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IS THE PERCEPTUAL MODEL OF EMOTIONS STILL A GOOD COMPETITOR? A SMALL PHENOMENOLOGY OF FEELING

abstract

This paper defends a version of the Perceptual Model of feeling, according to which feeling is the mode of presence of axiological aspects of reality, or values. After considering the objections to this Model (§1), it presents an intentional analysis of feeling as the core of all emotions, more generally of all the phenomena of affective life, for which it proposes a taxonomy and provides in addition a dedicated phenomenology of feeling consciousness and of the degrees of intuitive cognition of values which may be distinguished in it (§2 and §3). Finally, it reconsiders the objections to the Perceptual Model in order to make sense of them, showing the limits in which they are valid and how to overcome them (§4).

keywords

feeling, emotions, perceptions, values, phenomenology

The Direct Access Thesis, sometimes referred to as “the Perceptual Model of emotions”, is the claim that

(P) Feeling is essentially a perception of the value-qualities, whether positive or negative, of things.

This claim, which was originally put forward by classical phenomenologists (Husserl 1900-1901, Scheler 1916, Stein 1917, Geiger 1921, Hildebrand 1921-1922, Hartmann 1926 – to name but a few of them), has garnered attention more recently among analytical philosophers as well (Mc Dowell 1985; D’Arms and Jacobson 2000; Mulligan 2010; Tappolet 2000, 2011; Goldie 2004). Several critics have also raised objections against these more recent incarnations of the idea (Dokic and Leymarie 2013, Deonna and Teroni 2012, Bagnoli 2011-2013). Their objections can be partitioned into at least two classes. Some objections are concerned with the differences between emotional and perceptual mental states and contents, while other objections are concerned with the issue of value and normativity. According to the first sort, emotions or emotional episodes *are not like* perceptions in all the respects in which a mental state can be analyzed. They differ, in particular, in their phenomenology and their intentionality. According to the second sort of objection, emotions cannot play the epistemic role that the perceptual model would assign to them, namely, they cannot be a source of evidence for value judgements in the way that ordinary perception can be a source of evidence for judgements of fact.

This paper addresses the first sort of objection, arguing that recent criticisms of this variety are perfectly justified as long as (P) is presented as a straightforward (analogical) explanation of emotions¹. Emotions are *not* like perceptions. What *is* in some sense like perception is the core of emotions as well as of any affective state, namely *feeling*. As in its classic phenomenological rendering, (P) will be shown to apply to *the feeling core* of any emotional experience, “bracketing” whatever aspect of it exceeds pure feeling. Though showing this

¹ The focus of my presentation at 2016 Spring School was the other sort of objection, those addressing phenomenological cognitivism concerning values and rejecting the value epistemology embedded in the perceptual model. Yet, since a corresponding paper is already in print for another journal (De Monticelli 2015), I prefer to shift the focus to the first sort of objection for this paper.

would require a full-fledged phenomenology of feeling, this paper will only lay out some basic points about such a phenomenology.

By a “full-fledged phenomenology,” I mean something more than what is currently understood (among Anglophone philosophers) by “phenomenology”, which is commonly taken to refer to the analysis of “phenomenal consciousness,” leaving intentionality for separate treatment. A full-fledged phenomenology of feeling is supposed to describe the peculiar intentionality of emotional life in its essential features, by illustrating the specific intentional operation of *feeling* as lived experience of reality.

To get this important preliminary point, a terminological remark may be helpful. The word “experience” can be used in two senses; a broad one, designating *what-it’s-likeness*, more or less equivalent to the German *Erlebnis*, and a strict one, designating a mode of *immediate presence of reality* as an infinite source of information, more or less equivalent to the German *Erfahrung*.

Only on this second rendering does it make sense to say that we “learn” from experience, i.e., that we can always *further explore* the given and *correct* illusions and mistakes. That is, in experience, thus understood, we may get reality *right* or *wrong*. No such immediate hold on reality figures in remembering or thinking, let alone day-dreaming, where veridicality is not even an issue. On the other hand, day-dreaming or remembering, and even propositional thinking, do have a what-is-likeness of their own, after all, as a number of authors have recently maintained (Bain and Montague 2011). Yet, emphasizing the qualitative character of these states has nothing to do with underlining the crucial distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, because no lived experience is an *encounter* with reality.

Feeling, like perception and unlike day-dreaming, is a way of encountering reality, or so I will argue. This paper offers a defence of (P), on the basis of a full-fledged phenomenology of feeling. A full-fledged phenomenology of feeling is an analysis of experience in the strict sense, providing a description of what is distinctive about *feeling* consciousness as a type of *direct* presence of objects to a subject. Such a mode of presence is what Husserl used to call an “*originally giving*” consciousness, a type of experience best exemplified by (external) perception. Yet external perception is by no means the only instance of *Erfahrung* or originally giving consciousness. Further instances include, indeed, feeling and that direct mode of social cognition that phenomenologists usually call empathy.

I shall first very quickly summarize some objections of the first class to the “perceptual model of emotions” (§1), then propose a brief phenomenology of feeling enabling us to make sense of those objections (§2 and §3) by letting us see their source and the limits of their validity (§4).

