnow (1956) and Strasser (1956), and the view is an integral part of the “core affect” theory, as developed by the American psychologist James Russell (2003, 2009). A beautiful expression of this view was provided by the German psychiatrist Paul Schröder: “*Ist die Stimmungslage der Grundbaß, welcher einförmig und gleichmäßig einerschreitet, so sind die Gefühle die darauf aufgebauten, wechselnden, bunten Aussetzungen und Melodien.*” (1930, p. 11).

³⁰ The present analysis of the structure of emotion experience has been inspired by the analysis provided by the German psychologist Philip Lersch, expounded in his most brilliant, but, as far as I know, entirely forgotten book *Aufbau der Person* (1939/1966, pp. 221-226).

such, be reduced to any non-thymic form of experience, i.e., to bodily feeling, perceptual experience or cognitive experience. In other words: when we undergo an emotional episode, that which corresponds to emotion in our experience is that thymic feeling state alone and *nothing else*.

Of course, that is not to say that when we undergo an emotion episode, we do not experience a handful of other things along with this feeling state. In other words, the claim is *not* that this feeling state alone is present in our experience during an emotion episode, but rather that this feeling state alone constitutes the experiential correlate of emotion and is alone the referent of statements such as “I feel sad”, “I feel angry”, “I feel joyful”, and so on. In short, as per the present analysis, it is not the case, as is often stated, that emotion experience is *constituted* by a multitude of components, e.g., a bodily component, a perceptual component, a motivational component, a cognitive component, and so forth (e.g. Frijda 1986, sec. 4), but rather that emotion experience is a feeling state *sui generis*, namely, affective feeling, which is *embedded* within a complex of distinct experiential components, namely those corresponding to bodily changes, motivation, perception, cognition, imagination and so on.

Thus, for instance, when we are sad because of some particular event, we may have experiences that correspond to perceiving the eliciting event, or thinking about it, imagining it, and so forth, as well as experiences that correspond to the physiological processes that occur in us due to our emotional response, that is, we may have experiences corresponding to changes in heartbeat, breathing, internal temperature, tenseness, production of sweat, tears, specific contractions of facial muscles, and so forth. However, as per the present analysis, it is not these experiences that *constitute* our subjective feeling of sadness: they are rather merely experiences that accompany our feeling sad. Feeling sad is an experiential state *sui generis* that is embedded within these other experiences. It is not a state of the body, nor is it to be found in the experiences corresponding to our thought, perception or imagination. It pertains to the self alone—it is a *thymic feeling*.

That this is the case is most evident if we consider that (i) the experiences in question often occur in non-emotional contexts, and that (ii) emotion experience can occur without being accompanied by these experiences. As regards the first point, it is clear that we can think of something as angry, sad, or frightening *without* being angry, sad or frightened ourselves, and there is likewise nothing inherently emotional about perceiving and imagining. As I discuss in more detail below, to perceive or imagine a “scary event” is not the same thing as to feel scared. Similarly, we can feel angry, sad or frightened without having experiences pertaining to thoughts about the stimulus (although, typically, thought is always in some way present in experience), and it is clear that emotion experience is in no way necessarily tied to perception or imagination—it can be elicited by a thought rather than a percept, for instance, and bear no direct relation to our surroundings. Emotion experience cannot, therefore, consist in these experiences, or any combination of them.

The matter may seem less clear in the case of bodily feeling. For, the absolute majority of emotion theorists of the modern period have confused bodily feelings associated with what is known

as “physiological arousal” with emotion experience.³¹ The view has been most clearly expressed in the following famous passage from William James’ influential treatment of the emotions: “If we fancy some strong emotion, and then try to abstract from our consciousness of it all the feelings of its bodily symptoms, we find we have nothing left behind, no ‘mind-stuff’ out of which the emotion can be constituted, and that a cold and neutral state of intellectual perception is all that remains.” (James 1890, p. 451).

In truth, however, this view is nothing but a phenomenological mistake rooted in the ignorance of thymic feeling. Its falsity can be revealed in the same manner as in the case of the forms of experience discussed above. Firstly, as pointed out already by Walter Cannon (1927), physiological arousal is a phenomenon that is by no means exclusive to emotional situations. That is to say, bodily changes and therefore bodily experiences akin to those that accompany emotion occur in a variety of non-emotional contexts. Consider, for instance, the bodily changes and feelings that accompany strenuous physical activity such as exercise, or a cold plunge. These cases make it clear that there is nothing inherently emotional about bodily feeling as such.

Of course, the complex of bodily feelings that we experience, e.g., during exercise, is not really the same as, say, that which we experience when we are afraid (although there are shared elements, such as the feeling of increased heart rate). The point is not that we experience the exact same bodily feelings in non-emotional situations, as, indeed, that is not even the case. Instead, the point is that there are cases when we experience pronounced bodily feelings, e.g., during strenuous physical activity, and, yet, the experience is not emotional. This, I take to be clear evidence that it cannot be bodily feeling that constitutes emotion experience, because it shows that bodily feeling *per se* has nothing emotional about it. We may be inclined to set aside a set of “emotional” bodily feelings, such as a hot flash, a pang in one’s stomach, and so forth. However, these experiences are of the exact same general nature as those that constitute “non-emotional” bodily feeling. What does a pang in one’s stomach, or a hot flush, have that other, “non-emotional” bodily feelings do not have? Nothing at all, except: *association with emotion*. They are still mere bodily feelings: however, they tend to accompany emotion experience, and, in consequence, have come to be so intimately associated with experiencing an emotion that, in our minds, they have simply become the experience of emotion itself.

Perhaps more importantly, however, we also routinely experience affective thymic states akin to emotion *without* there being any accompanying physiological changes out of the ordinary, namely in the case of what is known as mood-experience (cf. Kreibig 2010, p. 410). When we are depressed, for instance, we are constantly experiencing a pervasive and strong affective feeling. We feel “awful”,

³¹ Countless references may be given here. See, for instance, James 1890; Ribot 1910; Schachter and Singer 1962; Damasio 1994; Prinz 2006; Slaby 2008; Barrett 2014; Deonna and Teroni 2017. – In the most general terms, physiological arousal may be described as the mobilization of physiological resources for activity. As such, physiological arousal involves a complex, coordinated set of physiological changes all throughout the body governed by central arousal systems (Jones 2003), involving changes in heart rate, blood pressure, blood flow, hormone production, temperature regulation, muscular tension, breathing, metabolism, and so forth (see, e.g., Thayer 1989, ch. 3; Colombetti and Harrison 2018). Physiological arousal is a prominent and extensively studied aspect of emotional response (e.g., Kreibig 2010; Scherer and Fontaine 2013; Siegel et al. 2018).

“down”, “burdened”, “empty” and so forth. However, there are no particular bodily feelings or other experiences that we could refer to in order to account for feeling this way. Anyone who has experienced depression knows that it would be utterly absurd to attempt to reduce the feeling of depression to bodily feelings such as those corresponding to “low physiological arousal”, or any other kind of experience for that matter. Again, we are here dealing with a purely thymic feeling: depression fills and consumes *the self*.

The exact same analysis as to mood experience, however, applies to emotion experience. For, in truth, what we call mood-experience, namely, affective feeling a certain way in general, is, in essence, identical to emotion experience, differing only, albeit significantly, in intensity, depth and duration.³² As I have said, emotion experience is nothing but a temporary modification of how we, the self, feel. However, we tend to overlook the thymic feeling that constitutes emotion experience, because, in contrast to affective feeling a certain way in general, emotion experiences are often accompanied by feelings of pronounced and sometimes very intense physiological arousal, which, as such, tend to “overshadow” the thymic aspect of our experience during the emotion episode.

It may be argued that, without the feeling of physiological arousal, emotion experience would lack “intensity”, or, in other words, that there would be no such thing as strong, highly excited emotions—in a word, passions—and that, in consequence, bodily feeling must in some sense constitute emotion experience, at least in such cases.³³ The premise of the argument seems to me mistaken, however. Physiological arousal does not *constitute* excitement: it is rather its bodily manifestation. In essence, experience of excitement is the degree to which we feel “awake” and “alert”. As such, it corresponds to an intensification of what I have called core thymic feeling above. It is clear from phenomenological observation, however, that such feeling is of an entirely *thymic* nature. Alertness and wakefulness are experienced as states of the self, i.e., central and non-bodily, not peripheral and bodily. Consider, for instance, the experience of the effects of caffeine, or other psychostimulants. The feeling of being “wide awake” and “alert” that is associated with them certainly cannot be reduced to, e.g., the experience of increased heart rate and blood flow: these bodily experiences merely accompany the feeling of thymic arousal.³⁴ That physiological arousal follows central arousal is explicable by the fact that the neuromodulatory substances on which psychostimulants exert their influence, such as dopamine and norepinephrine, play an important role in the regulation of autonomic activity (see, e.g., Koob et al. 2020).

³² Hereby, I do not mean to imply that mood and emotion themselves differ only with regard to these properties. As I have noted above, what we call mood-experience has nothing to do with mood *per se*. Of course, “mood-experience” also differs in that it is feeling a certain way *in general*, not in relation to some particular stimulus, as which is characteristic of prototypical emotion experience. But, here, I am speaking merely of the nature of the subjective pole of the overall experience.

³³ The “excited” aspect of emotion experience is attributed to physiological arousal (although, to be fair, also in combination with felt action tendency), e.g., by Colombetti and Harrison 2018.

