

Emotional Rationality and Feelings of Being

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a comparison and theoretical unification of two recently proposed philosophical accounts of human affectivity: Bennett Helm's theory of *felt evaluations*, centered on the idea of a sui generis emotional rationality as the standard of intelligibility of affective evaluation, and Matthew Ratcliffe's phenomenological account of *existential feelings* (or 'feelings of being'), which are encompassing affective background structures that comprise the foundation of all sorts of directed experiences – crucially including emotional and cognitive states. While these two proposals seem – at least on the surface – to focus on radically different aspects of our emotional lives, I will argue that they can (and should) be reconciled. While Helm is right in stressing and elaborating the intricate networks of emotional intelligibility, his approach needs to be supplemented by an understanding of affective background structures which form the indispensable starting conditions of an individual's evaluative perspective on the world. Only a consideration of these affective backgrounds will give us the information needed to adequately reconstruct and assess an individual's emotional evaluations as well as the evaluative judgments based upon them. Thus, overall this paper works towards a philosophical synthesis so far rarely achieved. An analytical, rationality-based approach to the normative structure of human forms of life (Helm) is brought into fruitful alignment with the descriptively rich accounts of human experience offered by the phenomenological tradition (Ratcliffe). These two approaches are shown to converge in their underlying aim: To outline the contours of a descriptive metaphysics of personhood and to stress the importance and indispensability of affectivity.

1. Introduction

Two of the most intriguing and also most broadly useful theoretical approaches in the philosophy of emotions today are Bennett Helm's theory of *felt evaluations* (Helm 1994; 2001; 2002; 2009) and Matthew Ratcliffe's conception of *existential feelings* (Ratcliffe 2005; 2008). Helm's approach is a consistent development of the premise that a person's feelings, in their entirety, form a complex intra-rational structure – a structure that explains not just the

feelings themselves but also the person's behaviors, aspirations, evaluations, and ultimately the whole of the person's life as it is consciously led. Helm does not shoehorn human feelings into any independently established model of rationality (such as epistemic or instrumental rationality) but rather shows that feelings present us with a distinct type of rationality: evaluative rationality or *emotional reason* (as per the title of his 2001 book from Cambridge University Press). Only within such a framework can we make sense of the central role that affectivity plays in a person's life – and in particular this is the only way to explain how, and to what extent, we orient our lives around significance, i.e. how, as Charles Taylor puts it, we are *subjects of significance* (Taylor 1985).

In contrast, rationality hardly gets any explicit mention in Ratcliffe's conception. In *Feelings of Being* (2008) Ratcliffe offers a phenomenologically oriented description of a category of background feeling that has a wide-ranging influence on our relations to the world as well as on the attitudes and dispositions to act of feeling persons. *Existential feelings* are encompassing existential orientations that influence the person's relation to the world *prior* to every directed relation to something specific. Ratcliffe provides a wealth of material that offers the reader a very clear picture of the central role existential background feelings play both in the lives of healthy people and in the pathologically altered experiences of the mentally ill.

In the following I undertake to ascertain to what extent the initially very different-seeming positions of Helm and Ratcliffe can be brought together and whether a unified philosophical theory of the emotions can be developed on this basis. Such a synthesis would gather together several of the most important insights in the current philosophical work on human affectivity. I will show that the two conceptions, which I first contrast and then integrate, can be seen as the culmination of theoretical developments that seek in different ways to understand the distinctive evaluative relation to self and world found in emotions and feelings without artificially isolating this 'affective intentionality' from other personal compartments. The thoughts of both authors take them beyond an exclusive investigation of the emotions, thus confirming the impression that a well-conceived philosophy of emotion inevitably snowballs into a philosophy of personhood (Slaby 2008a). Before reconstructing Helm's complex approach (2) and then comparing and enriching it with specific central elements of Ratcliffe's phenomenological theory (3) I will begin with a brief sketch of the recent state of the discussion of philosophical conceptions of affective intentionality (1).

2. The context: theories of affective intentionality

For a long time the mainstream in the philosophy of emotion was defined by a sharp dichotomy between cognitivist and feeling-based approaches. However, some time ago several influential positions emerged that occupy a middle ground between the theoretical extremes. Authors such as Peter Goldie, Sabine Döring, and Robert Roberts as well as Bennett Helm and Matthew Ratcliffe, for all the differences in the details of their respective approaches, advocate a program that seeks to combine the strengths of both strands of the theory in a phenomenologically adequate manner. These authors agree with a key tenet of cognitivist theories insofar as they see emotions as intentional states that can be evaluated with regard to their epistemic correctness. When I feel fear, an aspect of my environment strikes me as threatening, and either that portion of the world really is threatening, in which case my fear is epistemically adequate, or it only seems threatening to me; in the latter case, my fear contains a misconception of reality, a cognitive error. Unlike proponents of classical cognitivism, these authors do not inflate this into the absolutist thesis that emotions are *nothing but* cognitive states, i.e. beliefs or judgments. Unlike a person's conscious judgments, affective states often persist even though the person knows better. My fear can persist even after I have recognized the harmlessness of what I fear, whereas it is constitutive of judgments and beliefs that I withdraw them in light of pertinent contrary evidence – we cannot at the same time, consciously, hold both p and $\text{not-}p$ to be true. Besides this characteristic passivity, cognitivism also fails to adequately account for the affective and hedonic character of emotions: emotions feel like something; they are, after all, *feelings* – this persuasive intuition was the bread and butter for feeling theories in arguing against cognitivism.¹ The solution to this *problem of emotionality*, as Helm calls it (Helm 2001, 38-41), is decisive for the positions of the authors just named: to no longer conceive of the evaluative relation to the world and its affective components separately, but rather to locate the world-directedness inherent in emotions within the feeling itself. Goldie set the course with his description of *feeling towards* (Goldie 2000, chap. 2; 2002). Döring (2007) speaks of *affective perceptions*, Roberts (2003) of *concern-based construals* and Helm of *felt evaluations*. What these different proposals have in common is to attribute to feelings a unique type of relation to the world – an *affective intentionality* (Slaby/Stephan 2008; Slaby/Stephan/Walter/Walter 2011). This avoids both a phenomenologically inadequate intellectualization of emotions into cognitions and a