According to the first class of objections, emotions or emotional episodes *are not like* perceptions of the value quality of things. Emotions, the objection runs, are not to value qualities as visual perceptions are to colours or auditory perceptions are to sounds. As put forward by – for example – de Sousa (1987) or Tappolet (2000), the perceptual theory of emotions would in fact assert this very analogy:

Being afraid is to perceive danger, being sad is to perceive a loss, much as having a visual perceptual experience is to perceive, say, a red circle. To the adherent of this theory, we do not need to deploy the concepts of danger or loss in order to experience, respectively, fear and sadness, any more than we need to deploy the concept of a red circle to see one (Deonna and Teroni 2012: 67).

There is a weak sense in which this theory is more than an analogy. It is supported by an analysis of the *intentional contents* of perceptions and emotions and of their common

1. Objections to the Perceptual Model

properties. So, perceptions and emotions have the same mind-to-world direction of fit. In this respect, they are like other cognitive states such as beliefs, and unlike the typical world-to-mind direction of fit of desires and intentions, or conative states. This fact clarifies the difference in satisfaction conditions enjoyed respectively by cognitive and conative states, or cognition and will. There is a further experiential feature distinguishing, within cognitive states, perceptions and emotions from beliefs and judgements and capturing what we may call the character of *impression* (Hume) or “being struck” (Mulligan 2009) characteristic of *direct* or *immediate* cognition. Perceptions and emotions share causal self-reference, i.e., they are about what is (experienced as) causing them (redness, danger).

On the side of *phenomenal consciousness*, the analogy can be spelled out in terms of the lived “affection”, the state of being “affected” or “touched”, of suffering as it were the impact of reality, through the bodily feeling – for example in sweating or trembling – in which the emotion is lived, much as seeing can be felt in dazzlement or hearing in near-deafening loudness.

On both sides, of course, elaborating the analogies immediately brings out the differences. This will lead us directly to the critical objections against the perceptual model.

First of all, one may wonder *which* model of perception we are referring to. Alva Noë has convincingly contrasted two basic attitudes toward perception, giving rise to two opposite ways of “modelling” it: the “scientist’s” and the “artist’s” attitudes.

Some years ago I was talking with an artist. He asked me about the science of visual perception. I explained that vision scientists seek to understand how it is we see so much – the colourful and detailed world of objects spread out around us in space – when what we are given are tiny distorted upside-down images in the eyes. How do we see so much on the basis of so little?

I was startled by the artist’s reply. Nonsense! He scoffed. That’s not the question we should ask. The important question is this: Why are we so blind, why do we see so little, when there is so much around us to see? (Noë 2015: xi).

By and large, these attitudes correspond to the naturalistic-scientific (not the “natural” or pre-theoretic) one and to the phenomenological one in the language of classical phenomenology (Husserl worked out the similarity of the aesthetic and the phenomenological attitude at length: Husserl 1998: VII, 133 ff.). Not surprisingly, the “artist’s” perspective takes for granted that perception is or can be experience in the sense of *Erfahrung*, not just of *Erlebnis*. The exercise of our senses would be full of adventure and discoveries, surprise and amazement, if we weren’t most of the time trapped in our perceptual routines, organized by our practical needs and habits, making us “blind” to the richness and intricacy, the charm and horror, the novelty and volatility of any given perceptual scene (indeed, the artist is supposed to rouse us from the dogmatic sleep of *aisthesis* or sensibility).

The criticism of the Perceptual Model of feeling depends partly on adopting a model of perception based on the naturalistic attitude, for example, the attitude common among psychologists and neuroscientists. From the standpoint of psychology, objects are only envisaged as stimuli, i.e., what triggers experiences in the broad sense of the term – qualia of any sort, but also “mental representations”, “images” – all that transpires in the theatre of consciousness. In this language, seeing things is exactly like seeing pictures of them: real pictures actually are externalized retinal images. This is what Noë rightly calls the trigger-experience conception: “As if things just cause the lighting-up of experiences inside our heads” (Noë 2015: 97). “Experience” cannot but be meant in the broad, weak sense of *Erlebnis* here, and not in the more appropriate and strong sense of an encounter that a whole

embodied and active person has with whatever presents itself in its surroundings, in the flesh, demanding attention, exploration, investigation, and interaction.

Can one possibly perceive the golden glare of the Pisan Hills at midsummer time, without perceiving the soft lines of a Tuscan horizon, and the orderly sweetness of such a landscape? “Perceiving” means here an exercise of all the senses or sensory modalities, whereby one is “struck” by “sensible” and “affective” qualities alike, without really being able to distinguish “sensations” and “feelings”. Yet the trigger-experience model of perception accounts for the experience of colours and shapes only on the basis of the retinal input, thereby leaving the “felt” sweetness – the value quality – without a specific organ, and the “feeling” without an organic basis. This is the first dissimilarity between perception and emotion. Perception is associated with certain sensory modalities and their specific organs, emotion is not. So, if the red tomato is not there to cause my visual experience of it, I only seem to see a red tomato (i.e., the experience is an illusion, being “just subjective”). On the contrary, not being intersubjectively shared does not make the emotion illusory: I may genuinely feel afraid of a barking dog, even if it is not in fact dangerous.