³⁴ That feeling of physiological arousal is merely the bodily correlate of the feeling of “central arousal” has been recognized already by Russell (2003, p. 154).

Lastly, a simple, but crucial objection emerges from the present analysis of the domain of feeling, namely that if emotion experience was constituted by bodily feeling, then emotions would pertain merely to *our body*, and not to *ourselves*. This, I believe, contradicts most blatantly the fundamental phenomenological “data”; for, are not emotions felt as movements of our innermost being, or, as the traditional expression goes, *passiones animi*, rather than mere bodily states?³⁵ Of course, as we have seen, in virtue of the self’s embodiment, the passions of the self manifest themselves in the form of physiological arousal, wherefore the experience of emotion is typically accompanied by experience of physiological arousal; however, the former cannot be identified with the latter.³⁶

In short, emotion experience *cannot* be reduced to any of the non-thymic forms of experience, i.e., either to cognitive, perceptual, or bodily experience. The “emotion” is not to be found in any of these experiences individually, nor in any combination of them: it is only ever to be found in the domain of thymic feeling.

(b)

On the Affective Nature of Emotion Experience

A more specific claim pertaining to the nature of emotion experience laid out above is that emotion experience itself constitutes a *sui generis* form of thymic feeling, namely, *affective feeling*. In other words, emotion experience cannot be reduced either to core thymic feeling, or conative feeling.

As I have already said above, core thymic feeling is always experientially present, however phenomenally thin it may be. We *always* feel a particular degree of central “wakefulness” and “mobilization”. Were core thymic feeling to be identified with affective feeling, we would have to maintain that we are always in some affective state. This, however, blatantly contradicts phenomenological evidence: most of the time, we are affectively neutral. Here, it may be argued that core thymic feeling is valenced (i.e., always more or less pleasant), and that, in consequence, it is affective, or emotional, in nature. However, the hidden premise of this argument, namely that what is valenced is affective, is most erroneous. Valence, or feelings of pleasure and displeasure, are not specifically emotional, nor are they themselves emotion experiences: they are rather, as Nico Frijda brilliantly observed, a “niceness gloss” on experience (Frijda 2010). In other words, valence is a general property of *all* experience, not only emotion experience. As such, while all emotion experiences are undoubtedly valenced, not all valenced experiences are emotional. A purely bodily sensation may be just as pleasant or unpleasant as emotion experience.

³⁵ It is of note, I believe, that a recent study revealed that people’s intuitions about emotion experience directly contradict the view underlying James’ “subtraction argument” quoted above (Díaz 2022): the majority of people that participated in the study reported that they take their emotion experience would not cease with the subtraction of bodily feeling, revealing a strong intuition that it is actually not bodily feeling at all that constitutes emotion experience.

³⁶ A consequence of the self’s embodiment is that bodily changes that tend to accompany emotion, in particular negative emotion, tend to elicit that emotion when they occur in a non-emotional situation, and even just bodily changes that cross a certain threshold tend to elicit an emotional response, e.g., fear. This, however, changes nothing about the point, which is that the experience of these bodily processes is not itself emotion experience.

To be sure, as I have said above, core thymic feeling constitutes the fundament of all other kinds of thymic feeling, and therefore also affective feeling. However, affective feeling cannot be reduced to it. The inadequacy of such a reduction is evident from the dimensional models that attempt to reduce all affective states to combinations of “valence” and “arousal”, i.e., in other words, valenced core thymic feeling (e.g., Russell 2003). On such a model, sadness, for instance, is characterized as “deactivated displeasure”, that is, low arousal (wakefulness/mobilization) and negative valence. The fact is, however, that one can find oneself in an unpleasant low arousal state *without* being sad. Furthermore, on such a model, experientially distinct emotions occupy the same spot: e.g., both fear and anger are conceptualized as “activated displeasure”. In short, as Frijda put it, “One could not reconstruct the experience if only the dimensional values were known. Something essential appears to be lacking.” (1986, p. 184).

The proposal that emotion experience is to be identified with conative feeling, as put forth by a number of emotion theorists (Arnold and Gasson 1954; Arnold 1960; Deonna and Teroni 2015; cf. Frijda 1986), is, at first sight, much more plausible. For, conative feeling is thymic in nature (although, e.g., Deonna and Teroni understand felt action tendency as constituted by bodily feeling, see 2015, 2017), is not always present, and is most intimately associated with emotional response. Nevertheless, the two are not to be confused. For, firstly, they are clearly phenomenologically distinct. As I have already said, in the case of emotion experience, we feel ourselves to be *affected* in a particular way, whereas, in the case of conative feeling, we feel ourselves *striving*. In short, the former is *affective*, whereas the latter is *conative* (or, alternatively, *voluntative*).³⁷

Besides their phenomenological distinctness, their difference is also evident from the fact that the two can and do occur independently of each other. We certainly can and do experience felt desire or action tendency without finding ourselves in any affective state. Consider, for instance, the urge to engage in consummatory behavior of some sort, such as to eat something, or to light a cigarette. These urges are of the same nature as those that occur during an emotion episode, yet, they occur (although, of course, not always) in a non-emotional context. Similarly, we can and do experience affective states without any concomitant action tendencies, namely in the case of general affective feeling, or “mood-experience”.

To be sure, when the two occur together, e.g., during an emotion episode, they are felt as connected in a most intimate manner. They are, after all, both modifications of one and the same self. In consequence, reports of emotion experience often include descriptions of action tendency (Davitz 1969). Nevertheless, even then, they can be distinguished in virtue of their phenomenology, namely, as has already been said, as the passive and active aspects of the domain of thymic feeling.³⁸ As such, it is, I believe, phenomenologically evident that affective thymic feeling, as which, on the present analysis, constitutes emotion experience, is in no way dependent on, not to mention constituted by, felt action tendency, or conative thymic feeling.

³⁷ Cf. Pfänder 1900, p. 66.

³⁸ This has also been recognized most clearly by Pfänder, see 1900, pp. 66-67.

In a word, then, affective feeling is a thymic feeling *sui generis*. Further below, I shall consider the specific nature of affective feeling in more detail (§11).

(c)

On the Experiential Horizon of Emotion Experience

Emotion experience does not occur in an “isolated interior”, closed off to anything beyond it. Quite on the contrary, it is present, roughly speaking, in an organism characterized by being in a world (Heidegger 1927). As such, emotion experience, as, indeed, all experience in general, is intimately integrated with experiential components that pertain to the world, particularly those corresponding to perception. These experiences constitute, as Philipp Lersch put it most accurately, the ‘experiential horizon’ (“*Erlebnishorizont*”) of the subjective experience proper to emotion (Lersch 1939/1966, p. 222).

More specifically, an emotion episode is typically preceded by an encounter with something in the world that elicits an emotional response in us, and the experience of the elicited emotional response is further characterized by being in a specific sense directed toward the given eliciting stimulus. In a word, when experiencing an emotion, we do not merely affectively feel a certain way, we rather *affectively feel a certain way in relation to something in the world*.³⁹ The emotion experience and the perceptual experience constitute the subjective and objective pole respectively of one and the same unified experience of being-in-the-world. Thus, when we are afraid of a figure in the dark, for instance, we feel afraid in relation to that figure, in the sense that the perception of the figure “resonates” within us emotionally (cf. Lersch 1939/1966, *ibid.*). Furthermore, we do not perceive the figure as such, but rather through the lens of our affective state, so to speak: we perceive it as “scary”.

Here, it is crucial to realize that emotion experience, i.e., the subjective pole of the overall experience, is *not* itself the experience that pertains to the world, as so many have claimed in the phenomenological tradition (e.g., Brentano 1874; Husserl 1901, 2020; Sartre 1939) and as many claim to this day (e.g., De Sousa 1987; Döring 2007; Tappolet 2016). The problem with this notion is akin to the bodily feeling theory of emotion experience: If emotion experience were a perception-like “intentional” experience, then it would pertain to the world, and not to the self. In other words, the notion that emotion experience is *itself* a sort of intentional apprehension, be it perception-like or *sui generis*, is a great misinterpretation thereof.⁴⁰

The proper analysis, as I have proposed, is rather that we feel a certain way—that is, experience an emotion—in relation to something. In other words, emotion experience tracks, as Alexander Pfänder put it most accurately, “*wie einem psychischen Subjekt angesichts dieser oder jener Gegenstände*

³⁹ Cf. Slaby and Stephan 2008, p. 506. – I am here deliberately focusing on cases where that “something” is of direct perceptual origin, as opposed to, e.g., a mere thought of something. In the latter cases, the experiential horizon is still present, but, since it does not contain the eliciting stimulus, which is, e.g., merely in our thoughts, it is not attended to as much, or, indeed, entirely ignored due to us “facing inward”. Nevertheless, even such cases of emotion greatly influence our overall relation to our surroundings.

⁴⁰ In this regard, my view differs, as far as I can tell, from that of Peter Goldie (2000, 2002): his “feeling towards” itself pertains to the world (or, more broadly, the object of a given emotional response). Cf. below, note 5.

zumute ist.” (1904, p. 229): it is not itself *of* the objects.⁴¹ As such, seeing a “scary” object is not the same thing as experiencing fear; instead, when we experience fear in response to something, that is, feel afraid, we see that something as “scary”. As it seems to me, the proper state of affairs was articulated quite eloquently by Jan Slaby: “While afraid, you experience something as dangerous and at the same time ‘you’ feel vulnerable in the relevant respect. But your experience of the danger is not separate from, but rather consists in your feeling thus vulnerable. Each emotional experience has that structure: Something affects you, and thereby you feel affected by it. Your ‘minding’ and something else’s ‘mattering’ are constitutively interrelated—there cannot be the one without the other.” (Slaby 2008, p. 438).⁴²

We must, then, clearly distinguish between emotion experience constituted by affective thymic feeling on one hand and the experiential horizon with which it is integrated on the other. Similarly, as I have pointed out above, we must distinguish between thymic feeling and the *overall* experience within which it is embedded, which includes, besides perceptual experiences, also experiences corresponding to thought, motivation, and bodily processes.

