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Emotion and Agency

William James famously held that we “*feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful as the case may be*” (1884, 190). We disagree, but not entirely. We suggest it would be more adequate to say that we are sad *insofar* as we cry or otherwise mourn, angry *insofar* as we strike or otherwise confront, fearful *insofar* as we hide or run or otherwise evade, happy *insofar* as we laugh, jump for joy, or smile. Emotions unfold *in the act* – they are not felt responses to prior and independent reactions or actions nor clearly separate causal entities or events prior to our actions, but acted-out engagements with the world.¹ The specific mode or style of one’s engagement, the intensity, the emphasis or vivacity we bring to these acts *shape* our emotions, determining their ‘what’ and their ‘how’. The active nature of emotion importantly sheds light on the way emotion relates to value. Emotional engagement is what lets value manifest and become concrete, in that it opens up a practical sphere rife and buzzing with what ought to be (or not be), and thus what ought and can be done – by me, by us, here and now. Value, on our view, is *both* constituted *and* detected by our emotional engagements (cf. Helm 2001) – a view whose paradoxical initial appearance will be mitigated by our account of emotions as active engagements with the world.

Accordingly, our aim in what follows is to outline a philosophical view of emotion that puts agency much closer to the heart of what an emotion is. Two interlocking aspects are central to this perspective: a) emotions are *relational*, i.e. they are constituted by a dense phenomenal coupling to the agent’s environment; b) they are *dialogical* in that their acting-out as an engagement with the environment helps to shape the space of possible further ways

¹ To our knowledge, Solomon (2004) has introduced the concept of “engagement with the world” into the philosophy of emotion, as a way to make his former ‘judgementalist’ theory of emotion more adequate to the phenomenology of emotional experience.

of acting them out and thus partly determines how the emotion will subsequently unfold. Furthermore, conceptualising emotions as unfolding in relational and dialogical acts demands seeing them less as mental states and more as temporally extended episodes involving a person's entire comportment in and toward the world. Now, the problem of agency in part amounts to the question in what ways we can appropriate these agentive episodes as *ours*. This appropriation is crucial, because only then, by actively and consciously getting a hold of an emotional episode that – at the same time – we passively undergo, the realm of value is disclosed *and* (re)constituted in the same sequence of unfolding acts.²

Accordingly, what we will outline in the following could be put like this: The expressive qualities of our environment, its manifest value (i.e. things that matter to us in some specific way or other) can draw us in and exert an affective pull on us. This might be seen as the 'passive aspect' of emotions. However, in opposition to many theories of emotion currently debated, we believe that an emotional episode does not stop there, but essentially involves a moment of 'phasing-over' or transforming the initially passive experience into an active engagement. This acting-out is not a separate and blind reaction to the affective pull but depends on the kind of person we are, on our various abilities and capacities and, not least, on the values that we already uphold. In addition, the way we act-out our emotions not only conditions the further ways we can proceed in acting them out, it also shapes the phenomenal aspects, i.e. the felt dimension of the emotion in question. Therefore, we argue, it is essential not to strip the phenomenological description of emotions of their active momentum but, on the contrary, to emphasise it. This view avoids an apparent gap between emotions as passive

² The view that emotional engagement 'activates' value is not new, it is a staple in phenomenological thinking on emotion – articulated for instance by Sartre (1994 [1939]), with clear echoes from Heidegger (1927), and also in slightly different terms by Paul Ricœur (1966 [1950]). Solomon (1976), once again, tried to appropriate the view for a contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, speaking of emotions as "constitutive judgments" that imbue the world with value. With his sometimes exuberant formulations, Solomon tended to oscillate between cognitivism (emotions as judgments *detecting* value) and projectivism (emotions as *bringing forth* value). We believe that there is an important and correct intuition behind this very oscillation: neither the tracking of pre-existing value nor its mere subjective projection captures what really goes on – the point of speaking of an *emotional constitution* of value is exactly this: to avoid either extreme. Bennett Helm (2001) comes quite close to a cogent explication of this no-priority view, albeit with somewhat excessively rationalistic overtones. Part of the point of our paper is to make a fresh start in this direction with a focus on the aspect of agency in emotion.

experiences and the actions they warrant. Rather than bridging the gap between passive emotions and the ensuing actions by some sort of obscure ‘motivational force’, we suggest to think of emotions in a way that does not open this gap in the first place: the action is already part of the emotion, it is no less than its processual core.³