All subsequent objections of this sort emphasize the relative objectivity (or more or less universal accessibility) of (stimulus-based) perceptual information in contrast to the subjectivity of emotional responses.

- 1) Intersubjectivity/Idiosyncrasy: Unlike perceptions, emotions are highly dependent on the subject’s motivations, beliefs, and character traits. You fear the barking dog, I don’t.
- 2) Transparency/Self-affection: Unlike perceptions, emotions are not “transparent.” They seem more to induce qualitative states in the experiencing subject, than to reveal qualities (e.g., colour, shape) of their object.
- 3) Cognitive Grounding: Emotions stand in need of justification (“Why are you indignant?” “What are you afraid of?”), unlike perception, which serves as a source of justification for judgements (Why do you say he is a thief?” “I saw him steal your necklace”). Emotions always seem to need a cognitive basis (perceptions, memories, beliefs, imagined situations), whereas perception provides such a basis for other states.

Let’s start with yet another terminological remark, concerning the word “emotion”. Classic and contemporary philosophical literature alike tend to lump together a number of different phenomena related to feeling under this word, yielding a list where one can find toothaches or the pleasures of the table, along with the sin of pride or the passion for truth, a diversity that gives rise to what might be called the hodgepodge problem (De Monticelli 2003-2012). In his influential book on emotions, for example, Peter Goldie seems to speak of emotion in at least two ways: in a very broad and comprehensive way – as synonymous with “emotional feeling” (Goldie 2000: 51), including bodily feelings, moods, sentiments, and passions² – and in a narrower and more negative way, by contrast with moods and bodily feelings. That Goldie uses the word “emotion” in so broad a sense is also apparent in the general criterion he provides to distinguish emotions from “brute feelings like toothache, which we cannot make sense of” (Goldie 2000: 20). Emotions, accordingly, are characterized by their meaningfulness, or intelligibility, which is explained in terms of intentionality or directedness-toward-an object. This criterion is, by phenomenological standards, acceptable intensionally, yet too restrictive extensionally. To illustrate this extensional restrictiveness, consider how an emotion can

**2. Pure feeling,
or the two
poles of feeling
intentionality**

² A construal strikingly similar to what Descartes meant by “passions”, or the sort of conception of emotion found within the classical philosophical tradition

serve as a way of becoming aware of part of one's body, or of one's fragility or poor health. Even a toothache can make sense in that way, and so also can a physical pleasure, a global bodily feeling, a mood, and the like.

Now, a theory of the emotional life of a person should provide a rationale for distinguishing, ordering and connecting such different, yet somehow related, phenomena as those heaped together in the conceptual hodgepodge one finds in the literature. That is, such a theory has the task of linking together a variety of emotional phenomena that include local sensory feelings, like pleasure and pain in every sensory modality; global bodily states, like feeling ill or good, being tired, hungry, disgusted; moods and states of mind, like sadness, anxiety, cheerfulness; emotions of different kinds and levels (distinguishing emotions as basic, like fear, anger, disgust; non-basic, as shame, regret, guilt, indignation; and, more generally as social, moral, aesthetic, political, religious); personal feelings or sentiments (such as love and hate, esteem, respect or contempt, devotion), passions (like jealousy, gambling addiction, passion for truth), habitual but changeable dispositions/attitudes (e.g., trust or mistrust, sympathy, reliance on others), attitudes of personality (self-esteem, confidence, humility, curiosity), and so on.

Drawing on classic and contemporary research, a phenomenological theory of emotional life capable of providing a rationale for such a taxonomy and a map of the place of each type of affective phenomenon in a person's emotional life can be worked out on the ground of three main principles, which I've elaborated and defended elsewhere. (De Monticelli 2003-2012, De Monticelli 2016). I reproduce them here only in order to focus on their implications, which can clarify both the sense and the limits of the Perceptual Model of feeling.

The first principle is a version of the Direct Access Thesis (P), which I shall defend here by appeal to the just-mentioned general phenomenological theory of affectivity:

P1. Feeling is essentially a perception of the value-qualities, whether positive or negative, of things.

P2. All affective phenomena are "founded" on feeling (but not reducible to it).

P3. The feeling disposition, or affective sensibility, has a structure of layers ("stratification"), which are activated by felt values of a corresponding hierarchy of value-spheres, and activate corresponding levels of self-experience.

2.1. Bracketing drives

Claims P2 and P3 go against the grain of the current literature, though I contend that they alone do justice to the complexity of emotional phenomena. To be more specific, P2 clarifies the relation that holds among all affective states and dispositions in the taxonomy outlined above and identifies their common core, i.e., their feeling core, which, in Husserlian terms, is the founding (*Fundierung*) basis of all emotional experience. P2 articulates two "moments" characteristic of most emotional phenomena:

(a) *Being affected* by or receptivity, "passivity", being "struck" or "impressed" by something, in short, the *receptive component* of an emotional episode, marking it as a kind of perception.

(b) *Being inclined to*, "moving" to or from, drives/desires, or in short the *conative component*, the urge to action.