Notes

1. As I have discussed above, some form of the notion that emotion experience is constituted by bodily feeling has been held by the majority of modern emotion theorists. In contrast, I have proposed that emotion experience is constituted by affective thymic feeling, which does not pertain to our body, but rather immediately to ourselves. But, if such a feeling exists, how come, it may be asked, that so many researchers have failed to notice the presence of such a feeling?

That ignorance of thymic feeling—that is, in essence, *ignorantia sui*—can occur may sound strange, but it is not; in fact, its occurrence makes perfect sense. For, it is much easier, in a sense, to become fully aware of something distinct from us than of ourselves; for *we are* ourselves, wherefore we are *always* experientially present to ourselves in a most intimate, immediate manner, that is, in a manner entirely distinct from the presence of any experiential ‘object’ distinct from ourselves, even one as close to ourselves as our body. As such, immediate experience of *our* own state, or thymic feeling, is, in essence, the ever-present ‘background’, so to speak, of all the other kinds of experience, which all pertain to phenomena distinct from ourselves, be it bodily sensations, percepts, verbal-images, or whatever else; wherefore it is not only possible, but also likely, that we should overlook the content of thymic feeling, namely due to its constant and most intimate presence, as opposed to the contents of the other kinds of experience.

⁴¹ Cf. the analysis along similar lines provided by another member of the Munich phenomenological circle, namely, Moritz Geiger (1911), on which see Vendrell Ferran 2024.

⁴² A similar account has also been advocated by Bennett Helm, see, e.g., Helm 2009. – Slaby became well aware that the subjective pole has been rather neglected in the more recent discussions of the “intentionality” of emotion experience (*op. cit.*; Slaby and Stephan 2008; cf. note 5 below). Unfortunately, though, Slaby considered the subjective, feeling aspect to consist entirely in bodily feeling, as evident from what immediately follows the above quoted passage: “Your feeling affected by something is a bodily experience.” (2008, p. 438).

Furthermore, the content of thymic feeling, and particularly affective thymic feeling, lacks any easily graspable features, it is essentially transparent, as opposed to the other kinds of experience, whose contents generally have some relatively ‘objective’ properties that allow us to focus on them more easily—for instance, the localizability of bodily sensations, the inner voice of cognition, or the rich properties and qualities of visual percepts. If we combine this consideration with the observation that, as I have already said, emotion experience tends to be accompanied by feelings of pronounced and sometimes very intense physiological changes, it is, I believe, quite understandable that affective thymic feeling has been ignored, in particular in favor of bodily feeling.

Moreover, the focus on the bodily aspects of emotion is further explicable by the fact that these aspects alone are actually objectively observable and measurable, as opposed to affective feelings, and that, in consequence, the focus of emotion science has for the most part been on them.

2. Historically speaking, in virtue of the characterization of emotion feeling as a feeling state *sui generis* that is not reducible to bodily feeling or any other kind of experience, the above account of the nature of emotion experience may be considered a version of the so-called “centralist” feeling theory of emotion experience (see Reisenzein and Döring 2009, p. 197; cf. Dub 2024, pp. 587-588). However, my view differs from the other accounts that fall within this category in virtue of the manner in which I characterize the nature of the feelings in question.

There are, in essence, two versions of the centralist feeling theory. The simplest version of the view was advanced by the American physiologist Walter Cannon. In his explicit polemic against James’ theory of emotion experience (Cannon 1927), Cannon argued that, instead of being constituted by the feeling of bodily changes, emotion experience consists in a centrally generated feeling that is not reducible to the former. Cannon rightly recognized that bodily feeling as such has nothing inherently emotional about it: “[T]he sensations from the peripheral changes, contrary to James’ view, are ‘pale, colorless and destitute of emotional warmth’” (1927, p. 121). He characterizes his own view in the following passage: “The theory which naturally presents itself is that the peculiar quality of the emotion is added to simple sensation when the thalamic processes are roused.” (p. 120); further below, he refers to his view as “the view that thalamic processes add feeling-tone to sensation” (p. 124).

A more elaborate version of the centralist feeling theory was advanced before Cannon in Germany, namely by Wilhelm Wundt. Instead of merely arguing for the view, Wundt undertook to specify the fundamental features of the “central” feelings in question. According to Wundt, each emotion experience is constituted by three distinct kinds of elementary feelings, namely, feeling of pleasure or displeasure (*Lust-Unlust*), excitement or calmness (*Erregung-Beruhigung*), and tension or relaxation (*Spannung-Lösung*) (Wundt 1896, p. 98; cf. Reisenzein 1992). This view has been greatly influential in affective science, and the fundamental idea has been pursued by a large number of theorists since Wundt (see Barrett and Russell 2009 for an overview). The currently most prominent version of the view is the already discussed “core affect” theory of James Russell (2003, 2009), on which the two basic dimensions of emotion experience are valence and arousal.

As it appears to me, neither of these two versions of the centralist feeling theory succeeds in characterizing the proper nature of the kind of feeling that constitutes emotion experience. Cannon's characterization strikes me as deeply inadequate. For, as it seems to me, to consider emotion experience an added "feeling-tone" of sensation is ultimately no better as far as the recognition of its nature is concerned than to consider emotion experience a bodily feeling, insofar as, on such a view, it still ultimately pertains to the body, only indirectly. As far as Wundt's dimensional view is concerned, we have already seen above that and why it is inadequate. It consists, in essence, in the reduction of affective feeling to elements which cannot yield it, namely, core thymic feeling and feelings of valence.

3. It may be objected to the criticism of intentionalist theories of emotion experience given above that I am committing a fundamental mistake, namely that of falsely focusing on "reflective" emotion experience, as opposed to "non-reflective" emotion experience. The phenomenological analyses provided by the advocates of the intentionalist view, so the objection may go, focus on emotion experience as it is given in its pre-reflective form, namely, when it is fully immersed in our being-in-the-world. In this form, it may further be argued, emotion experience clearly constitutes *experience of the world*; and it is only when reflected upon, that it becomes a subjective state of sorts.⁴³

However, it does not seem to me that this objection would hold any merit. For, firstly, one can certainly feel a certain way without consciously reflecting upon the fact that one feels a certain way; and it is this manner of feeling a certain way that I take to constitute emotion experience in its original givenness. As such, on my view, one need not have second-order awareness—that is, e.g., think "I am afraid"—to experience the feeling which we associate with fear. Furthermore, and more importantly, it is, as I have endeavored to show above, simply not the case that non-reflective, or first-order emotion experience is *experience of the world*, as, e.g., Sartre claimed. As we have seen, emotion experience, namely, feeling a certain way, is not itself experience of the world, but rather merely integrated with it. The fact that when we are experiencing an emotion during immersed striving in the world, we are not reflecting upon the way we feel, but rather attending to the world itself, does not mean that this attending is to be identified with emotion experience.⁴⁴ –

4. A prominent account of the relation between emotion experience and the world along the lines of the view I have advanced above has been proposed by Peter Goldie (2000, 2002).⁴⁵ According to Goldie, the nature of emotion experience is best described as "feeling towards", which he defines as "*thinking of with feeling*" (2000, p. 19). Thus stated, the view is almost the same as that put forth above, and, indeed, if we understand "thinking" in the broad, Cartesian sense (which Goldie seems to do, *ibid.*, p. 20), essentially the same. We "think of" something, and, at the same time, we feel an

⁴³ The distinction between reflective and non-reflective awareness has been explicitly employed in this context by Sartre (1939) and has been utilized in more contemporary literature as well (e.g., Frijda 1986, sec. 4), more recently in the form of the distinction between "first-order" and "second-order" emotion experience (Lambie and Marcel 2002; Frijda 2009), the former being immersed, or non-reflective, and the latter reflective.

⁴⁴ For this reason, I take it to be an illegitimate argument for the view that emotion experience *per se* pertains to the world to note that studies show that most people focus on how they perceived the world during an emotion episode in descriptions of emotion experiences (e.g., Lambie and Marcel 2002, p. 223).

⁴⁵ Cf. Mitchell 2020, who recently advanced a similar view.

emotion; thus, in this sense, we feel towards it. This, at least, is the account advanced above. However, on a closer look, it does not seem to be the account really put forth by Goldie. For, while Goldie defines feeling towards as “thinking of with feeling”, he nevertheless insists that it is not only the “thinking”, but rather also the feeling *itself* that is directed toward the world. He says, for instance, that our “emotional feelings are directed towards the object of [our] thought” (*ibid.*, p. 19), and explicitly criticizes views according to which feelings themselves are not “directed towards objects in the world” (2002, p. 242).