In the following we will zoom in from the broad perspective of the socially engaged person into what one might call her active-affective ‘minimal self’, whose catastrophic erosion in conditions like severe depression lends additional phenomenological credibility to our proposal. In this way we try to show that emotions are so intimately entangled with action that a philosophical account of emotion is well advised to start – and subsequently stay – right there: *where the action is*.⁴

1. From experiential to action-oriented theories of emotion

The discussion of the pros and cons of cognitive theories that has dominated the recent decades in the philosophy of emotion seems by now rather tiring. It is no longer a revolutionary idea, as it might have been in the early time of cognitivism when the views of Kenny, Bedford, Solomon and others first emerged, that emotions have intentional contents both capable and in need of rational evaluation. The motivating idea of cognitivism no longer requires provocative statement, since in some broad sense, most or all theorists currently working on the topic agree that emotions are rationally evaluable, that they can be described as somehow ‘apprehending’ import. Accordingly it makes sense to assess their accuracy in doing so, for example by distinguishing their factual contents from their evaluative contents,

³ Sabine Döring (2003; 2007) proposes an account of emotion that likewise closes the ‘motivational gap’ that presumably opens up, in the specific case discussed by her, between moral insight and moral agency on standard philosophical accounts of moral motivation (what Michael Smith calls ‘the moral problem’, see Smith 1994). However, Döring’s proposal differs in significant respects from ours as she deems emotions not as directly agentive but rather as perceptual-cum-motivational states of a sui generis kind (‘affective perceptions’).

⁴ Special thanks to Jonas Klein for suggesting several formulations for this introduction by providing a highly illuminating written comment on an earlier draft of our paper.

and likewise their world-relatedness from their self-disclosive dimension.(see Slaby & Stephan 2008).

Most theorists also agree that the cognitive or intentional characteristics do not exhaust the emotions' nature. It is their *experiential dimension*, their qualitative character, so the consensus goes, that distinguishes emotions from intentional states of other kinds: emotions are *felt*, and essentially so. They are described variously as *felt evaluations* (Helm 2001), *feelings towards* (Goldie 2000), *affective perceptions* (Döring 2007), *affect-imbued concern-based construals* (Roberts 2003), or *felt evaluative attitudes* (Deonna & Teroni 2012). In viewing emotions as ways of affectively experiencing the world, these approaches combine the insights of cognitivist and feeling theories without sharing the excesses of either.

As we will show in the following, this common orientation towards experience as the core dimension of emotion is not entirely misguided, but it might lead in the wrong direction, particularly if 'experience' is understood in a narrowly perceptual and moreover 'passive' sense. The danger in focusing on an emotion's experiential rather than its *active* character is that the importance of agency for emotion is lost sight of and with it what might be an emotion's most relevant feature. While paying regular lip service to emotions' motivational force, and to the fact that there are often characteristic *actions out of emotions* (see, e.g., Goldie 2000, 37-49), proponents of philosophical theories of emotion for the most part fail in providing a cogent connection between an emotion's feeling component and the action into which the emotion unfolds. Right from the start, emotions have to be understood in relation to our ability to act and to engage with the world practically, or so we will argue in the following. Emotions themselves are in fact best understood as forms of active *comportment in and towards the world*, and in many cases their unfolding is not at all distinguishable from intentional action as such. In these latter cases, it is easy to say that *emotions are something we do* – a view that Robert Solomon famously over-generalized and read into Sartre

(Solomon 1976). This general view warrants a careful re-appropriation that will also begin to clarify what exactly our talk of an ‘agentive character of emotion’ implies – and what not.⁵

2. Phenomenal Coupling or: Who took passivity out of passion?

Initially, it certainly seems that not all emotions are correctly described as active engagements. For the most part, one may argue, the description of emotions as *passive experiences* is much more adequate.⁶ How else could one conceptualize the feeling of being overcome or swept away by an emotion, or capture emotions’ sometimes paralyzing effects? In order to show that even in cases of extreme passivity the temporal unfolding of an emotion is agentive, it is advisable to start from a point least likely to be associated with ‘activity’.