The foundational relation is a relation of *ontological dependence*. That the receptive component provides the foundation for the conative one means, first of all, that the latter cannot exist without the former, but the former can exist without the latter. There are lots of examples of this second possibility, whereby a receptive experience can exist without a conative one. To illustrate, think of aesthetic experience, e.g., listening to music and discriminating its aesthetic and expressive qualities, or think of the way a mother lovingly contemplates her sleeping child, or, again, of states like blissfulness, calm, despair, surprise, amazement, and the like.

Conversely, we can hardly conceive of a drive, a conative urge, deprived of any feeling. So, far from being reducible to excitability, *emotional experience is based upon sensitivity*, and excitability, when the former is in effect, tends to be conditioned by it (rather than directly by the “stimulus”).

This claim goes against a prominent tradition, according to which what is essential and ineliminable in affectivity is its conative component (in the form of, e.g., drives or desires). This tradition is exemplified by theorists like Freud, but can be traced back to Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, and Hume, among others. Even Franz Brentano is still completely faithful to this tradition and, as a consequence, does not divide affective and conative states into two distinct classes but rather fits them all into one and the same class³. Hence, P2 presents a revolutionary challenge in philosophy of mind and personhood – a genuine discovery on the part of phenomenology, and a motivation for its cognitivism in axiology. As Kevin Mulligan aptly remarks:

The view that it is possible to feel values, what I have here called being struck by value, and that this is a form of epistemic contact with value was defended by a quintet of realist phenomenologists – Reinach, Scheler, Hildebrand, Hartmann and Reiner (Mulligan 2009: 154).

According to this theory, *emotions are not perceptions of values: they are personal responses and re-actions* to such perceptions that are, as it were, built on them. P2 allows one to “bracket” the drive-component of affectivity, identifying it as distinct but dependent on the latter and thus breaking the ground for a thorough analysis of “pure feeling”, that is, of its *peculiar intentionality*. Within this frame, in fact, P1 and P3 shed light, respectively, on *the objective and subjective poles* of the intentional relation – thereby explaining what is peculiar about any mode of consciousness involving *feeling*.

What is characteristic of feeling, peculiar to it as a form of intentionality? Let’s frame the answer within a more general understanding of intentionality. As is well known, this term denotes the key-notion for the analysis of consciousness. There is no consciousness but in a given mode – whether as perception, emotion, desire, belief etc. Now a genuine phenomenology of consciousness consists in distinguishing the way in which objects are present to a subject in accordance with modes such as these. There is no reason to doubt that Husserl accepts P1 as a basic axiological principle and does so quite early on in his philosophical labors. Yet no classical phenomenologist brought out the importance of *both poles* – subjective and objective – of the intentional relation as well as Husserl. Let’s go back to the notion of *Erfahrung*, as clarified above. Not every mode of consciousness is an actual encounter with – let alone an exploration of or interaction with – reality. The paradigmatic form of *Erfahrung* is external perception. And, as we saw already, Husserl has a technical term for this “epistemic contact” involving some mode of presence of a perceptual object. He calls it an “originally giving” consciousness, or a presence of the object in the flesh. It is a mode of presence requiring further analysis on the “noematic” side, i.e., on the side of the object. We made mention already of that peculiar feature of the *Seinsinn* (the “noema”) of an object of perception by virtue of which it is given as further explorable, indeed, even as an

2.2. Originally giving consciousness and positionality

³ According to Brentano there are three classes of mental states: Presentations (*Vorstellungen*), Judgements (*Urteile*), Interests or Emotions (*Interesse und Gemutsbewegungen*) – *Ideae, Judicii, Volitiones* in the Latin version (Brentano 1973: 198).

infinite source of further experience. There is much more than *intuitive presence* to “original” presence. To see why, try to count the pillars of the Parthenon just by recalling it to your memory. Your memory makes possible a re-visualizing of things, and so in attempting this feat you will have an intuitive mode of presence of the Parthenon. But you will not be in a position to increase your knowledge of the object. Unless you already knew the number of the temple’s pillars, you won’t be able to (without imaginative embellishment) count them on your imaged temple.

One might think that this difference is captured by a standard (Searlian) analysis of the mental state’s content in terms of direction of fit plus causal self-referentiality (enjoyed by perception, but not by memory). But how could *causal self-referentiality* grant the possibility of illusion and correction, “learning from experience”, which is *constitutive* of perception? Illusion and correction would be impossible if experience were only a causal impact of reality on sensory organs. There is a *claim of validity* (veridicality) to any genuine perception, that no sheer causal impact of things on organs can produce. What “bears” the implicit claim of validity is a feature of perception which makes an act out of it – rather than a state (De Monticelli 2015). We “take notice” of the (apparent) existence of the perceived object, or “take a position” concerning it. The *doxic positionality* of an intentional act is the noetic correlate of the givenness and further explorability of the act’s object, and exists quite independent of any propositional attitude, thought or conceptually articulated belief. It consists, rather, in the *recognition* of the given thing as existing or being there. We “take note” of something being there or happening, and this is not at all subject to the will. That’s why radical doubt is impossible when it comes to actual perceiving. This *Stellungnahme*, in which the person “filling in” the subjective pole of intentionality “lives” while experiencing, is subject to the “jurisdiction of reason”, though. That is, it can turn out to be *wrong*, and is subject to being “cancelled” for a new position, or suspended in hesitation, uncertainty, further exploring – all of which takes place at a pre-linguistic level (the level of the “pre-reflective cogito”, as Merleau Ponty would have it). Types of experience like imagination or day-dreaming, by contrast, present us with contents whose veridicality is not an issue. In them positionality is “neutral,” so that there is no claim of “validity” at this level. I’m perfectly free, for instance, to imagining flying donkeys. This two-sided “noematic-noetic” analysis of perceptual intentionality is the background against which an analysis of feeling intentionality can be now outlined.