¹ And it still is in some quarters – see Whiting (2006; 2009) for a recent defence of a feeling theory of emotion.

downgrading of feelings into mere sensory states without intentional content. The idea of a specifically *affective* intentionality conveys that emotions are *felt evaluations* and as such stand on their own alongside cognitive states and purely physical sensations. Affectivity is accepted as a *sui generis* category of human world-directedness.

This allows the philosophy of emotions, which tends to be analytically oriented, to catch up to a state of reflection achieved some time ago in the phenomenological tradition. In particular Heidegger's discussion of moods and *attunement* in *Being and Time* and *Basic Concepts of Metaphysics* describes affectivity as an indissoluble unity of world-disclosure, awareness of self, and a qualitative modification of one's own existence (see Slaby 2008a, chapt. 5). Interestingly enough, with both theories discussed here we can trace a connection back to Heidegger, which already hints at how they might be brought together. Ratcliffe's concept of *existential feelings* rather directly takes up and elaborates on what Heidegger calls *attunement* ('*Befindlichkeit*' in German). Thereby, he already moves into the midst of a very deep level of factors constitutive of personhood and human experience. Less obviously, Helm's conception of *felt evaluations* takes up and develops a related idea of the early Heidegger's: the rejection of a cognitivist understanding of intentionality, exemplified in Helm's case by a view of the emotions that operates beyond the cognitivism/non-cognitivism dichotomy and thus is well-suited to dispense with the traditional representationalist understanding of intentionality. Helm's view is similar to Heidegger's in that it operates on a level of world-disclosure prior to the level on which it makes sense to distinguish between beliefs, desires and sensations.

3. Emotional rationality – the holism of felt evaluations

Bennett Helm's ideas can be seen as a contribution to a 'descriptive metaphysics' of personhood.² The broad leading question is this: What are the minimal conceptual ingredients necessary to articulate our self-understanding as persons? The guiding idea is that persons are creatures whose existence is *inherently concerned*. For persons, something is at stake; their affairs *mean* something to them – *something matters*. The first of Helm's central thoughts is that we cannot explain this basic dimension simply by referring to the category of desires, since without further explicating the concept of desire we cannot distinguish between a sense of 'desire' as merely functional goal-directedness such as found in thermostats and computers

² I use this expression loosely in reference to P. F. Strawson's philosophical orientation (see Strawson 1959).

and desires in the fuller sense of the word. Only the latter imply an *assessment* of the desired as meaningful – as worth striving for (Helm 2001, 30-32) and thus link the content of the desire in some non-derived, non-instrumental way to the very *being* of the subject of that desire. Only ‘subjects of significance’ in this sense are true *agents*: their strivings can be understood as the pursuit of goals that they hold to be meaningful and thus qualify as genuine action (in contrast to mere behavior).

In place of an unspecific conception of desire, Helm makes use of a generic concept of the affective state: *felt evaluations*. These are meant to be both feelings with a hedonic valence (pleasures and pains) and at the same time intentional states directed at aspects of the world: felt evaluations *of something* as good or bad. Emotions, bodily sensations, moods, genuine desires: Helm considers all these, all the affective states that a person usually displays, to be *felt evaluations*. And in the course of explaining the affective relation to significance by means of felt evaluations he brings rationality into play: *felt evaluations* continually demonstrate that persons are rational creatures. All of the exercises of a person’s faculties, all of her actualizations of her being a person, are subject to the conditions of rationality; they all take place in the space of reasons.³

I will now explicate further the relation that felt evaluations have to significance and also say something about the role of a specifically emotional rationality. Significance cannot be something radically independent of the constitution of feeling subjects, since whatever is significant for us obviously has to have something to do with *ourselves*. Thus significance (Helm usually refers to it as ‘import’) cannot just be a component of a reality independent of evaluating subjects, such that a person just has to correctly detect it. On the other hand this insight should not be taken as a blanket subjectivism: we have equally strong intuitions to the effect that our evaluations are not the only standard of what is significant and what not. Evaluations are also subject to standards of appropriateness; they can be in error and can often be criticized with good reason as inappropriate.

Helm tries to account equally for both intuitions by taking feelings as a *sui generis* category of world-relation. *Felt evaluations reveal value* – they have a relation to significance, and yet on Helm’s account this relation cannot be conceived either within a cognitive detectivist model (significance as something that exists in the world independently of the constitution of feeling subjects) or within a non-cognitivist model of projection (significance as a mere ‘shadow’ of our subjective attitudes). Affective intentionality resists the prevalent schema according to which intentional states have to be *either* cognitive *or*

³ Here Helm repeatedly refers to Donald Davidson’s postulate that rationality is a ‘constitutive ideal of the mental’ (cf. Davidson 1970; Helm 2001, 2).

conative.⁴

Instead Helm sees feelings as both affectively registering significance *and at the same time* first constituting that significance. *Individual* feelings can be seen as a correct or incorrect grasping of situationally manifest significance, but only insofar as the individual feelings are themselves elements of a more comprehensive pattern of systematically interconnected feelings. This explains how the actual significance of something does not depend on individual feelings and yet at the same time is not entirely independent of feelings as a whole. The *whole weave* of feelings in its entirety constitutes value. Thus the contrary intuitions of cognitivism and constitutive theories can be unified in a single conception.