Consider cases of art appreciation. Many of the emotions we experience in response to music, film, theatre or dance are such that their full phenomenal quality, their capacity to ‘move’ us cannot be adequately characterized without recourse to the expressivity of the artworks themselves – it is these expressive features that engage us affectively: we are *made to feel*, acted upon from without, in and through our affectivity.⁷ What is certainly *not* needed, or so it might seem initially, is a reference to anything *we do*. Here, as also in most cases of inter-personal emotions, what affects us *in the environment* is itself active and expressive⁸, whereas the ‘agent’ is in the grip of whatever is going on in the world.

⁵ Somewhat contrary to its neglect in the philosophy of emotion, agency has figured more prominently in the psychological research literature on emotion. Leading the way is Nico Frijda’s explicitly action-oriented theory of emotion (see Frijda 1986), another approach that gives pride of place to action in emotion is by Parkinson (1995), who views emotions as strategies of relationship configuration. Griffiths & Scarantino (2009) provide a good overview over some of the empirical literature. Also see Lambie & Marcel (2002) for a thorough account of emotional experience from a psychological perspective.

⁶ We omit a further complication of this matter by disregarding the plausible possibility that many experiences might themselves be *activities* rather than processes passively undergone. With our proposal, we chiefly aim to oppose *passivist* views of experience that treat experiences primarily as exercises of a person’s receptivity (as opposed to a person’s spontaneity; see, e.g., McDowell 1994). With our stance, we are in line with authors in the tradition of enactivism who defend a view of experience as essentially active (see, e.g., Noë 2005).

⁷ We use the term “affectivity” in a generic sense to refer to affective phenomena, i.e. emotions, moods and intentional feelings such as feelings of being satisfied or dissatisfied, etc.

⁸ Art appreciation here serves only as a very intriguing example of the passive experience of emotion. We cannot enter into the intricate debates about the expressivity of works of art or the actual *activities* it might demand from the beholder. One plausible approach, put forth by Levinson in the context of an analysis of music, holds that rhythmic movement and other dynamic features of musical sound constitute patterns resembling the

But even here, we argue, the engagement with the expressive and thus active environment comprises some sort of activity on part of the appreciator. Using a term that might strike readers as somewhat unusual, we will call this ‘phenomenal coupling’ (see Slaby 2014).

Phenomenal coupling is the direct engagement of an agent’s affectivity with an environmental structure or process that itself has affect-like, expressive qualities – for example, in the form of an *affective atmosphere* (Anderson 2009; Schmitz et al. 2011) or as an *expressive quality* of a piece of music (Levinson 2009). The most relevant range of examples for phenomenal coupling is in the social-interactive domain: probably nothing is as emotionally engaging as the dynamic expressivity of fellow humans – individuals as well as groups regularly *draw us into* emotional experiences that we would not be able to experience on our own. But even in these cases of apparently passive immersion the core element of the emotional experience is a kind of engagement, a form of agency.

Froese and Fuchs (2012), in part echoing Merleau-Ponty, have provided an account of how this might be played out in interpersonal interaction: namely, in the form of a dialogical interplay of *actio* and *passio*, expression and impression – with the lived body as a “felt resonance-board for emotion” (Froese & Fuchs, 2012, 212). In these inter-affective exchanges, the manifested emotional expression (face, gesture, body posture, etc.) of one agent is apprehended by the other in the form of an affective bodily *comportment*. This in turn modifies the second person’s expressivity, which is again taken up by the other, and thus a dialogical sequence of mutual corporeal engagement unfolds.⁹ Importantly, the expressive

dynamics of human gesture (understood broadly). Musical expressivity would thus be derivative from the expressivity of human conduct (see Levinson 2009). As to the alleged ‘active’ expressivity of other forms of art, such as paintings, we sympathize with enactivist accounts that stress the inherent dynamic character of artful composition (see, e.g., Noë 2012).