3. A brief phenomenology of feeling

In a footnote to a working paper on emotional life, Husserl quotes William Hamilton, who “says that in feeling we are in a peculiar way one and the same with its content” (Husserl 2005: 165).

This and similar observations constitute a cornerstone for the phenomenology of feeling, and highlight a key point of contrast with the phenomenology of perceiving. The decisive move enabling the phenomenologist to adequately describe pure feeling consists in taking note of the intentionality of feeling both as a mode of presence of *objects* to a subject and as a mode of presence of the *subject* to herself. The two poles of the intentional relation are in fact the targets of P1 and P3, respectively.

“Noematic” description highlights our receptivity to an infinite variety of value qualities belonging to things, making “goods” and “evils” out of them. Receptivity is the phenomenon of “being struck” – wrongly or rightly –, in emotional responses which are more or less appropriate and in principle correctible (as illustrated in cases when, for instance, we come to regret our responses and the course of action based on them). Axiological positionality, which may be positive, negative or neutral, is as much “under the jurisdiction of reason” as doxic positionality. Up to this point the analogy with perception is fitting, and to this extent the “perceptual model” of feeling is justified.

I may feel the unpleasantness of a sting, the bodily or psychological discomfort associated with a state of illness or weariness, the agreeable nature of an arrangement of colors. But I may also sense the nobility of a gesture, the vulgarity of an attitude, the wickedness of an act, the beauty of a masterpiece. The harmonious way a tool or a piece of furniture fits one’s body, the easy form of a teapot – these and many others are examples of the sort of “affordances” an object can have. These qualities too are in a way “perceived,” and feeling is the mode of this kind of perception. Emotion is in that respect essentially *like* perception. It is, as the German language has it, a *Wertnehmen*.

To summarize, feeling is the *mode of presence* of things’ value qualities (salience, affordances in Gibson’s sense⁴, or tertiary qualities of all sorts). This point addresses the question of the formal object of emotional intentionality. It points to a widely neglected, yet pervasive feature of the life world, namely, the rich and varied plurality of positive or negative value qualities that “colour” things, events, states of affairs, and situations in the surrounding world. Indeed, it is hard to find qualifying words, adjectives, that do not refer to some value quality. Axiology is in a sense the ontology of adjectival language.

Yet “noetic” description has to take into account the other feature of feeling, the one noticed by Hamilton and explored by the classic phenomenologists. The clearest noetic account is given by Edith Stein, both in her (1917) text on *The Problem Empathy* and in her (1922) on the *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*. Phenomenologically, experience (in the sense of *Erfahrung*) is always also self-experience, and not in the trivial sense of *Erlebnis*, but in the strict one of a discovery of oneself, or self-cognition. Yet this happens *only to the extent to which experience includes feeling and action or movement*. I can be “lost in perception” or in thought, completely oblivious of myself. But I cannot feel pain without feeling myself in pain, nor can I act without experiencing my agency or my causal power – except in some specific “de-personalizing” psycho-pathologies⁵.

We can call “egological states” those experiences that belong to the affective and the conative classes of intentional acts. Feeling states, in particular, are egological states, inasmuch as they are both experiences of the (axiological aspects of) the world and self-experiences. “Being struck” is not all that there is to pure feeling. It may also be described as an experience of being touched, or “affected”, “involved”, “impressed,” or even awakened, “revived”, excited, etc. Such characteristics make up the noetic counterpart of affective sensibility. Only in feeling do we feel alive. Further, what is deeply interesting to a philosopher is the extent to which feeling – and hence self-experience – is involved in intellectual research. Epistemic values and disvalues are a source of deep suffering or joy for some of us. A phenomenology of boredom,

3.1. The feeling dimension of breadth

4 J. J. Gibson (1966): “I have coined this word as a substitute for *values*, a term which carries an old burden of philosophical meaning. I mean simply what things furnish, for good or ill. What they *afford* the observer, after all, depends on their properties”. Quoted in Jones (2003: 111).

5 Take, for example, the case of compulsion described by Viktor Emil von Gebattel (1994), where poor Mr H. H. seems to have entirely lost his sense of agency – a predicament that compels him to desperately repeat each action and segment of action he has to accomplish.

too, could be worked out along these lines. Dullness and estrangement seem intimately bound up with indifferent activities.