In consequence, it appears to me that, on Goldie’s account, the feeling aspect of “feeling towards” ceases to really be feeling: it merges with what he calls “thinking of”. As Goldie himself says: “Feeling towards, as it is thinking of with feeling, is a sort of thinking of.” (2000, p. 19). As I have argued above, however, such a view is untenable. In my view, the proper analysis is that feeling towards is really a complex experience constituted of a subjective pole, namely affective feeling, which pertains not to the world, but rather to ourselves, and of perceptual (or cognitive) directedness towards something, which cannot be identified with the former. Accordingly, as the already mentioned Jan Slaby brilliantly put it, a more adequate explication of the structure of “feeling towards” is: “*You feel yourself in a certain way towards something.*” (Slaby and Stephan 2008, p. 508; the emphasis is Slaby’s).

§11

On the Specific Nature of Emotion Experience

As we have seen above, affective feeling is a *sui generis* form of thymic feeling, that is, a form of thymic feeling that cannot be reduced either to core thymic feeling or conative feeling. It may be asked, however, wherein exactly it consists. This is, indeed, of great significance with regard to determining the place of emotion within the overall structure of our mental life. Let us ask, therefore, what is the specific nature of affective feeling?

As it appears to me, that which, besides its affective nature in general, characterizes affective feeling is that *affective feeling discloses the significance things, persons and events have for us*. That is to say, the experience of affective feeling in relation to something consists, in essence, in the *disclosure of its significance for us*. This, I believe, is known to anyone who has experienced emotion most intimately.

Firstly, the occurrence of affective feeling in relation to, say, a given event, discloses to us that the given event has significance for us at all. Not all stimuli that we encounter elicit an emotional response in us: indeed, most things, persons and events we encounter throughout our life leave us cold, so to speak. Clearly, then, there is something about those stimuli that do elicit an emotional response in us that distinguishes them from those that do not. This something, however, cannot be found in the objective properties and qualities of stimuli, as objectively identical stimuli, such as the presence of a particular object or person, can and, in fact, typically do elicit different emotional responses in different individuals who encounter said stimuli at the same time, and even in one and the same individual who encounters them at different times. As such, it is not what the stimuli

objectively *are*, but rather only what they *mean* to a given individual, that elicits an emotional response: for, otherwise, whence the often drastic differences, both inter- and intraindividual, in emotional response despite objective identity of stimulus?⁴⁶ Indeed, that is, in essence, the “meaning” of *being affected by something*, namely, that that something *matters to us*.

Secondly, the specific affective feeling that occurs in relation to this event discloses to us, roughly, what that significance is. For instance, feeling fear in relation to the idea of losing contact with a family member reveals to me, roughly speaking, that such an event would be of significance to me, and, furthermore, the fact that it is fear that occurs, rather than happiness, reveals to me that the event represented by the idea is undesired by me, and that its occurrence would therefore be emotionally painful for me. In short: the fact that the idea *scares* me, which is to say, I feel afraid in relation to it, reveals to me that I do not want it to occur, or, in other words, that it is in some sense or way important to me that it does not occur. In this sense, the experience of fear in relation to the idea of this event is a disclosure of the significance that this event has for me.

Of course, the “correct” interpretation of the occurrence of a given emotion in relation to something is a difficult and profoundly individual matter. For instance, I may inquire: what is it exactly about the idea that scares me? That is not necessarily obvious. Indeed, the difficulty of determining the precise reasons for the occurrence of emotions is a great hurdle for a general theoretical account of their psychogenesis. Nevertheless, the general fact remains that *affective feeling discloses significance of something for us*, that is, *the self*.

This insight allows us to determine what it is that distinguishes different kinds of emotion from each other: different “emotions” differ on account of the significance that they disclose. That is to say, it is by virtue of a difference in felt significance that we feel angry, sad *or* afraid. By this, I do not mean to imply that all instances of anger, sadness or fear feel exactly the same. Instead, what I mean to say is that *that* in virtue of which we identify different instances of fear *as* fear must, by necessity, always be the same, and that, I posit, is the significance that is being felt.

Notes

1. The fact that, in general terms, emotion experience is in some way related to the significance that events, persons and things have for us is, as it appears to me, one of the most widely recognized properties thereof. Accounts differ, however, in how the precise manner in which emotion experience relates to said significance is understood and described, depending on how the nature of emotion experience in general is understood. I have already discussed and endeavored to refute the various alternative accounts of emotion experience above in general terms. It is clear, I believe, that, if they cannot be accepted as theories of the nature of emotion experience in general, they certainly cannot be accepted as accounts of the manner in which emotion experience discloses significance. For

⁴⁶ They are certainly not to be explained by individual difference in corporeal constitution (i.e., difference in brain organization and function, and so forth), as evidenced by the cases where even one and the same individual responds differently to the objectively same stimuli at different times.

instance, if emotion experience cannot be understood as intentional apprehension, it is *eo ipso* inadequate to conceive of the relation between emotion experience and significance as that of intentional apprehension of value.

On the present analysis, emotion experience discloses significance simply by being felt. To be afraid of something is *to feel afraid in relation to it*, and to feel afraid in relation to it is to have the significance it has for me disclosed to me. The disclosure is most immediate, intimate and, of course, non-propositional. In a word, it is *affective*.⁴⁷

2. It may be said that, on the above characterization of affective feeling, even valenced sensory experience is a form of affective feeling, because such experience too, although in a more rudimentary sense, discloses the significance of something for us, namely insofar as it is more or less pleasant. Clear instances are provided by prototypical cases of sensory pain and sensory pleasure: sensory pain, it may be said, discloses the dangerous or harmful nature of something for us, and sensory pleasure, in contrast, that something is good for us.

It is not difficult to see, however, that that is not the case. The key point here is the meaning of the seemingly innocuous phrase “for us”. Strictly speaking, sensory pain and sensory pleasure do not disclose the significance something has *for us*, but rather only the significance something has *for our body*. In contrast, affective feeling is characterized by the fact that it discloses the significance that things, events and persons have *for us* in the proper sense, namely, *for the self*.

That this is the case is, I believe, most clear. For instance, while, what has “significance” for our body may also have significance for us, *it must not*. In other words, sensory pain or pleasure are not necessarily accompanied by affective feeling. When I burn my finger, I may experience significant bodily pain, but the event as such need not have any significance for me. Furthermore, the significance something has for us may be entirely distinct from that it has for our body. Thus, something may be pleasurable for the body, while hurtful for the self. Consider, for instance, Augustine’s inner turmoil due to his lustful behavior, as narrated in the 8th book of his *Confessions*. The fact that the significance of sexual acts may be such that they elicit emotional distress in us does not change anything about the fact that they are still pleasurable for the body. Similarly, what is painful for the body may be experienced as affectively positive, such as various self-harm practices. In short, then, the above characterization of affective feeling does not cancel out the distinction between it and sensory pain and pleasure.

§12

Summary

In the present chapter, I have concerned myself with an analysis of the experiential states associated with emotion, or, in other words, with a phenomenology of emotion.

Firstly, I have, in line with an older psychological tradition, advanced that the domain of feeling, to which emotion experience belongs, is constituted by two fundamental kinds of feeling,

⁴⁷ Cf., for similar accounts, Slaby and Stephan 2008, Helm 2009 and Mitchell 2020.

namely, *bodily feeling* and *psychic feeling*, of which the former pertains to the body, whereas the latter to ourselves in a broad sense. Furthermore, I have distinguished two subdomains within psychic feeling, namely, *cognitive feeling* and *thymic feeling*, of which the former pertains to our thought, whereas the latter to ourselves in the most intimate, proper sense.

Secondly, I have advanced and defended the view that emotion experience is a thymic feeling *sui generis*. First, I have discussed the thymic nature of emotion experience, and endeavored to show that it is irreducible to any non-thymic form of experience, namely, cognitive, perceptual or bodily experience. Then, I endeavored to distinguish emotion experience from the other thymic forms of experience, namely, core thymic feeling and conative feeling, by pointing out its specifically *affective* nature. Moreover, I discussed the relation between emotion experience and the world, and endeavored to show that emotion experience *per se* does not in any way pertain to the world, but rather is merely integrated with experiences that do, and that the relation between emotion experience and the world can only be described as feeling a certain way in relation to something.

Finally, I have discussed that which characterizes emotion experience as such, namely, that it discloses the significance that things, events and persons have for us, and pointed out that it is on account of the significance that is being felt that different emotions differ from each other.

PART THREE ON THE SPECIFIC NATURE OF EMOTION

§13

Introduction

In the first part of the present work, we have seen that, as far as its generic nature is concerned, emotion is a *mental phenomenon*. That is to say, we have seen that emotion is a naturally occurring function which is realized by the brain, which influences or determines behavior as well as other mental phenomena, and whose realization is typically accompanied by specific experiential states. Furthermore, we have also seen that, to describe the proper nature of emotion, we must describe what the specific function whose realization bears the name ‘emotion’ consists in, and that such a description can ultimately only be arrived at on the basis of a phenomenological analysis of the nature of the experiential states associated with it. This analysis, I have carried out in the previous section. Thus, at present, it remains to derive an account of the proper nature of emotion on its basis.

In the following, I provide a characterization of the proper nature of emotion in two steps. First, I discuss the subgroup of mental phenomena to which emotion belongs, or, in other words, the subgeneric nature of emotion. Then, I lay out what exactly emotion as such consists in, i.e., provide an exposition of the specific nature of emotion. In addition, I discuss the specific role that emotion plays in our lives, show that the occurrence of emotion is by necessity preceded by a process of appraisal, and discuss the difference and relation between emotion and those mental phenomena with which emotion has falsely been identified in the literature, namely, drive, judgement and perception, as well as between emotion and mood, which, in contrast, is often conceptually conflated with emotion.