Let us take as an example a random emotion, e.g. my current fear of a pyromaniac stalking the campus of the University of Marburg with a stolen passkey and indiscriminately setting university buildings on fire. We can most clearly describe the theory of emotional rationality by taking note of the details that are necessary to fully comprehend my emotion. Since my office is full of valuable objects, i.e. a collection of rare and expensive books, I naturally fear for my office and the book collection it holds. The world-relation in my fear can be analyzed as follows: the *material object* (or *target*) of my fear, is the crazed arsonist – I fear him. I fear him because he represents a threat – this dangerousness of the target of fear is the *formal object* of my fear. Here ‘formal object’ means that each type of emotion is characterized by a certain value feature: just as fear necessarily refers to a threat or danger, anger refers to a vexation, sadness to a loss, envy to a good in another’s possession, shame to a flaw or a lapse of one’s own as noticed by relevant others, etc. – this is how the various types of emotions are individuated (see Kenny 1963). But we can differentiate the emotional relation even further, and distinguish the *focus* of an emotion from its material and formal objects. In my example the valuable contents of my office are the *focus* of my fear – it is only the significance of these things that explains why the arsonist represents a danger and thus an appropriate target of my fear. *Because* the things in my office are important, the fact that the arsonist might burn them up is something that I fear. I have to attribute a significance to certain things, persons or goods for it to be understandable how certain *other* objects, persons or circumstances can be the formal objects of emotions – precisely because they have some positive or negative bearing on the objects I value (what is in each case the ‘focus’ of significance).

⁴ Helm calls this the *cognitive-conative divide* (Helm 2001, 4). He claims that adopting this basic distinction leads to unresolvable difficulties, such as the problem of moral motivation (Smith 1994). We could redescribe Helm’s claim in different terminology by saying that felt evaluations have neither the mind-to-world nor the world-to-mind direction of fit (Helm 2001, 4-8).

This three-fold intentional relation of the emotions, comprising material object, formal object and focus, allows a more precise formulation of the basic idea of emotional rationality: I cannot have just *any* emotion, i.e. an emotion that stands in no relation to other prior and subsequent emotions with the same focus. Feelings are incomprehensible unless they are systematically embedded in a comprehensive pattern, since only such a pattern could show what the focus of the particular emotion is and thus in what sense its material object instantiates the formal object of a certain type of emotion. My fear of the arsonist exists in the context of my stable and rooted valuation of the objects in my office: there are the things that mean something to me, my valuable books, original editions that I painstakingly collected over years and paid a lot of money for, etc. Once we are given this background pattern of stable evaluations, which includes not just emotions but also desires, motivations and actions, my current fear of the arsonist becomes entirely understandable. And the absence of appropriate *subsequent emotions* would be just as odd as the lack of a back-story. My current fear commits me to quite specific subsequent emotions depending on the particular situation: anger that the police and university administration are not doing enough to stop the arsonist; annoyance at having stored so many valuable things in my office; hope that my office remains unscathed, etc., and finally happiness and relief when I learn that the perpetrator has been apprehended. Fear of a danger not followed by relief or happiness when the danger is averted would seem profoundly strange – we would no longer be certain whether it had actually been fear in the first place. Thus every emotion brings with it a *normative requirement*: the requirement to subsequently have evaluative attitudes that accord with the significance of the focus.

Hence we have to conceive of feelings within a *rational holism of evaluation* – there are rational relations between our feelings, in the absence of which our emotional life would be incomprehensible.⁵ Helm consistently speaks of ‘commitments’, even if it seems unusual to say, in the case of predominantly passive states, that the feeling person commits herself, *in her feeling*, to subsequently having other, quite specific and appropriate feelings. Felt evaluations resist the standard dichotomy between active performances (actions, judgments etc.) that the person bears responsibility for and passive occurrences (e.g. emotions as they are traditionally understood in the sense of ‘passions’).⁶ Thus Helm conceives the rationality of persons more broadly than usual in seeing a network of rational relations at work even in

⁵ This does not mean that such ‘outliers’ don’t happen on occasion – but in that case they are seen either as erratic impulses or intentional strays or else – more likely – as urgently in need of explanation. In any case we cannot be blasé about them.

⁶ Thus here we could explain the concept of *commitments* with the concept of ‘normative requirements’, since this expression says nothing about the activity or passivity of the states it applies to.

involuntary affects and sensations.⁷ This gives Helm's theory of the emotions a central role in a conception of *lived rationality*.

We should now be able to see more clearly how Helm construes the way in which the emotions function as both, *detectors* and *constitutors* of significance.

Individual emotions are what achieves the detection of situational significance. Thus, individual emotions come in view as a *receptivity* for significance – the individual feelings make us aware of the fact that a certain object (the material object) has some positive or negative bearing, acutely or potentially, on something significant to us (the focus) in some relevant way (the formal object).⁸ We can speak here of *concern-based construals*, as Robert C. Roberts calls them (Roberts 1988; 2003): emotions are apprehensions of states of affairs grounded in our concerns – something in the world is seen in light of our concerns and valuations and thus is seen as significant for us. Accordingly, emotions are subject to two standards of correctness: firstly they refer to some state of affairs in the world and can apprehend it correctly or incorrectly. Alongside this *fundamentum in re* they also have a *fundamentum in persona*:⁹ an emotion typically manifests a concern of the person, so error is possible here as well: my emotion could make something appear significant to me that is not actually significant to me at all. In this case the relevant normative standard is not how the world is but rather the concerns I actually have. These concerns, in turn, are not independent of my emotions but rather consist in comprehensive, rational patterns of systematically interrelated felt evaluations with the same focus – these patterns are what constitutes significance.