⁹ Joel Krueger has provided in-depth descriptions of affect-rich embodied interaction, and he helpfully invokes the concept of a “we-space” as the specific interpersonal realm that is created and then negotiated in these dialogical embodied exchanges (see Krueger 2011).

behaviour of each party is not merely a mirroring of the partner's expressions; rather, it is dynamically thrusting forward, thus enabling a genuine dialogue.¹⁰

Besides being felt, emotional episodes – even in their immediately felt, phenomenal character – are forms of an intentional engagement *with* the world; they involve an emotional comportment *in* the world.¹¹ The feelings in question are *feelings-towards* in Peter Goldie's sense (Goldie 2000) and thus forms of affective world-disclosure. The active lived body is the partially transparent medium of the emotional engagements, not the opaque phenomenal endpoint of these experiences, as Jesse Prinz would have it (see Slaby 2008b). Now, our view differs from Goldie's in that we explicate what he calls *feeling towards* as active *engagements-with*: where there is emotion, there is agency, and thus an agent. But, at first glance, it is not clear that the action in fact originates, intentionally, from the agent – since, as we have seen, emotions are typically experienced as something that comes over us, at least initially. We will, however, *subsequently* take hold of our emotional engagements and sometimes we even can deliberately 'stay in the mood'. Either way, we actively *hold ourselves* in the comportment in question, it is now *our* emotion in the same way that an action is our action. It is here that the descriptive shift from mental states to temporal episodes is most noticeable. Imagine someone pushes you from behind on the sidewalk in a rude way to pass by. What do you experience? First, you will probably feel an unqualified surprise, finding yourself in a state of alarm, maybe even shock. Your surprise will soon evolve into anger, calm down to annoyance and might give way to a general frustration about modern life in the city. But now, let's look at what you *do*: Instinctively and almost mechanically your eyes will open wide, your heartbeat rises and so on. But soon you will change your facial

¹⁰ Enactivists speak of this dynamic interaction as "participatory sense-making" – a joint acting-out that lets meaning become manifest in a way that is socially shared, situated, and embodied from the outset (see de Jaeger & di Paolo 2007).

¹¹ We prefer speaking of "comportment *in*..." instead of "comportment *toward* the world" in order to avoid the impression of a cleavage between an agent's engagements and the world that is thereby actively disclosed. We follow Heidegger (*being-in-the-world*) and Merleau-Ponty (1962 [1945]) in subscribing to a thoroughly anti-Cartesian conception of world-disclosure – one that does not start from a presupposed ontological distinctness of 'subjects' and 'objects', but instead moves clear of these notorious dichotomies.

expression to a frown, you will look for the approval in the faces of others around you, if you find it, maybe you will exchange a smile with that person, if not, you might shake your head and decide to move to the countryside.

In our view, there are two potential mistakes one might make in analysing this event. The first one would be to break up this emotional episode into different sets of emotion-and-reaction patterns. The sequence only makes sense as a whole, because it is unreasonable to believe that either your anger simply stops as soon as you see someone smile approvingly or that you now have two completely separate and independent emotions that do not interrelate with each other. The second mistake would be to consider what you *do* simply as reactions to what you feel. The shocked expression, your frowning, your looking for approval, your shaking your head ... are the ways in which your anger unfolds in time; and moreover they are ways in which you actively *integrate* this episode into your life. They transform what *happened* to you into your active engagement with the world. Some of these actions seem more deliberate than others, some involve judgments, maybe even reasoning, some do not. So, transforming the 'passive' experience into an active engagement might encompass anything from impulsive physical responses to specific intentional actions until we reach a state that we deem appropriate to the situation. This might raise the objection that it now becomes unclear when an emotional episode actually ends. This might indeed be so, but is it really an objection? Or is it rather a precise description of the fact that we are *constantly* trying to obtain a hold over our affections and emotions?

This idea brings us very close to Aristotle's concept of *hexis* as this possible 'hold' we can have over our emotions.¹² Strictly speaking, the term *hexis* is not limited to the human sphere alone; however, its most influential role has been its use in the *Nicomachean Ethics* to

¹² Hexis is a notion that has been unjustly neglected in comparison to Aristotle's much better known notion of the passions of the soul (*pathe*). The term comprises, like most Aristotelian terms, a variety of meanings reaching from disposition to capacity or even property and quality. Still the most thorough interpretation of hexis can be found in Hutchinson (1986), given its dependency on Aristotle's Physics VII, the authenticity of which is not beyond doubts.

describe “those things in virtue of which we are in a good or bad condition with respect to the feelings” (NE 1105b 25–26). It is this narrower meaning with its strong connection to moral value that is of interest here. With *hexis*, Aristotle provides a term lacking in most modern theories of the mind, as it conceptualizes this precise moment of ‘phasing over’ or transition from *pathe* to *praxis* as a genuinely human embodied capacity. It is crucial to understand that this ‘phasing over’ does *not* involve moral *reasoning* or theoretical reflection. By our *hexeis* we are already well- or ill-disposed *to act* in the light of strong emotions or passions. By virtue of our courage, for example, we are well-disposed to strike when facing a threat; but this does not mean we won’t *feel* fear, it means that we will *turn* our fear around into brave action, and in this action we can, so to speak, *own* our fear. This should not be misconstrued as the commonplace ability to act in various ways *out of* our emotions. What Aristotle aims for is the ability to mould the emotion itself in accordance with our capacities and the situation at hand. This ‘moulding’ or shaping the emotion is carried out by acting appropriately in line with who or what we are in relation to the established values of the *polis*.