§14

On the Thymic Nature of Emotion

The most general result of the preceding phenomenological analysis is that emotion is a *thymic phenomenon*. That is to say, emotion belongs to a particular subgroup, or *subgenus*, of mental phenomena which I refer to as *thymic phenomena*, because they are characterized by the fact that they are functions pertaining directly to the self.

The reasoning behind this claim is as follows. As I have argued above, experience, as far as its relation to mental phenomena is concerned, is nothing but the subjective aspect of the output of a given mental phenomenon. As such, the properties of a given experience are “projections”, so to speak, of the properties encoded by the given output. Now, as I have endeavored to show above, emotion is experienced in the form of thymic feeling, or, in other words, as feeling pertaining immediately to the self. Accordingly, emotion itself, namely, the function whose output projects into experience in the form of emotion experience, must be conceived as *thymic* in nature, namely, as a function that pertains directly to the self, or, in short, a *thymic function*.

As a thymic function, emotion cannot be reduced to any of the other subgenera of mental phenomena, namely, somatic, cognitive or perceptual. For, as we have seen, thymic feeling cannot be

reduced either to bodily, cognitive or perceptual experience. Accordingly, emotion itself cannot, should our account thereof be faithful to its phenomenology, be understood in terms of interoception, cognition or perception. As we shall see, that emotion is irreducible to these mental phenomena is further elucidated by the fact that it plays an entirely distinct role in our mental life.

Note

The notion of thymic mental phenomena is derived entirely from phenomenological analysis. That is to say, the existence of “thymic phenomena” is derived entirely from the fact that there are thymic experiences, i.e., experiences that pertain immediately to the self (e.g., affective feeling), and that not all experiences are thymic in nature (e.g., perception), as evident on phenomenological reflection. That is to say: since there is a particular subgroup of experiences characterized by the fact that it pertains directly to the self, there must be a particular subgroup of mental phenomena characterized by the fact that they pertain directly to the self, as per the relation between experience and mental phenomena. On the present analysis, emotion is such a phenomenon.

§15

Exposition of the Specific Nature of Emotion

We have seen not only that emotion experience is a form of thymic feeling, but rather also that emotion experience is a thymic feeling *sui generis*, namely, *affective feeling*. More specifically, we have seen that emotion is not only irreducible to non-thymic forms of experience, but also that it cannot be reduced even to the other kinds of thymic feeling, namely, core thymic feeling and conative feeling. It follows that emotion cannot be reduced either to the function underlying core thymic feeling, namely, *arousal*, or the function that underlies conative feeling, namely, *drive*. In other words, emotion is a thymic phenomenon *sui generis*. As such, since thymic phenomena constitute a *subgenus* of mental phenomena, and emotion is a thymic phenomenon *sui generis*, it follows that emotion is a mental phenomenon *sui generis*. That is to say, emotion is a unique mental phenomenon that plays a distinct, irreducible role within our mental life: *quod erat demonstrandum*. It remains to consider, then, what specifically that role is, i.e., what the *specific* nature of emotion is.

This, we may derive from the above analysis of the specific nature of emotion experience. As I have endeavored to show, experience is a temporary modification of how we, the self, feel, or, in more technical terms, a felt temporary modification of our thymic state, in relation to a stimulus. Furthermore, we have also seen that this modification consists specifically in the modification of our thymic state into a particular *affective state*, which is to say, in emotion experience, we feel ourselves to be *affected* in a particular, positive or negative way by something, or, as I have put it, emotion consists in *affective feeling*. Lastly, we have seen that the proper meaning of being affected by something is to have disclosed to us in a most immediate manner that something has significance for us, as well as what that significance is specifically. In short, we have seen that affective feeling consists in the disclosure of the significance things, events and persons have for us.

As such, it appears to me that, just as, e.g., perception is to be defined as the function of informing us about the properties of the environment, and interoception as the function of informing us about, roughly speaking, what is going on in our body, emotion itself, as far as its specific nature is concerned, is to be defined as the *function of informing us about the significance stimuli have for us, the self*. This, then, appears to me to be the proper meaning of the word ‘emotion.’⁴⁸

Note

In accordance with the preceding phenomenological analysis, the fact that emotion informs us about the significance of *stimuli* is not to be understood in the sense that emotion *per se* is *about* something, or “intentional”, but rather in the sense that emotion always occurs *in relation to something*. Strictly speaking, emotion itself simply *informs about significance*, and that is it. The connection of this information with something in the world must, as it appears to me as well as a number of other theorists, be a distinct process.⁴⁹ Emotion *per se* does not seem to convey any explicit information concerning what it is about. Nevertheless, in prototypical cases, emotion tends to be clearly associated with some particular event—such as the loss of a loved one, a dangerous situation, or simply a snide remark—wherefore the connection is immediately at hand. Insofar as that is the case, it is, I believe, justified to speak of emotion as informing us about the significance of something, although, strictly speaking, emotion *per se* is not intentionally directed at anything. Of course, emotion misattribution also occurs, most commonly in the case of what is known as “mood-experience”.⁵⁰

§16

On the Necessity of Appraisal for the Occurrence of Emotion

As we have seen, emotion, generally speaking, only occurs in response to stimuli that are of some significance to us. This means, however, that it is necessary that there be some process that precedes emotion by means of which the mind is able to identify and distinguish significant from non-significant stimuli, and, secondly, to determine the precise significance of a stimulus. The necessity of such a process is *a priori* evident, as it is inconceivable that we may be informed about the significance of a stimulus via emotion *without* the stimulus first being recognized as significant and identified as to its precise significance. In other words, we could not ever conceivably be informed about the significance of a stimulus if there were no information about its significance, which is to say, without such information, emotion simply could not occur. The process of the determination of significance—known in the literature as *appraisal*—is therefore a completely necessary precondition for the occurrence of emotion.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Note that emotion as defined here is not to be confused with *appraisal*. The latter consists in *determining* significance, whereas the former in *informing* about the significance thus determined.

⁴⁹ See, in particular, Russell 2003; Whiting 2011; Shargel 2014.

⁵⁰ Russell 2003, p. 159.

⁵¹ The notion of appraisal was introduced by Magda Arnold (1960) and worked out by a number of other prominent theorists, most notably the already mentioned Richard Lazarus, Nico Frijda, and Klaus Scherer. See, for an overview, Ellsworth and Scherer 2003 and, more recently, Ellsworth 2024. – Of course, the “processing” that precedes emotion will,

Note

By appraisal, I do not mean the same thing as cognition. Cognition, on the present account, is constituted only by those mental phenomena that have to do directly with thought. Appraisal, however, is not such a process. Appraising an event as to its significance is *not* thinking about it: it is a much more fundamental process that does not seem to project to experience directly, but is rather inferred as the *antecedent* of other mental phenomena, such as emotion. To be sure, as I discuss in more detail below, the information yielded by appraisal may be, and, indeed, typically is utilized in cognition so as to form an evaluative judgement. However, appraisal *itself* is not cognitive in this sense.⁵²

§17

On the Role of Emotion in our Lives

The above characterization of the specific nature of emotion allows us to elucidate the specific role emotion plays in our lives, namely if we consider *what it means* for a stimulus to be of significance to us. For, as recognized clearly by many, to disclose what is significant to us is to reveal what is *relevant to our concerns*, and to disclose how it is significant to us is to reveal *how it relates to our concerns*.⁵³ In other words, to say that emotion is the function of informing us about the significance stimuli have for us *eo ipso* is to say that emotion is the function of informing us about the relation a stimulus has to one or more of our concerns, as the significance of a stimulus for us is nothing but its relation to our concerns. Concerns—typically rather imprecisely referred to as ‘needs’ in psychology—are the fundamental mental dispositions on whose basis we appraise situations and events as well as strive in the world (Dweck et al. 2023).⁵⁴ In other words, concerns encode *what we want* in the broadest sense.

From this perspective, it becomes clear that emotion plays a vital role in our lives: it does nothing less than guide us as individuals in the world. For, in the most general terms, it reveals to us what in the world is “good” for us and what is “bad” for us by revealing to us how events and things in the world relate to our concerns, and, as such, it teaches us what to pursue and what to avoid so as to arrive at concern-satisfaction, or “what we want”. For, how could we ever satisfy our concerns if we did not even know what they are about, and how particular things, events and persons relate to them?

at least in some cases, most likely be different in the case of emotion elicited by artwork. In the case of music, for instance, it would seem that emotion is rather a direct reflection of the significance being conveyed, rather than the consequence of appraisal: it is as if music spoke the “language of the self” directly. To be sure, there is still, as with any language, the subjective moment of interpretation; however, the point is that, in this case, that interpretation is not to be understood as appraisal as described above (cf. Pratt 1948).

⁵² Cf. Kappas 2006. As it appears to me, it was the interpretation of ‘cognition’ in this sense that spurred the notorious “primacy of affect” claim of Robert Zajonc (1984), and thereby the “primacy debate”.

⁵³ See, most notably, Richard Lazarus (e.g., 1966, 1991) and Nico Frijda (1986, 2007).

⁵⁴ A mental disposition is, in essence, stored information employed in the realization of non-dispositional mental functions. A prototypical instance of a mental disposition is a *belief*, which is a piece of stored information, or “content”, that is employed, e.g., in the decision-making process. – In using the term ‘concern’, I am following Frijda. The term ‘need’ is imprecise simply because we do not necessarily need everything we care for. All concerns may, however, be said to play the role of *needs*, although, of course, with differences in intensity.