Thus individual emotions are characterized and individuated by means of their relation to significance, but significance is also seen as constituted primarily on the basis of emotions, as the focus of stable patterns of feeling. Having emotions means *valuing* certain things. And it is precisely the concrete implementation of this valuation – that has to be stable and consistent through time and across changing situational circumstances – that constitutes significance (thus Helm speaks of *caring* and *valuing*, 2001, 74). *Patterns* of rationally coordinated felt evaluations – as opposed to mere individual instances of feeling – are what achieves these valuations and thus constitutes value. Quite obviously, the explanation is

⁷ Helm doesn't even stop short of *bodily* pains and pleasures – for him even these commit the feeling person to certain quite specific subsequent sensations, desires and motivations, and they can also only be characterized according to the scheme of target, formal object and focus. In other words: for Helm even bodily pains and pleasures are *felt evaluations* in the sense described here (cf. Helm 2002 and Slaby 2007a).

⁸ 'In this way, emotions are a kind of receptivity to import; indeed, their warrant normally depends on their targets and focuses having import, which means they can be right or wrong about that import.' (Helm 2009, 253)

⁹ I have borrowed this formulation from Jean Moritz Müller (2011).

openly circular: ‘In this way, our evaluative attitudes and import emerge together as a part of a conceptual package, neither of which is prior to the other’ (Helm 2001, 59). The central idea behind this way of explaining feelings is to reject any conceptual priority of significance over the emotions (objectivism) or of the emotions over significance (subjectivism) – feelings and significance are equally primal. This structure recalls the hermeneutic circle: this procedure would be viciously circular if there were an alternative explanatory resource that we could make use of without overstepping the limits of sense. Yet because we cannot *entirely* transcend our evaluative practice and see it *as a whole* from the outside, we have no other option than to locate the source of value within the realm of our actual evaluations.¹⁰

What determines the appropriateness of the patterns of feeling themselves? What about the phobic who fears harmless things – does she thereby make the things actually dangerous? Do people all constitute their own private values with their individual patterns of feelings? Unless it gets qualified in some way, Helm’s approach runs the risk of leading to an exaggerated subjectivism. I cannot deal with this issue exhaustively here, but would like to at least sketch the rough outline of a solution to the problem of subjectivism: individual patterns of feeling are normally anchored within overarching intersubjective patterns. A person’s evaluative perspective, the pattern of feelings in combination with the person’s value judgments, stable attitudes and conceptual commitments, is itself always the result of intersubjective influences, such that the attribution of value properties is essentially subject to criticism and approval on the part of an *evaluative community*. Thus this expanded notion of how value gets constituted gives a central role to a shared scheme of evaluative concepts. Like all concepts, evaluative concepts are based on the existence of a linguistic community using and shaping them, and hence by their very nature they transcend individuals’ subjective affective attitudes. Individual valuations would thus always also be beholden to the communally instituted patterns of felt evaluations.¹¹

With these rational patterns and the idea of commitments to suitable subsequent emotions, does Helm not make emotionality into a bloodless system of abstract rational relations? No – for this is where the conception of emotions as *felt* evaluations comes into

¹⁰ This is how I reconstruct the background of Helm’s *no-priority-view*. Hence his conception satisfies John McDowell’s requirement in *Mind and World*, namely that an explication of the human relation to the world cannot be a sideways-on conception. See McDowell (1994, 35 f. and 82 f.), where among other things he attempts an instructive comparison with Otto Neurath’s famous boat metaphor.

¹¹ Of course a lot more remains to be said about this intersubjective foundation of individual evaluative perspectives and about the role of evaluative concepts. It seems decisive to me that we conceive this affective constitution of significance as a thoroughly intersubjective affair from the very outset, so that rightly seen there is, at first, no *strictly individual* affective intentionality. More recent investigations of the developmental psychology of socially mediated affective attention among newborns point in this direction. On the role of evaluative concepts in the expanded activity of value-constitution see Müller (2011).

play: the evaluative states under discussion are indeed *feelings* – qualitative experiences disclosive of the circumstances being evaluated (the material and formal object). Felt evaluations are intrinsically agreeable or disagreeable feeling states – *pleasures and pains* – that imply a relation to the world such that the feeling itself is an evaluation of its intentional object as good or bad. When I fear the arsonist, my fear takes the form of a *painful* awareness of the threat that the arsonist poses to my belongings. As Helm puts it: ‘To be afraid *is* to be pained by danger (and not by one’s stomach)’ (Helm 2002, 16). The painful sensation is not just a mere accompaniment to the intentional relation, like a feeling of weakness in the stomach. The painful sensation is my fear itself: as a felt evaluation of the arsonist as a threat to my possessions.¹²

Thus *pleasures* and *pains* are the central building blocks of the rationality-based conception of personhood. We should read these two terms as variables for all of the pertinent concepts from the hedonic spectrum: content/discontent, pleasure/displeasure, happiness/suffering, etc., with context determining which variation is appropriate in a given case. Agreeable and disagreeable sensations are the bridge between the rational relations that structure the person’s relation to the world and their entire conduct and state of mind, and the person’s qualitative and phenomenal experiences. Thus Helm unifies the two aspects typically seen as conceptually distinct and separately realized, the intentional and the phenomenal or the rational and the qualitative. Helm’s *pleasures* and *pains* are sensible-intelligible hybrids – the distillate produced when we spell out at a high level of abstraction the fact that persons exist in orientation towards significance. This intrinsically hedonic but at the same time thoroughly rationally interconnected world-relation is the core of the notion of genuinely affective intentionality.