3.2. The depth dimension of feeling

Phenomenological analysis reveals a further dimension of feeling's intentionality, which we can call its *depth*. Thus far we have considered one dimension, namely, the *breadth* of its domain, or horizon. The qualities of value - positive and negative to varying degrees - are *many*. The extraordinary *richness* of the negative or positive value qualities to which we are sensitive provides the starting point for any phenomenological reflection on feeling. There is virtually no situation in life in which one of these qualities is not currently or habitually present.

Feeling, moreover, is always a self-revealing experience. Value-experience is always self-experience as well, to the extent that it "touches," involves, or concerns us. Doubtless, not all feeling experiences are on a par. There are differences in importance or weight, or, we might say, in rank of value, or in motivating power - of the felt goods and evils. - This in a way corresponds to the "depth" of the feeling experience, say, of the pleasure or the pain of waking oneself up. As if values of different rank were felt at different levels of oneself (or as involving a lesser or greater part of oneself). It is as if the experience of different values belonged to different layers of sensibility. That idea is described well by Scheler:

There can be no doubt that the facts which are designated in such a finely differentiated language as German by "bliss," "blissfulness" [*Glückseligkeit*], "being happy" [*Glücklichsein*], "serenity," [*Heiterkeit*], "cheerfulness" [*Fröhlichkeit*], and feelings of "comfort" [*Wohlgefühl*], "pleasure," and "agreeableness" [*sinnliche Lust und Annehmlichkeit*] are not simply similar types of emotional facts which differ only in terms of their intensities..." (Scheler 1973: 330)

Intuitively, we realize that a feeling can touch a person more or less "deeply", depending on *the degree of personal involvement*. For instance, the pleasure of a good massage can be felt by most of us as much less involving than the joy of discovering Shakespeare. No doubt this joy will have a *higher degree of motivational power* than the pleasure of the massage, and it might indeed motivate a choice to study English Literature rather than something else, a turn of events with significant consequences for the rest of my professional life.

Is it possible to give, if not a way to measure depth, at least a rationale for the putative ordering of layers of sensibility concerned, respectively, with the pleasure of a massage and the joy of reading Shakespeare? What is the rationale for this stratification?

A last passage from Scheler offers a powerful suggestion:

It is, for example, impossible for one to be "blissful" over happenings of *the same axiological level* that are "disagreeable" to another; the differences in these feelings also seem somehow to require *different axiological states of affairs*. (Scheler 1973: 331, emphasis added)

Let's unpack Scheler's remark. The "depth" of a feeling is proportional to the importance of the values concerned. Feelings are modes of presence of values *at different levels of an axiological hierarchy*.

Many scholars and philosophers are dubious of the sort of objective value hierarchy that Scheler offers in his *Formalism*, with its four spheres of value, i.e., the sensory, the vital, the personal and the divine. Yet it's debatable whether they have understood its phenomenological grounding. Everyday experience and ordinary language already point in the direction of this view as providing a criterion for ordering the hodgepodge of affective

phenomena, the very thing we are looking for. This criterion, in turn, is intimately bound up with our selfhood, as experienced through all the different forms of feeling.

By “selfhood” I mean the reality of a person *as she experiences herself, or as she is “given to herself”*, in that quite peculiar and irreducible way in which she is not given to anybody else, that is, from a first person perspective (Baker 2013). Any value experience is at the same time an experience of selfhood, though in varying degrees of centrality, or of wholeness, so to speak. This seems phenomenologically undisputable. The relatively localized pleasure of a massage is an experience of those parts of my body, which are touched, as *mine*, or as parts of my (bodily) self. The pain I feel in when you step on it teaches me the boundaries of my bodily being. Similarly, any global, “vital” comfort or discomfort, hunger, drowsiness, feeling refreshed or tired, the energetic feeling of young age or that of powerlessness in old age – all of these inform me of *how I am*, what condition I am in, as well as what I need insofar as I am in a constant state of vital self-regulation. They also inform me of my finitude, my dependency on the material and social environment. My global state is exactly what basic emotions alter, by flagging up threats and advantages in the surrounding world. Moods as well are indicative, both to myself and others, of *how I am*, signalling which of the affective tones, in a scale ranging from deep depression to manic euphoria, now colours my life.

Only encounters with what kindles sentiments in me - whether of admiration and contempt, love and hate, political passions, religious or artistic devotions - will, over time, tell me *who I am*. By *sentiments* I mean those relatively abiding dispositions to assent to or dissent from the very being of someone or something. The peculiarity of sentiments is to present their objects to us as bearers of yet unknown values, or as fields of axiological discovery. They instigate a kind of search as exciting and fallible as any other search after truth, and mark out a significant domain of the life of a person. They nourish and motivate higher-order emotions, emotions which would be impossible in the absence of their sentimental background, but also choices, actions, and behaviours. The kind of hope I have for a friend’s success would be unknown to me without the friendship binding me to him, and neither would the pleasure of benevolence and other friendly behaviours towards him. In so doing, sentiments gradually reveal our personal identity – or rather a part of it, whether it be an essential or contingent one. In the course of our personal growth – and humans, as long as they live, in some respects never cease to grow up – our sentimental dispositions lead us to discover, wonder about, change, establish or disrupt *our* individual scales of value priorities and our systems of value preferences. Sentimental life, in this expansive sense that *grounds* our long-term desires, passions, intentions, choices and actions, is what first awakens what we may call the personal layer of our sensibility, which will in a way in return take root in the subsoil of evaluative feeling and acting at the level of its more basic, sensory and vital layers. Sentiment is always indicative of the growing core of selfhood, or personal identity, whose discovered aspects are often astounding or disconcerting to us, in exactly the same way as newly gained knowledge of the real can be in other cases.