Emotion therefore provides us, albeit, crucially, in an entirely *indirect* manner, with invaluable information about the world.

In doing so, however, it *eo ipso* also teaches us about ourselves, for we may infer, by reflecting on what it is that elicits emotion in us, and what those emotions are, *what it is that we care about*. We often err in the way we interpret our own sentiments, or even intentionally deceive ourselves; emotion, however, does not lie. Seneca is entirely right when he says of man: *non quid dicat, sed quid sentiat refert* (*Ep.* 9). We may, for instance, assure ourselves and those around us that we have rid ourselves of any regard for what others think of us; yet, if at some point we come out in an unfavorable light, the sting of unfulfilled vanity reminds us just how deeply the concern pertaining to how we want to be perceived is ingrained. As such, emotion also provides us with invaluable information about ourselves.

Accordingly, the existence of emotion as defined above makes perfect sense from an evolutionary perspective: for, emotion is revealed to be a function that directly subserves the most fundamental aspect of our being, namely, *our striving in the world*.

Note

There can be no doubt, I believe, that, generally speaking, we are only emotionally affected by events that somehow pertain to what *we care about*. In other words, for a stimulus to be of significance for us, there must be *something* about it *in virtue of which* it is of significance for us. As pointed out by Frijda and others, this something is the stimulus' relation to one or more of our concerns. For instance, we tend to experience fear in relation to a dangerous situation, because such a situation is directly relevant to our concern of staying unharmed and alive. Were that not our concern, there would be no reason for us to be scared. Similarly, we may feel joy and affection in relation to a potential romantic partner, as that person's presence is directly relevant to our need of—and therefore concern for—intimacy and social relationships more generally.

It is likewise clear, as it appears to me, that the significance a stimulus has for us is constituted by the relation it has to our concerns. In the most general terms, events in the world either bring us closer to concern-satisfaction, or hinder it. As Frijda put it: “Emotions result from match or mismatch between events and concerns. Positive emotions can be said to result from events that represent match: actual or signaled concern satisfaction. Negative emotions result from events that represent mismatch: actual or signaled interference with concern satisfaction.” (1986, p. 278). As such, we feel joy and affection when a romantic interest displays signs of affection towards us, as that satisfies our concern—our desire—for this to happen. In contrast, were that person to reject or leave us, we would experience sadness, as that constitutes concern-dissatisfaction.

Of course, not all stimuli that elicit emotion in us necessarily bear the same general relation to our concerns, namely, that of either promoting or hindering concern-satisfaction. A most notable exception is the manner in which emotion is elicited by artwork. Consider, for instance, feelings of profound sadness elicited by a sad melody, or feelings of elation induced by listening to such melodies as contained, e.g., in Beethoven's *Eroica*. Here, the elicitation of emotion cannot be explained by the

relation of the given artwork to the satisfaction of our concerns, because, typically, no such relation is to be found. However, the fact that art does not necessarily promote or hinder concern-satisfaction does not *eo ipso* mean that it does not have any relation to our concerns at all. The ability of art to elicit emotion in particular appears to me explicable by the fact that, instead of directly contributing to our striving, a great portion of art *represents* our striving in various ways. Some forms of art, most notably those dramatic in nature, represent our striving in a quite literal sense; some, in contrast, seem to represent the very distillation of *significance* itself, namely, most notably, music, as brilliantly observed and described by Schopenhauer. As such, both share, albeit in very different forms, what may be called “emotional content”. From this perspective, I believe that the emotion-eliciting properties of artwork can be accounted for within the above framework. Unfortunately, such a task exceeds the scope of the present analysis by a great margin, as it would necessarily involve us in a discussion of the nature of art and aesthetic experience in general.

Let it be noted, however, that what I here call emotion elicited by artwork is not to be confused with the latter: aesthetic experience—or, aesthetic contemplation—not only has nothing to do with emotion as understood here, it even, insofar as it involves “disinterestedness”, *precludes* its elicitation.⁵⁵

§18

Emotion and Other Mental Phenomena

As I have argued above, emotion is a mental phenomenon *sui generis*. However, as I have discussed in the overall introduction to the present thesis, essentially all theories of emotion that acknowledge, be it explicitly or implicitly, its status as a mental phenomenon reduce emotion to some other mental phenomenon, namely, in particular, either to motivation, judgement or perception. In the following, I further defend the notion that emotion cannot be reduced to any of these mental phenomena by discussing, in psychological terms, the differences and relation that obtain between them and emotion. In addition, I also discuss the difference and relation between emotion and a mental phenomenon that is, in contrast, often conflated with emotion, namely, mood.

(a)

Emotion and Drive

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the experience of emotion is typically accompanied by the experience of action tendency. In other words, emotion is intimately associated with the motivational processes that drive us toward certain behaviors, or, in short, with *drive*. This state of affairs is readily explicable by the above characterization of the role that emotion plays in our lives. As we have seen, emotion typically occurs in relation to stimuli that are of some relation to our concerns. In particular, emotion informs us about the presence of a concern-relevant stimulus, as well as about the precise relation it bears to our concerns.

⁵⁵ Again, I am here drawing on the characterization of aesthetic experience provided by Schopenhauer, namely in the 3rd book of his *magnum opus* (1859), which, in turn, represents a complex elaboration of that provided earlier by Kant (1790).

However, it is not ultimately sufficient for concern-satisfaction to recognize that there is something relevant to my concerns and how it is relevant to them. To satisfy my concerns, I must act: for instance, to preserve my life and health, I must hide, or run, from danger, and to preserve the affection of a romantic interest, I must display affection myself. As such, it is entirely natural that, since emotion occurs in relation to concern-relevant stimuli, it would be accompanied by the occurrence of drive, as which is the force driving us toward concern-satisfaction.⁵⁶

At the same time, we can see, once again, and this time perhaps even more clearly than before, that it would be a fundamental mistake to identify emotion and drive, i.e., to consider emotion itself a motivational process such as drive. Both emotion and drive play its own unique role that the other does not: emotion indicates that a stimulus promotes or hinders concern-satisfaction, whereas drive leads toward concern-satisfaction. As such, drive is the more fundamental of the two. To be sure, in emotional situations, it pushes us toward a certain manner of responding to the given stimulus (it is not emotion *per se* that motivates us, as is so often said, but drive). In its more typical form, however, it is the force that urges us to initiate behavior that brings about “situations of satisfaction”, as Frijda put it (1986, p. 84).

As we have already seen above (§16), emotion is, in essence, merely “embedded” within the motivational system, namely as a sort of signaling function that helps steer our course. At our innermost core, we are “wanting animals”, as Maslow put it (1954, p. 24) and as has, a century earlier, been made incomparably clear and vivid by Schopenhauer (1859). We strive in the world to satisfy our concerns, to arrive at what we want, and emotion occurs in the course of our striving as the function that signals to us that a stimulus either promotes or hinders our arrival at what we are striving for. Naturally, such stimuli may require a response, and this is typically where drive has to step in.⁵⁷

Drive does not always co-occur with emotion, however, as not all emotional situations are urgent and require immediate action. In such cases, emotion is not necessarily accompanied by drive—i.e., a particular action tendency—, but rather merely informs regular intention formation (cf. Pacherie 2002).

(b)

Emotion and Judgement

Emotion is often accompanied by cognition pertaining to the eliciting stimulus in the form of judgement. In the most general terms, when undergoing an emotion in relation to something, we tend to think of the stimulus in terms that are congruent with the significance disclosed to us by the emotion. Thus, when we are angry in relation to, say, a particular person, we tend to have “angry thoughts” about them, and when we are afraid of something, we tend to think of it as “scary” or “dangerous”.

⁵⁶ That this is the relation between emotion and drive has been most clearly recognized and described by Philipp Lersch, see 1939/1966, pp. 215-221.

⁵⁷ In adopting this picture of the place of emotion in our lives, I am following Frijda (1986).

One prominent theory of emotion states that emotion itself *is* judgement of the above kind, namely, a “judgement of value”, or an “evaluative judgement” (Solomon 1976, 2003; Nussbaum 2001). As it appears to me, this theory is most fundamentally mistaken, but it is also, in a sense, very close to the truth.

It is clear, I believe, that emotion cannot be identified with judgement. Firstly, it is evident from phenomenological observation. As we have already seen, emotion experience certainly is not reducible to cognitive experience, or to cognitive experience in combination with bodily feeling, or any other kind of experience. Secondly, it is evident from the following psychological consideration. As we have seen, emotion consists in informing us about the significance that stimuli have for us. However, cognition does not *inform us* about anything: it rather merely operates with *already available* information. *Nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu*. That is to say, evaluative judgement does not “create” significance out of thin air—as which would be required for the judgment theory of emotion to work—, it is rather the *expression* of the significance that things have for us.

Accordingly, emotion is not constituted by judgement, as that is not possible even in principle: judgement is rather merely one of the forms of expressing emotion. On the present account, evaluative judgements are, in essence, cognitive, propositional representations of the very same information that emotion provides in a direct, non-propositional manner. Of course, strictly speaking, this applies only to the most rudimentary evaluative judgements, such as “this is scary”: evaluative judgement need not contain *only* the information yielded by emotion. Indeed, that is, strictly speaking, never the case, insofar as evaluative judgement generally always already involves attribution. Furthermore, I do not by any means care to imply that *all* evaluative judgements express emotion, as which is blatantly not the case. My point is merely that, *in relation to emotion*, evaluative judgement is always merely its expression, and certainly not emotion itself.