Helm’s conception can be seen as a formal phenomenology of human evaluation (see Helm 2009). However, the emphasis here is on ‘formal’, since Helm is not interested in many of the specific features of human evaluations, in their concrete manifestations in the various states of feeling.¹³ This distinguishes his approach from phenomenological theories of

¹² Helm writes: ‘In feeling fear, the badness of the threat is thrust upon you, grabbing your attention and moving you – literally – to respond, and this feeling of the badness of the threat just is your being *pained* by the danger it presents. In general, in having an emotion we feel good or bad, we are pleased or pained, not in that we have some special, non-intentional bodily sensation but rather in that we are gripped by the import of our circumstances’ (Helm 2009, 253).

¹³ This disinterest is nowhere more clear than in Helm’s remarks on the corporeality of emotions: ‘[T]here is no doubt that our experience of many emotions has a bodily component to it, so that to remove the feeling of the relevant bodily changes from our emotional experience would be to alter that experience. Nonetheless, part of the philosophical task in understanding emotions is to separate that which is essential or fundamental to the emotions whenever they occur from that which is a mere accidental (though usual) accompaniment to human emotions. So which is it: are our feelings of bodily changes fundamental or accidental to our emotions? Not surprisingly, my answer is that they are accidental’ (Helm 2009, 254).

emotions and feelings.

There are several reasons to enrich the account phenomenologically. While Helm deserves much credit for outlining a neat philosophical theory of human feelings centred on the three pillars of, first, a basic idea of a genuinely affective intentionality, second, the formal outline of a type of emotional rationality and, third, a constitutional theory of value, something is still missing. In addition to these aspects we want to know more about what forms affective intentionality actually takes – what the various types of feeling and modes of appearance of affective intentionality are, and how these are intermeshed with other capacities and compartments of a person. Not least of all we expect a philosophical theory to inform us about the often less than ideal reality of human feeling, which can certainly run counter to the normative requirements even of a cautiously formulated and ‘personalized’ form of emotional rationality, at least on occasion. How can we come to a systematic understanding of the feelings possible even at those points where it is not at all apparent that our feelings are structured and rational? Without some handle on these situations a theory of human feelings runs the risk of excessive idealization at the cost of descriptive aptness.

Moreover, a phenomenological understanding could be interesting for quite different reasons, since it could at least attempt to locate one of the sources of the evaluative dimension in personal existence – whereby it would pursue Helm’s aim of contributing to a descriptive metaphysics of the person while shifting the focus somewhat away from the conceptual and rationality-based approach that Helm follows. Maybe we can say more about the very roots of the affective-evaluative dimension, of the basic ‘mattering’ at the very foundation of our lives as personal agents.

4. Feelings of Being

I hold that Matthew Ratcliffe’s conception of ‘existential feelings’ can deliver the phenomenological supplement we are looking for. Existential feelings are encompassing background feelings – and as such they comprise the ways individual persons locate themselves in the world or ‘find’ themselves: ‘ways of finding oneself in the world’ (Ratcliffe 2005, 45); or a ‘background sense of belonging to the world’ (Ratcliffe 2008, 39). Feelings of this sort concern the person’s relation to the world as a whole and thus are prior to the specific relations we take to particular objects or circumstances. Existential feelings constitute a sense of reality and possibility – it is these feelings that first make possible our access to and grasp of the world, the comprehensive background of our orientation in our surroundings. Thus on

the one hand existential feelings are continuously present background structures of ordinary experience – basic feelings of being alive or feelings of vitality, a basal sense of reality and feelings that reflect one’s own capacities and abilities as well as susceptibilities and potential vulnerabilities in various ways, including forms of interpersonal relatedness. On the other hand they also include quite specific ‘expanded forms’ of ordinary emotions: a sadness so deep that the person’s entire relation to the world takes on the character of an irretrievable loss; a joy that rises to a boundless feeling of being carried or elevated by one’s surroundings or a disappointment that turns to such an unbounded hopelessness that the person can no longer form any hopes or expectations for concrete events, since the foundation for all hope is gone. Another ‘classic’ among existential feelings are the expanded forms of fear comprising such a profound feeling of fragility and vulnerability that the world strikes the person as just one big source of danger. These are all examples of existential feelings: the encompassing feeling of being in danger; the encompassing feeling of being unwelcome; the encompassing feeling of being strong and capable; the feeling of being part of a larger whole; the feeling of being appreciated or loved; the feeling of being part of a group or community; and feelings of hopelessness or senselessness and not least of all feelings of unreality, of being cut off from the world and other people, or the feeling of being disembodied, dead, or not even existent.¹⁴

Ratcliffe develops his approach with recourse to Heidegger’s emphasis on moods in *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1927, § 29-30). Heidegger sees moods, which he discusses under the heading of ‘attunement’, as constituting ‘Dasein’s openness to the world’ – i.e. the way in which the things and circumstances of our environment affect and concern us. On this view an underlying affective dimension informs all of a person’s relations to the world, so that each specifically targeted emotion can only develop on the basis of encompassing background feelings as their respective situational refinements.¹⁵ But it is not just emotions that grow from the soil of basic attunement – other intentional states, attitudes, motivations and propensities to action develop out of an affective background and are shaped and guided by this

¹⁴ Obviously the latter belong on the pathological spectrum – I will say more about this later. Ratcliffe himself provides the following list of examples of feelings, which he then explains variously in greater detail: “The feeling of being: ‘complete’, ‘flawed and diminished’, ‘unworthy’, ‘humble’, ‘separate and in limitation’, ‘at home’, ‘a fraud’, ‘slightly lost’, ‘overwhelmed’, ‘abandoned’, ‘stared at’, ‘torn’, ‘disconnected from the world’, ‘invulnerable’, ‘unloved’, ‘watched’, ‘empty’, ‘in control’, ‘powerful’, ‘completely helpless’, ‘part of the real world again’, ‘trapped and weighed down’, ‘part of a larger machine’, ‘at one with life’, ‘at one with nature’, ‘there’, ‘familiar’, ‘real’.” (Ratcliffe 2005, 45).