Hexis, deriving from the Greek verb for ‘having’ (*echein*) entails a concept of possession in contrast to being possessed – hence *hexeis* are more than just *dispositions*, they are ways of *self-ownership*. For the Ancient Greeks with their concept of a perfect *kosmos*, being changed against one’s nature amounts to the ultimate moral failure since in doing so you lower yourself to the state of an animal or, even worse, a stone being kicked around. Viewed from this Aristotelian perspective, it would be right to say that conceptualizing an affective episode as *completely* passive will lead to a depersonalized view of the subject involved.

Change, or movement, is the primordial condition of the world of the Ancient Greeks, even prior to the distinction of *actio* and *passio*; and as a human you cannot but constantly try to maintain *ownership* of that change at every level. You do so by *praxis*, you execute your

human nature only *insofar you act*. And therefore, it is in that *praxis* that value is already contained, as its immanent *telos*.

Of course, there are aspects of the Aristotelian teleological concept that do not translate as easily into our modern worldview, but the general idea points right to the centre of an ongoing debate concerning agency and the problems it faces. David Velleman famously presented the problem of agency as the problem of where to put the agent in the “explanatory order of the world” (1992, 465). For Velleman, we understand (human) action only if it can be traced back to an (human) agent as its cause, and thus we are confronted with Thomas Nagel’s concern that “[e]verything I do is part of something I don’t do, because I am a part of the world” (Velleman 1992, 467; Nagel 1986, 114). At this point, Velleman sets out to look for “events and states to play the role of the agent” (475) and finds, naturally – *desires, motives, reasons* and other *mental states* (477). It is here that Velleman makes a critical difference between those events that are “functionally identical to the agent” (475) and those that are not, coming to the conclusion that personhood is to be found only in the “desire to act in accordance with reasons” (478) – making in fact a very Aristotelian point.

We cannot fully enter this discussion about how to appropriate causes as *ours* in the right way and whether reason should really be the criterion here, nor can we solve Nagel’s problem of agency. However, we cautiously suggest two things: first, this appropriation is already imposed on us by what we usually call our *passions* (i.e. what *matters* to us, what concerns us as individuals) and not only by those desires that are in accordance with reason or some sort of human nature; and second, this appropriation itself is already essentially agentive. It is something *we do*, and we do it so continuously and at the most basic level that in order to get a true picture of human nature, our agency is the starting point that explains the rest and not some obscure problem we are left with at the end of the day. So Nagel’s worry “[e]verything I do is part of something I don’t do, because I am a part of the world”, is unfounded since “being part of the world” is essentially something *we do*.

It should be clear that we by no means want to take passivity out of emotions, nor do we claim that *experience* is not a crucial factor in what we call affectivity. In fact, in our view, it is highly doubtful whether ‘passivity’ and ‘activity’, ‘experience’ and ‘action’ need at all to be conceptualized as mutually exclusive. Our concern here is only with the right order of explication. For once one starts viewing emotions through the lens of passive experience one will have a hard time bringing activity back into the picture in a satisfying way.

3 Sartre’s hodological space and the Sense of Ability

Emotions are widely accepted as motivational forces (that might lead to action) and as ‘ways’ of doing things – like *lovingly* gazing at someone you like or *angrily* shouting at someone you don’t like. Yet this general acceptance is either overturned by the neglect that agency suffers in philosophical theorizing about emotions, or confused by overly complex theories, for example by those in which desires are understood as prime sources of human action.¹³ This neglect (or confusion) leads to an uncomfortable explanatory gap in the description of emotional episodes. Even in the most careful approaches, emotions tend either to be turned into distinct causal entities that *somehow* lead to an ensuing action, or into detached felt feedbacks that show up when the real action is already over. We have indicated that even in cases of affectivity that seemed to involve a *passive* recipient rather than an agent, this involvement itself is best described as an *active* engagement with the world, first in the form of an involuntary comportment and then, at least in many cases, as an active appropriation and continuation of the initial engagement. Now it is time to show how the true agentive