For the same reason, even the a possible weaker version of the cognitive theory, which would not identify emotion with judgement, but rather merely conceive of judgement as the cause of emotion, must be repudiated. If anything, the proper state of affairs is the other way around: I do not feel scared in the presence of a stimulus because I *think* that it is scary; instead, I think that it is scary *because* I feel scared in its presence. That cognition does not *determine* thymic phenomena, but rather merely constitutes their *expression*, has been recognized and clearly articulated already by Spinoza, who, in the 3rd book of his *Ethica*, wrote: “*Constat itaque ex his omnibus, nihil nos conari, velle, appetere neque cupere, quia id bonum esse judicamus; sed contra, nos propterea aliquid bonum esse judicare, quia id conamur, volumus, appetimus atque cupimus.*” (*Eth.* III, Schol. ad Prop. IX).⁵⁸

Nevertheless, as I have said above, the view that emotion is evaluative judgement is, in a sense, close to the truth. At the very least, it is, to a degree, understandable how one could arrive at it. For, indeed, there is a particular sense in which emotion is abstractly *analogous* to judgement, namely insofar as, metaphorically speaking, emotion may be conceived as the self saying to itself, in its very own language, “this hurts me”, “this scares me”, “this offends me”, and so forth (where “this”, however,

⁵⁸ Of course, as we have already seen, cognition is not to be confused with appraisal.

is unspecified, as per the note to §15). Clearly, however, this “language” has nothing to do with cognition, as emotion projects into experience in the form of non-intentional significance-disclosing feeling, and not cognitive experience. Accordingly, while emotion may, in this very abstract and somewhat misleading manner, be taken to be analogous to judgement, it certainly cannot be identified with it. Within this analogy, evaluative judgement is rather to be conceived as the *translation* of the emotion “sentence”, i.e., of the information encoded by emotion, into the language of cognition.

(c)

Emotion and Perception

As noted in the overall introduction, some authors hold that emotion is, in essence, a form of perception, namely, perception of value, or evaluative properties, such as “being dangerous”. For instance, according to Ronald de Sousa, “our emotions constitute the apprehension of properties of a certain sort that I call *axiological*” (1987, p. xv; emphasis in the original). More recently, Christina Tappolet wrote, in a similar manner: “If emotions are non-conceptual representations of evaluative properties, then it should be expected that emotions are like sensory experiences in that they allow us to be aware of certain features of the world. Just as the visual experience of a blue mountain allows us to be aware of the color of the mountain, the experience of fear would allow us to be aware of the fearsomeness of things.” (2016, p. 18).⁵⁹

Now, to be sure, we have already seen in the previous section that the fact that emotion is *not* a species of perception, or perception-like, or however else one may wish to turn it, is clearly established by phenomenological analysis. It appears to be a common denominator of the advocates of the perceptual theory that they confuse emotion experience *per se* with the perceptual experiences with which it is integrated. It is therefore not surprising that they define emotion in perceptual terms, or, more generally, in terms of a perception-like relation to “evaluative properties”, as evidenced in the above quotations. Nevertheless, let us, for the sake of completeness, concisely consider the difference between emotion and perception also on a psychological level, so as to further elucidate the inadequacy of the perceptual theory.

Generally speaking, it may be said that, from a psychological perspective, there is a kind of analogy between emotion and perception, namely in that *they both inform us about the world*. In very abstract terms, that is no doubt true. However, as we have seen, it is, strictly speaking, not true that emotion *itself* informs *about* the world. There is a fundamental difference between perception and emotion that is entirely concealed by this general statement, and which, in my view, sets them apart completely, namely, the *manner* in which they inform us about the world.

Perception informs us about the world *directly*. That is to say, perception informs us about the world by directly pertaining to the world.⁶⁰ In contrast, emotion informs us about the world indirectly,

⁵⁹ Unfortunately, Tappolet, whose exposition of the perceptual theory is otherwise very lucid and compact, makes no distinction between emotion and emotion experience.

⁶⁰ Note that I am not to be read here as advocating “naive realism” about perception. As I have endeavored to explain elsewhere, to deny that we have *direct access* to the world is not the same as to deny that we perceive the world directly.

namely, by modifying our thymic state into a particular affective state, *not* by directly pertaining to the world. As I have endeavored to explain above (§15), emotion, strictly speaking, only informs about significance, and the connection of emotion with something in the world is a distinct process. Accordingly, while, to visually experience a blue mountain is to see a blue mountain, i.e., to perceive its properties, to be afraid of a wolf is, as we have seen previously, not to “see” or otherwise “perceive” some property of the wolf, but rather to *feel scared* in relation to the wolf. This, as it appears to me, is a most decisive difference, one that clearly sets perception apart from emotion.

A crucial consequence of this difference is that perception can, as is well known, be *veridical* or *non-veridical*, or, in other words, correct or wrong. For instance, we can see a bent stick, even though what is actually “out there” is a straight stick. In contrast, since emotion *as such* does not pertain to anything beyond itself, so to speak, no such thing is possible for it. An emotion cannot be “correct” or “wrong” in the sense that it somehow does not match what is out there, because, in and of itself, it does not pertain what is out there *at all*. It can, at most, be “irrational” or “inappropriate”, such as when we experience fear in relation to something that has, objectively considered, no real potential of hurting us, e.g., a harmless spider, or some inanimate object.

We may be inclined to say that, in such cases, our *appraisal* is wrong. We appraise something as dangerous, “even though it is not”. Indeed, in this manner, perceptual theorists argue that emotion can be wrong, as, for them, emotion is much like appraisal, insofar as it consists in perceiving, or “representing”, an event as having some evaluative property, e.g., in the case of fear, the property “dangerous”. As such, they maintain that an emotion is wrong when we perceive an event as having, e.g., the evaluative property “dangerous”, when, in fact, it does not have it. As such, Christina Tappolet writes, for instance: “your anger is correct if your neighbor’s action was offensive” (2023, p. 103).

This line of thinking, however, presupposes a most preposterous and blatantly false and, indeed, essentially inhuman view, namely, that *significance* is an objective, intrinsic property of things. Strictly speaking, appraisal can *never* be wrong, for it is precisely the opposite of “objective consideration”, it is a subconscious determination of what things *mean*, and, more precisely, what they mean *to me*. That is to say, the meaning of things is derived in an entirely subjective manner, namely, in the most general terms, by appraising their relation to *my* particular concerns. Both the appraisal, as well as the concerns, are through and through *subjective*. As such, the derivation of significance varies both in accordance with the variance of how I appraise things, as well as of what my concerns are. Accordingly, significance itself is, in each case, through and through *subjective*. What is offensive for one is not necessarily offensive for the other: what upsets me need not upset you, and what upsets you need not upset me. Likewise, what brings me joy today need not bring me joy in a day, a week, or a month, and so forth. In consequence, it is entirely absurd to maintain that appraisal can be correct or wrong. For that to be possible, there would have to be such a thing as “objective significance”, e.g., as in the case of the last quoted passage, objective “offensiveness”; that, however, is nothing but the most blatant *contradictio in adiecto*.

(d)

Emotion and Mood

Mood is often conflated with emotion. For, as I have pointed out in the previous chapter, there is a particular form of emotion experience—namely, that which is, among other things, not clearly related to any particular event or thing and has, as such, no clearly identifiable source, is of lower intensity and longer duration, and is not accompanied by distinct physiological arousal (see, e.g., Beedie et al. 2005)—that has come to be designated as the experience of mood even though, in truth, it has nothing to do with mood *as such*. Let us therefore concisely discuss the difference and relation between the two.

In the most general terms, mood may be defined as a *disposition*, or a *bias*, toward certain modes of information-processing.⁶¹ For instance, to be “in a good mood”, or “happy”, means, roughly speaking, to be in a “frame of mind” that consists in a disposition to appraise things in a positive manner and to think positively, or, in other words, in a disposition to carry out particular kinds of appraisals and cognitions. Similarly, to be “in an anxious mood” means, roughly speaking, to be in a frame of mind that consists in the tendency to appraise everything as dangerous and frightening, and to think as if everything were dangerous and frightening.⁶²

As such, mood is, to be sure, closely related to emotion. For, insofar as it disposes us toward certain modes of appraisal, it disposes us toward being in certain emotional states. Thus, a person in a bad mood tends to be upset at things and events he or she encounters, whereas a person in a good mood tends to feel joy in relation to what he or she encounters. However, mood itself cannot, as per the above, be identified with these emotional states⁶³: it is, indeed, a much more fundamental and complex phenomenon, one that manifests itself in a multitude of ways.

Similarly, it is, strictly speaking, not right to refer as “mood-experience” to emotional states attributable primarily to mood. To be sure, it is true that the experience of “mood-caused” emotional states is distinct, in a number of ways, from the experience of emotion clearly related to some event in the world. For instance, since, e.g., an angry mood disposes us toward appraising things in such a way that *everything* annoys us, we tend to feel annoyed as if “in general”, not in relation to anything in particular, but, in a way, in relation to everything. Nevertheless, such experiential states are still experiences of *emotion*, not mood. As a *mental disposition*, mood does not itself project to experience: it merely “manifests” itself in various ways, such as, as discussed above, modes of emotional responding and thinking. We may be inclined to say that the experience of mood-caused emotional states is mood-experience in the sense that it is the experience of the manifestation of mood.⁶⁴ Again, however, that is simply inaccurate; for, the fact that the occurrence of a mental phenomenon is a consequence of

⁶¹ See, most notably, Lormand 1985; Frijda 1993; Davidson 1994; Sizer 2000; Siemer 2005, 2009.