¹⁵ Are existential feelings nothing more than what we commonly call ‘moods’? No. The list of examples of existential feelings above should have dispersed this impression. Some states of feeling we call moods might be existential feelings, but existential feelings are a more comprehensive category that also includes states we would not describe as moods. Moreover the ordinary concept of ‘mood’ is very vague, making a stricter term necessary: Heidegger’s attunement as a dimension of ‘Dasein’s openness to the world’ or existential feelings as a ‘background sense of belonging to the world’ (Ratcliffe 2008, 39). Ratcliffe writes comprehensively about the difference between existential feelings and moods in Ratcliffe (2008, 55f.).

background. Here we see the double-structure that is characteristic of the early Heidegger, with an existential level – the underlying level of Dasein’s *being-in-the-world* as the fundamental framework for all reflection on human existence – and the superstructure of innerworldly relations: ordinary actions, perceptions, attitudes and feelings. We also find a modified version of an even more central thought from Heidegger’s *Being and Time* in Ratcliffe’s approach: that human existence is *ontological* – that our ‘way of being’ is distinguished by its containing a fundamental sense of reality that is also a sense of possibility.¹⁶ Thus the phenomenon Heidegger calls ‘understanding of being’, which comprises *attunement*, *understanding* and *discourse*, shows up in Ratcliffe’s work as well, although he deals almost exclusively with the role of feelings and says very little about active understanding and linguistic articulation of that which is disclosed in attunement and understanding.¹⁷

Ratcliffe characterizes the existential feelings as follows:

The world can sometimes appear unfamiliar, unreal, distant or close. It can be something that one feels apart from or at one with. One can feel in control of one’s situation as a whole or overwhelmed by it. One can feel like a participant in the world or like a detached, estranged observer, staring at objects that do not feel quite ‘there’. Such relationships structure all experiences. Whenever one has a specific experience of oneself, another person or an inanimate object being a certain way, the experience has, as a background, a more general sense of one’s relationship with the world. [...] Ways of finding oneself in a world are presupposed spaces of experiential possibility, which shape the various ways in which things can be experienced. For example, if one’s sense of the world is tainted by a ‘feeling of unreality’, this will affect how all objects of perception appear. They are distant, removed, not quite ‘there’ (Ratcliffe 2005, 45).

Existential feelings as ‘presupposed spaces of experiential possibility’ – this gives us the role of this type of feeling quite concisely. A structure is already at work prior to the formation of concrete intentional relations to the world, a structure that configures the entirety of experience and behavior. Ratcliffe identifies two primary characteristics that distinguish existential feelings from other affective phenomena:

¹⁶ “Das Dasein ist ein Seiendes, das nicht nur unter anderem Seienden vorkommt. Es ist vielmehr dadurch ontisch ausgezeichnet, daß es diesem Seienden in seinem Sein *um* dieses Sein selbst geht. [...] Diesem Seienden eignet, daß mit und durch sein Sein dieses ihm selbst erschlossen ist. *Seinsverständnis ist selbst eine Seinsbestimmtheit des Daseins*. Die ontische Auszeichnung des Daseins liegt darin, daß es ontologisch *ist*“ (Heidegger 1927, 12 – emphasis in the original).

¹⁷ It would exceed the scope of this paper to discuss here whether Ratcliffe is right to emphasize attunement at the cost of the other central existentials – understanding and discourse. In my opinion it would make sense to supplement the theory of existential feelings with corresponding elaborations of what Heidegger calls understanding and discourse; especially with the aim to explore the extent to which elements of understanding and discourse are already involved in human affectivity (cf. Slaby 2008a, esp. chap. 3). In general Ratcliffe says too little about these important connections.

[These feelings] form a recognisable group in virtue of two shared characteristics. First of all, they are not directed at specific objects or situations but are background orientations through which experience as a whole is structured. Second, they are all *feelings*, in the sense that they are bodily states which influence one's awareness. As they constitute the basic structure of 'being there', a 'hold on things' that functions as a presupposed context for all intellectual and practical activity, I refer to them as 'existential feelings' (Ratcliffe 2005, 46).

We can explain more precisely what it means to say that these background feelings constitute the 'basic structure of 'being there'' if we see these existential feelings as a fundamental *sense of reality*. We can only experience anything as 'real', as 'truly there', given a basic affective structure which first makes possible a relation to the world (cf. Ratcliffe 2008, chap. 2; 2009). And yet this is inextricably bound up with the feeling person's implicit understanding of *possibilities*: both the possibilities that things and persons in the world offer the feeling person as well as the person's own possibilities for action (the latter being closely entwined with the former) are components of the sense of reality (cf. Ratcliffe 2008, chap. 2 and 4). The mental illnesses known as affective disorders make both of these aspects particularly clear: when the otherwise inconspicuous affective background changes, the world can easily come to seem unreal, alien or unreachable, while one's own 'handle' on the world and 'standing' in the world also changes or even goes missing entirely.¹⁸ This is the case, for example, in depression, in schizophrenia, and with the monothematic delusions (the Capgras Delusion or the Cotard Delusion, persecution mania, etc.). Depression can involve seeing the world as bereft of all sense and thus as devoid of possibilities – all activity and initiative fades or can even seem inconceivable to the depressed person, resulting in a 'sense of unreality' that characterizes the depressed person's relations to the world as a whole (Ratcliffe 2009).