Let’s think again of that initial list of affective phenomena in the familiar hodgepodge of emotional experiences. We can now discern a clear order to them, the rationale for this order being their place and role in the sort of self-experience we go through by exploring the axiological aspect of reality, from sensory pleasures and pains to global bodily feelings and moods, and on to basic emotions, sentiments structuring our axiological scales, including higher emotions, will-shaping passions, and even personal callings. (P3) is the principle summarizing all the preceding analysis.

4. The objections reconsidered What is left of the three objections to the Perceptual Model of feeling that we considered above (§1)? Let's recall them:

- 1) Intersubjectivity/Idiosyncraticity: Unlike perceptions, emotions are highly dependent on the subject's motivations, beliefs, and character traits. You fear the barking dog, I don't.
- 2) Transparency/Self-affection: Unlike perceptions, emotions are not "transparent." They apparently modify their subject, inducing qualitative states in her/him, and do not simply reveal qualities (colour, shape) of their object.
- 3) Epistemic Grounding: Unlike perceptions, emotions are in need of justification ("Why are you indignant?" "What are you afraid?") and do not provide a source of justification for judgements (Why do you say he is a thief?" "I saw him steal your necklace"). They always stand in need of an epistemic support (*via* perceptions, memories, beliefs, imagined situations) and do not provide epistemic support for other states.

Our analysis shows:

- a) that the objections hit the mark in so far as the analogies between *emotions* (in the proper sense) and perceptions are concerned;
- b) that, nevertheless, they lose their force when it comes to the feeling core of emotions and its receptive core;
- c) that the source of the differences is also what grounds the analogy with perception, namely the egological character of feeling: being struck by value is a sort of perception, but experiencing values is not separable from experiencing selfhood. This is why feeling has such a central role in our lives.

Examining the objections in greater detail will help us see these points. Let's start from the second one. It finds warrant in the same fact that struck Hamilton and innumerable other authors. In phenomenological terms, feeling is "egological" or self-constitutive (as is well known, "constitution" does not mean construction or creation, but intuitive access to the evidence-filling content (*erfüllende Inhalt*) of a given notion). Feeling is, in this sense, also an essential component of any minimal bodily self-awareness as it figures in, for instance, sensory modalities such as the sense of touch, kinesthesia (sense of agency, or of posture and spontaneous movement) and cenesthesia (visceral feelings) a point that Husserl's analyses of mind-and-personhood's constitution (*Ideas II*) and Merleau Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* famously demonstrated.

Objection 2 (Transparency/Self-affection) refers to a phenomenon thoroughly studied by classical phenomenology. Drawing on their legacy, we can make sense of the disanalogy between perception and emotion. Both sensory and affective sensibility are modes of experience, in the strong sense of *Erfahrung*. They both exhibit the mode of presence of an "originally giving" consciousness. We also characterize this mode as immediacy or directedness. For both sensory and affective sensibility, it is a very common mistake to confuse immediacy with instantaneity. Experience, strictly speaking, always takes time. External perception in all its modalities is intimately tied up with action and exploration. The way in which feeling is temporally extended is somewhat different. Just as the being of any given visible object has much more to itself than what meets the eye at the first glance, likewise value- the axiological quality of a situation, a thing, a person, a work -always has much more content than the "aspect" of it that is sensed at first. But gaining further knowledge, in this case, is not so much a matter of further *exploring* (i.e., an active testing of some kind) as it is a matter of *contemplation*, so to speak. We can take aesthetic experience as a paradigm of value experience here. Notice that the first effect of being struck by aesthetic value is being halted

and brought to a standstill, as it were. We tend to take up the attitude of the spectator, a sort of contemplative receptiveness. Consider the glare of the sea on a midsummer late afternoon. We see it, but if we have time and leisure to contemplate it, we may gradually be somehow “filled” with a kind of impersonal bliss, up to a point where we feel almost overwhelmed. Perhaps we search for a word to name this blissful effect of the glaring sea, maybe an ancient Greek verse comes to mind, one from our school memories. “Innumerable smile of the sea”, that’s how Aeschylus names this bliss, capturing that mixture of calm infinitude and the vibrant plurality of glimmers which make it up, and reminding us of the blissful life of the gods. Well, the forgoing is intended as an illustration of a central phenomenological feature of feeling, i.e., that it takes time. And it does so in a double sense: it requires time, and it fills it, conferring *plenitude* to it. It calms us down and makes us silent. We feel ourselves alive, more intensely than in our ordinary practical commerce with things. It is as if all our time feeling were a time of growth. It is a time of growth indeed. What increases is our awareness of value (or disvalue, of course). – True, most of the time we are content with that value which first “strikes” us and go on with our busy lives. But if we let ourselves be “invested” with the positive or negative appeal of the thing, then – quite slowly, sometimes – we come to “realize” the nature of that value, becoming increasingly aware of its peculiar “thickness”, while it in a way “permeates” us, so that “we are in a peculiar way one and the same with its content,” as Hamilton has it.