⁶² Of course, there are more ways in which mood manifests itself—e.g., by facilitating retrieval of mood-congruent content from memory—, but it is not our aim at present to provide a full treatment of this complex phenomenon.

⁶³ This was articulated already by Alois Höfler, a student of Meinong, in his *Psychologie* (1897, §65).

⁶⁴ This is the way in which the term is used, e.g., by Matthias Siemer, who refers to the experience of all mood-caused mental phenomena—i.e., also, say, mood-congruent cognitions—as mood-experience (*op. cit.*).

mood does not *eo ipso* make the experience corresponding to that mental phenomenon mood-experience.

Note

In virtue of its pervasive effects on the manner in which we process information, mood is a phenomenon of fundamental philosophical importance. For, in essence, our frame of mind determines the very world we live in—what we see, how we think, what forms of significance we are open toward, and so forth. There are frames of mind which can only be arrived at on account of having had experienced certain psychically transformative experiences; and, often, it is these frames of mind in which the most fundamental truths are discovered. Of such nature are principally the insights expressed in religious texts, particularly those within the mystical tradition; it is no coincidence that such insights are typically attributed to ‘revelation.’

As is well known, the philosophical significance of ‘mood’ has been recognized and described by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1927) as well as some of his lectures, such as on the *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1992). However, as is likewise well-known, Heidegger himself never really provided a full-fledged account of the phenomenon. This lacuna has, in my view, been to a large extent remedied by Otto Bollnow, who provided a very insightful and highly lucid treatment of the nature of mood in general as well as of the various kinds of moods (1956).

In contrast, the notion of mood employed in much of contemporary philosophy of mind and scientific psychology, namely, mood as a sort of generalized, temporary emotional state, which, furthermore, is typically also not even described adequately, e.g., in terms of valence and arousal, is extremely superficial.⁶⁵ Even those who have recognized the proper nature of mood, namely, the advocates of the “dispositional” theories, overlook, as far as I know, the fundamental significance of the phenomenon. In short, a full-fledged account of the nature of mood that would both situate mood adequately within the psychological structure of man and also recognize and describe its full significance remains, to my knowledge, a *desideratum*.⁶⁶

§19

Summary

In the present chapter, I have derived an account of the proper nature of emotion from the phenomenological analysis carried out in the previous chapter, discussed the role that emotion plays in our lives, and treated of the relation and difference between emotion and a number of other mental phenomena, namely, in particular, drive, judgement, perception and mood.

⁶⁵ See, e.g., Thayer 1989, 1997; Russell 2003; Reeve 2018, sec. 3. Cf. Freeman 2014, sec. 2, for a critical overview of empirical work on mood in psychology.

⁶⁶ As it appears to me, currently, mood is either (i) described inadequately on both counts (see previous footnote), (ii) is described relatively adequately in psychological terms, but its full significance is not recognized (dispositional theories) (iii) or, its significance is recognized, but the phenomenon is described inadequately from a psychological perspective. The latter seems to me to be the case of those approaches that take their inspiration mostly or entirely from Heidegger (e.g. Freeman 2014).

We have seen, firstly, that, since emotion experience is a form of thymic feeling, emotion itself must be defined as thymic in nature, which is to say, as a mental function that pertains directly to the self; secondly, that, since emotion experience cannot be reduced to any other form of experience, emotion is a mental phenomenon *sui generis*; and, thirdly, that, since emotion experience, which is nothing but the subjective aspect of the output of the brain process implementing emotion, consists in the disclosure of significance that stimuli have for us, emotion itself must be defined as the function of informing us about the significance that stimuli have for us. Furthermore, I endeavored to show that, since emotion consists in informing us about the significance stimuli have for us, it is, by necessity, preceded by a process of appraisal, and advanced that, since the significance of a stimulus is constituted by its relation to one or more of our concerns, the proper role of emotion in our lives is to inform us what is relevant to our concerns, as well as how it is relevant to them, and, thereby, indirectly help us achieve concern-satisfaction.

Finally, we have seen that, while emotion is related in various ways to drive, judgement, perception and mood, it must be clearly distinguished from all of them. Emotion and drive both subserve concern-satisfaction, but in distinct ways: emotion informs about concern-relevance, whereas drive directly motivates us toward behavior that lead to concern-satisfaction. Emotion and evaluative judgement both relate to information about the significance of stimuli, but, whereas emotion informs about significance of stimuli, evaluative judgements, when related to emotion, merely expresses this information. Emotion and perception both inform us about the world, but in fundamentally distinct ways: perception does so directly, namely, by directly pertaining to the world, whereas emotion only indirectly, namely, by modifying our thymic state into a particular affective state. Lastly, mood and emotion are related, namely, in that mood disposes us toward being in certain emotional states, but mood *per se* cannot be identified with these emotional states, as it is a much more fundamental phenomenon that consists in disposing us toward certain modes of information-processing in general.

CONCLUSION

In the present thesis, I have set myself the goal of working out, in a systematic manner and in as clear and precise terms and possible, an answer to the question: *what is emotion?* In the following, I summarize the course and main results of the preceding analyses, and conclude with a full formulation of the answer that I have arrived at.

In the first chapter, I have discussed the generic nature and generic properties of emotion. In particular, I endeavored to show that, as far as its generic nature is concerned, emotion is a *mental phenomenon*—which is to say, a naturally occurring function which is realized by the brain, which influences or determines behavior as well as other mental phenomena, and whose realization is typically accompanied by specific experiential states—and discussed the inadequacy of alternative accounts of the generic nature of emotion. Furthermore, I discussed the relation between emotion, brain activity and emotion experience in more detail, and endeavored to show, firstly, that each particular instance of emotion is implemented in the brain in the form of a complex pattern of brain activity, but nevertheless is not reducible to it, and, secondly, that, in relation to emotion, emotion experience is nothing but the subjective aspect of the output of the brain process implementing it. On the basis of the latter observation, I have argued that the proper nature of emotion can be ascertained on the basis of reflection on the experiential states associated with it, and, furthermore, that, in fact, it can only be ascertained on the basis of such a reflection.

Accordingly, in the second chapter, I have carried out a detailed phenomenological analysis of emotion experience. Here, I sought to show, firstly, that emotion experience belongs to a particular group of feelings that are characterized by the fact that they pertain directly to the self, or, in other words, that emotion experience is a form of what I call *thymic feeling*; secondly, that emotion experience cannot be reduced to non-thymic forms of experience, namely, cognitive, perceptual and bodily experience; thirdly, that emotion experience, in virtue of its specific affective nature, cannot be reduced even to the other thymic forms of experience, namely, core thymic feeling and conative feeling; and, finally, that the proper nature of emotion experience consists in the disclosure of significance stimuli have for us, and that, accordingly, emotions are differentiated from each other on account of the significance that they disclose. Moreover, I also endeavored to show that emotion experience *per se* does not in any way pertain to the world, but rather is merely integrated with experiences that do, and that the relation between emotion experience and the world can only be described as feeling a certain way in relation to something. Accordingly, I advanced that the manner in which emotion discloses significance is not by somehow pertaining to the world, but rather simply by being felt.

Finally, in the third chapter, I systematically derived an account of the proper nature of emotion from the preceding phenomenological analysis. In accordance with the general relation between experiential states and mental phenomena established in the first chapter, I advanced, firstly, that, since emotion experience is a form of thymic feeling, emotion itself must be defined as thymic in

nature, i.e., as a mental function that pertains directly to the self, or, in short, a thymic phenomenon; secondly, that, since emotion experience cannot be reduced to any other form of experience, emotion is a mental phenomenon *sui generis*; and, finally, that, since emotion experience consists in the disclosure of significance that stimuli have for us, emotion itself must be defined as the function of informing us about the significance that stimuli have for us. Furthermore, I have also pointed out that, since emotion consists in informing us about the significance stimuli have for us, it is, by necessity, preceded by a process of appraisal, and endeavored to show that, since the significance of a stimulus is constituted by its relation to one or more of our concerns, the proper role of emotion in our lives is to guide us toward concern-satisfaction by informing us about what is relevant to our concerns and how it is relevant to them, and thereby also providing us with the means to discover what our concerns are. In addition, I also discussed the difference and relation between emotion and a number of other mental phenomena, namely, in particular, drive, judgement, perception and mood, and aimed to further elucidate that, while emotion is related in various ways to all of them, it is a unique mental phenomenon that must be clearly distinguished from them.

In conclusion, my answer to the question of the nature of emotion has three parts, corresponding to the distinct levels of analysis on which emotion can be considered. Firstly, as far as its *generic* nature is concerned, emotion is a *mental phenomenon*. Secondly, as far as its *subgeneric* nature is concerned, emotion is a *thymic phenomenon*. Finally, as far as its *specific* nature is concerned, emotion is the *function of informing us about the significance stimuli have for us*. In effect, the ultimate result of the preceding analyses is that emotion is a thymic mental function that consists in informing us about the significance that stimuli—that is, things, persons, events, thoughts and so forth—have for us and thereby guiding us as individuals in the world.

As I have endeavored to show, in contrast to alternative theories, this answer alone adequately describes what sort of thing emotion is, reflects the proper nature of the experience of emotion, and does full justice to the entirely unique role that emotion plays in our lives.

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