Ratcliffe emphasizes the close connection existential feelings have to agency on various occasions – particularly when he describes them as a *sense of possibilities* (Ratcliffe 2008, 121 ff.). In our everyday experience of life the world appears to us as a space of possibilities, as an arena of possible activities and relevant events – and not just as a collection of mere objects. More precisely we would have to say that the world doesn't just appear to us, but rather that *we encounter it by moving within it* in the way of having and not having possibilities, in the way of expecting and dealing or failing to deal with certain events and performing activities in and with (parts of) the world. Our primary world-relation is a being-moved-by-something and setting-something-in-motion – hence it unfolds within a framework of activity and dispositions towards activities and not in the form of a passive

¹⁸ These bodily, action- and posture-based terms such as 'handle' and 'standing' are deliberately chosen since what is in question is a relation to the world that is bodily through and through (see Ratcliffe 2008, ch. 4).

‘representation’ of things in the world.

Existential feelings are neither merely subjective sensibilities – reflecting exclusively our subjective state-of-mind – nor primarily intentional feelings relating to circumstances in the world (like ordinary emotions), nor are they just a level of mere experience in contrast to the capacity for action. Instead, they are a level prior to all of these relations, a level where experience and behavior are still indistinguishable, as are experience of self and of the world. This is why the changes in experience caused by affective disorders such as schizophrenia and depression are so radical and profound and at the same time so hard to empathize with for outsiders. The mentally ill, unlike healthy persons, don’t have just ‘altered states of feeling’ but rather inevitably find themselves in a different reality. This catastrophic change is due to their pathological affectivity (cf. Ratcliffe 2008, part II; 2009). The entirety of their relations and their grasp of the world are radically transformed from the ground up – thus one can say that their very *being*, their *existence*, gets modified.

In this way, ‘existential feeling’ is the name of a region of overlap between self and world that resists the standard subject/object division: existential feelings cannot be ascribed entirely to the person nor to the world experienced through them. Person and world are far more intimately entwined than is assumed on most standard accounts. Experienced through existential feelings the world is always already affectively disclosed and, so to speak, atmospherically ‘colored’ by feeling, while it makes no sense to speak of a subject or conscious agent independently of the affective relations to the world (cf. Slaby/Stephan 2008). Hence subjectivity in the fullest sense of the world would necessarily be tied to the condition of an affective and evaluative relation to the world enabled by existential feelings. Here Ratcliffe takes up one of the central ideas from Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, and if he is right about this then existential feelings are ontologically prior to the conceptual, reflection-based division of self and world, of subject and object. Consequently they could not be adequately treated within any conceptual framework that simply assumes these distinctions as unproblematic.¹⁹

This brings us to the level of analysis that is particularly relevant for our comparison with Helm’s conception. It should be obvious by now that Ratcliffe provides more than just a superficial phenomenological addendum to Helm’s rationality-based approach. Rather, he aims to describe that which first gives sense to any talk of an evaluative perspective on the world. In light of this one might even say that his account is *more* transcendental than Helm’s

¹⁹ I have elaborated on the connections between existential feelings and an adequate understanding of subjectivity and self-consciousness elsewhere, in a paper written jointly with Achim Stephan, see Slaby/Stephan (2008).

by aiming more thoroughly at the basic conditions of a person's relation to the world. Ratcliffe works on showing that affectivity is an indispensable dimension, without which personhood becomes unrecognizably truncated.

Thus both Helm's and Ratcliffe's respective approaches can be read as arguing that significance is founded in an underlying affective dimension. Yet both authors are not particularly explicit about this point. Some of Helm's formulations of his holism seem to even explicitly rule out the foundational thesis, since in an openly circular procedure he defines significance in terms of the felt evaluations of *pleasure* and *pain* but in turn defines those felt evaluations themselves in terms of significance. However, the decisive point is that Helm establishes this dimension of experience at all, where we can speak of both felt evaluations *and* significance, and that he does not wish to found this dimension upon something else in turn. Thus for all practical purposes he makes affectivity the foundational dimension of the personal – that which first makes possible the existence of *subjects of significance*.

Whereas Helm does not describe the underlying affective dimension in any greater detail, but rather is content to point to its formal building blocks – *pleasure* and *pain* understood as evaluative sensations – without further specifying them, Ratcliffe's detailed examination of existential feelings introduces a substantial discussion of the nature of this basic affective-evaluative dimension. It is central to his account that this involves a level of background feelings that first constitute the sense of reality and possibility. His phenomenological descriptions of characteristic changes and breakdowns of existential feelings give plausibility to this, revealing structural interconnections between affectivity, the relation to the world, significance, the capacity for action, and corporeality (in the sense of the 'lived body'). The most important difference from Helm's description is Ratcliffe's weaving together affectivity with the sense that there is a world at all and that we find ourselves in it in specific ways with specific possibilities, exposed to specific possible events, etc. Helm, like many other authors in the debate on human feelings, is not concerned with this ontological dimension at all, and sees feelings in abstraction from their ontological function – as affective evaluative mechanisms rather than as something that is crucially important for the possibility of a personal relation to the world. When Helm says that his theory of the feelings can overcome the problematic conceptual division between the cognitive and the conative – a division that is assumed as unproblematic and self-evident in large parts of philosophy and psychology – this claim can only be cashed out within a conception such as Ratcliffe's. For Ratcliffe, it is already impossible to distinguish between neutral reporting of facts and affective evaluation even at the level of our *understanding of being* – the sense of reality. All

our determinations of being whatsoever are inherently evaluative – the world by default appears to us as already familiar or unfamiliar, harmless or threatening, conducive or hindering to our efforts, aesthetically appealing or repellant, etc. The underlying sense of reality is evaluative through and through, and moreover is inextricably connected to one's agency, one's initiatives, attitudes and dispositions to act and pursue one's goals and projects. Helm did not succeed in capturing this amalgamation of cognitive-descriptive and affective-evaluative elements and practical comportments in the human relation to the world – because he did not take up the dimension of our lived sense of reality.