Among the classical phenomenologists, Moritz Geiger is the one who most clearly articulated the difference between perceiving and feeling. He used the German verb “*innewerden*” – literally, to be internalized – to denote that process of becoming aware of some value or disvalue through that inner reawakening we described (for further illustration, I defer here to Scheler’s account of the experience of repentance, to which he dedicated a famous essay in 1921). There is a German word, *Widerfahrnis* that is particularly well suited to express this sort of receptive encounter with some value that “sails into us”, to use the translation proposed by Herbert Spiegelberg (1982: 326). The term aptly describes the experience that a discerning listener has in hearing music. That is to say that this mode of presence of a subject in feeling, far from preventing an encounter with something outside the subject, is a mode of original presence of value – a typically non-objectifying mode. There is a very apt phrase for describing this attitude, which Geiger eminently applies to aesthetic experience, but which is nevertheless just as apt for value experience generally. He describes it as “external concentration”.

The classic phenomenologist who analyzed the degrees of sentimental intuitive knowledge with the greatest precision is Dietrich von Hildebrand, who introduced an important distinction concerning the experience of value. On the one hand, there is the actual perception of value – “*Wertsehen*,” the experience of its first coming into view, so to speak, or, of noticing an initial aspect of that value. On the other hand, there is the process of being genuinely, more or less deeply affected by it (“*Wertfühlen*”). And this is certainly not the last noteworthy feature of subjective our involvement in value cognition. There is, further, always some degree of *familiarity*, and perhaps even a habitual expertise relative to some class of values (think of a musician, or of a sommelier).

Going back to the second objection (Transparency/Self-affection), we can now concede that it is right, in a sense, although, as things stand, more needs to be said about why it is right. Its truth is much more evident when the feeling core of the emotion is separable from any drive, as in aesthetic, moral or religious emotion, in contrast to the emotions of the practical life (such as anger or fear, which are much more object- than self-aware). But in that extent, it is right for different reasons than the ones that its proponents would likely appeal to. The reason is not because of a lack of a *direct* intentional object in emotions, but because of the direct object’s *mode of presence* in the case of feeling consciousness. Moreover, an authentically

experienced affection of the subject takes place at a deeper level if the feeling in question has features opposite to those of the so-called “basic” emotions, which are understood in recent work in psychology as “affect programs,” characterized by automatism, quickness and cognitive impenetrability (Deonna and Teroni 2012: 20). Think of the difference between experiences like bursting into tears of anger and frustration, as young children often do, and that of being moved to tears of gratitude and repentance in realizing how much more we have been given by those who love us than we deserve. Think of how simplistic and short-sighted the listing of all emotional phenomena on the “fast thinking” side of Kahneman’s two systems theory (Kahneman 2011) would be. And yet, a tendency to associate the emotional with the “fast” and “automatic” side of mental life is quite common today.

Growth of all sorts is slow, and a person’s growth in self-awareness is no exception. Self-awareness is awareness of what is more or less important for us, i.e., the values priorities (lived as objective) and the value preferences (lived as subjective) that define us, constituting our moral and our personal identity. This leads us to the other two objections. The first one (Intersubjectivity/Idiosyncraticity) is only moderately persuasive. First of all, the things we spontaneously *perceive* in the real world are strikingly different pieces and aspects of it, depending on the subject’s motivations, beliefs, and character traits. Secondly, differences in emotional responses also concern the conative component of emotions, which, indeed, are absent in perception as such. Thirdly, as far as the feeling core of emotion is concerned, different people can in fact grasp different aspects of value in things, and possibly come to be more deeply affected by them. Such differences depend on the axiological structure of each one’s sensibility or selfhood. So there is indeed a point of divergence between emotion and perception. Yet the objection, as it stands, does not shed light on what accounts for this difference.

As to the third and last objection to be considered (concerning the epistemic role of perceptions/emotions and the need for justification), I respond, first of all, by maintaining that axiological positions, in the basic cases, do not differ from doxic positions in their relation to the will. Whether or not I am afraid of an aggressive dog or disgusted by a rotten corpse is no more in the power of my will than whether or not I recognize the real existence of the chair I stumble upon. Secondly, the non-arbitrariness of positions, in both cases, does not prevent them from being subject to perplexity or illusion, and therefore potentially standing in need of justification. Perhaps we tend to get visible facts right more often than we get their value-aspects right, but our perceptual certitudes are subject to error just as much as our emotional responses are. As far as the interesting part of the objection is concerned, it is true that we are sometimes shocked by the diversity in people’s values scales, depending on cultures and individual personalities. Yet, in principle, we have to attribute equal moral competence to all, and hence we must also attribute sensibility to universal values (and value priorities), to persons with different personalities and cultural backgrounds. Otherwise we must give up moral universalism, as well as the principle of equality of all humans in dignity and rights. That is the challenge any theory of feeling must confront. The ultimate meaning of the Perceptual Model of feeling should be assessed against the background of this challenge.

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