Within Helm's conceptual framework we can formulate these connections as follows: I have to be basically affectively oriented in some way, and have some sense of reality and possibility at my disposal, before concrete innerworldly circumstances can have any significance for me. Helm's descriptions of rational patterns, each of which has its vanishing point in some specific focus of significance, very aptly clarify the formal structure of a person's valuations, whereas Ratcliffe explores the dimension where it first gets decided that there is always affectively graspable significance for a person already there. Why do we have patterns of feeling oriented towards significance at all? What are the rational structures of human feeling founded on? The experience of severe depression that Ratcliffe describes demonstrates these connections quite dramatically by showing *ex negativo* the fundamental role that the affective background plays in human experience in constituting the world, in assignments of value and in making possible the person's initiatives (Ratcliffe 2009). Vivid descriptions of pathological changes in the world-disclosing affective background give plausibility to these thoughts. Another exemplary instance of such an encompassing affective breakdown is the experience of profound boredom, in which significance likewise drains away completely (see Heidegger 1983 and Slaby 2010).

But even independently of this fundamental level, Ratcliffe's conception of the existential feelings can add to Helm's approach without having to abandon the core idea of an evaluative rationality based on felt evaluations. Helm's abstract descriptions can be given more plausibility if we can show that the patterns of felt evaluations as such have experiential reality in the form of an affective dimension comprising a changeable affective 'background tone' determining a person's relations to the world. Having concerns and thus valuable 'background objects' that anchor rationally appropriate felt evaluations can in this way be seen as an affectively experienced background orientation. More precisely, it is a *felt preparedness* to react in specific ways when something affects the 'wellbeing' of the objects or persons one cares for. Reckoning with a *felt preparedness* to respond in accordance with

the value of focus objects imparts further plausibility upon Helm's idea of a 'rational' commitment to *feel* subsequently in accordance with one's concerns. That which Helm introduced as some abstract conceptual requirement is thereby shown to be a lively affective background orientation (of course, only on condition that the affective background is indeed attuned properly to what has been constituted as significant by the larger pattern of felt evaluations).²⁰

5. Conclusion

A person's changeable existential orientation, the affective background of attitudes, beliefs and actions, is the experiential raw material and thus a crucial condition for evaluative rationality – the background from which rational patterns grow, but also presumably that which will occasionally hinder rationality from unfolding adequately. People might bring with them affective existential orientations in the form of their sense of reality and possibility grounded in existential feelings, and these orientations might also define the limits to the spectrum of what they *can* construe as real, valuable or plausible. Thus, evaluative rationality in Helm's sense turns out to be just what he (presumably) intended it as: an abstraction – a normative schema we impose in order to understand persons as rational agents and to remind them, to some extent against their actual inclinations, of the normative requirements they have committed themselves to by virtue of what they have felt and done previously. The affective reality often does match these requirements, but on occasion it looks quite different. Certain emotional commitments are easier for some people than for others; for this reason certain subsequent emotions we would have expected are not actually produced, or not to the appropriate degree; the background of existential feelings that individual affective states and specific attitudes emerge from is subject to changes that sometimes have little or nothing to do with the person's other valuations and attitudes. These influences might reveal that we are in fact natural creatures of flesh and blood, hence subject to mechanisms that are not all by their nature set up in accordance with the socially established rational requirements of civilized life.

Ratcliffe's descriptions of existential feelings show us new possibilities for dealing with these sometimes quite fixated starting conditions of personal existence. He sheds light on the irrationalities and idiosyncratic peculiarities that sometimes result, and gives us the

²⁰ I have said more about background feelings as a felt preparedness to be affectively engaged with specific situational circumstances in a paper discussing Heidegger's conception of attunement; see Slaby (2007b).

outline of an approach to the larger breakdowns and pathologies where the background feelings that are constitutive of reality are often significantly disrupted or changed. This type of phenomenological approach can help us to gain a philosophical understanding even where a rationality-based theory is at its wit's end. Without abandoning the normative perspective of a rationality-based approach, the phenomenological perspective is able to carefully introduce pertinent starting conditions of human valuation that also allow us to understand why people sometimes find it so difficult to distance themselves from inappropriate affective orientations. The approach concerns an existential level so fundamental that it cannot just be circumvented or changed by cognitive efforts. Here a Wittgensteinian dictum proves to be remarkably apt: 'The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man.'²¹

In the end we need both if we wish to understand our evaluative relation to the world: a generalizing explication of rational structures *and* their grounding in a frequently unsettled reality of human feeling and the human conduct of life as a whole. If we wish to retain the above-mentioned characterization of Helm's position as 'lived rationality', Ratcliffe has made clear that we have to emphasize both elements: life in its own peculiar dynamics, for which the background of existential feelings plays a central role, and rationality as a normative ideal that is just as real as it is precarious and that is distinctive of our form of life as persons.

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²¹ *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.43.

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