¹³ A recent partial exception to the neglect of agency in the philosophy of emotion is the account by Deonna & Teroni (2012, see esp. ch. 7). Our proposal can be seen as more radical than theirs in chiefly two respects: first, what Deonna and Teroni call ‘attitudes’ is on our account specified as more active engagement or comportment, and second, we opt for a more intimate entanglement and co-articulation of agent and world that is more in line with the existentialist branch of the phenomenological tradition.

centre of affectivity lies exactly at this point: at the junction where someone's passivity and activity oddly melt into her *being actively involved* with the world.¹⁴

It might not be difficult to agree that affectivity is something like an embodied and enactive 'interface' between experiential awareness and intentional action. Emotional episodes mark a kind of switch point or transitional zone at which an evaluative awareness of a situation (something relevant grabbing attention) is phasing over into active engagement (our doing something about, with or in relation to it). But we want to suggest a more direct involvement of agency in emotion: affective responses consist in more than merely a felt pressure or pull to act in relation to what is grasped as important in the current situation. In our view, action and engagement themselves make up the substance of an emotional episode. A situation-directed motivational pull marks the onset, and often it is then actively taken-up and followed through with in the course of the emotion (anger is paradigmatic here, but also joy, also grief, also fear). Something in the world demands to be acted upon, or demands us to specifically avoid or evade it, and this attention-grabbing onset directly leads to a form of engagement that *is* the emotion – we are angry *insofar* as we strike, ashamed *insofar* as we avert the gaze of others, afraid *insofar* as we hide or run, happy *insofar* as we rejoice. In emotional experience, there is for the most part no salient difference between the apprehension of the importance of something and one's being pulled into engaging the world in accordance with this situational significance. There is no gap: to be emotional *is* to be engaging the world those relevant ways (see Helm, 2001, 2002 for a related view).

To understand how this commencing engagement shapes the experiential character of an emotion, imagine the following scenario. You watch a philosophical debate at home with some friends. One of the discussants makes an appalling comment about something of importance to you (for example the role of agency in emotional experience). At home you

¹⁴ This process of transformation from passive to active is also such that an emotional episodes' intentionality shifts from merely *experiential* intentionality (something is revealed as being such and such) into goal-oriented or *teleological* intentionality (some effect is to be realized, as for instance in flight, fight, or communication and the like).

will heatedly express your anger, pointing at the screen and maybe uttering one or two insults. Now, imagine yourself sitting in the audience of this same talk. Here you cannot point, scream or insult – instead you might fiercely roll your eyes, shake your head, fold your arms or sigh in disbelief. Next, imagine you are on stage in the discussion facing that imbecile yourself. Now you may lean forward, stare your opponent down while simultaneously control your anger so that it will still support your sharp reply but without making you look like a fool. In all three cases *some* sort of anger was induced that not only revealed the way in which the situated *demand*ed to be engaged, but also consisted in (at least) the beginning of the execution of such an engagement with the situation. However, some possibilities of action were blocked in each situation, whereas others were highlighted and almost obligatory. Accordingly, depending on the concrete circumstances, your anger was acted out differently in each case.

It is this phenomenon that Sartre in his *Sketch of a Theory of Emotions* – a particularly explicit and helpful approach to action in emotion – understood as a *hodological space*.¹⁵ The different possibilities of acting on your anger are also reflected in your emotional experience. Your anger was mixed with joy *insofar* as you could freely insult your opponent while safely at home among your reassuring, possibly laughing friends. Your anger was worsened and stained with helplessness when you sat in the audience unable to express it appropriately. And your anger was bordering on excitement and aggression when you were on stage under the spotlight ready to strike with a brilliant counter argument. In each scenario, the specific disvalue of the discussant's comments was clearly manifested, revealed in light of your emotional evaluation – brought to its full fervour through your expressive acting-out in the first case; appearing in a fleeting, unbearable obtrusiveness, reflecting your nervous paralysis in the second case; while in the third case, the disvalue is already about to give way to a brighter evaluative outlook, precisely because you are now able to engage the situation

¹⁵ The notion 'hodological space' was introduced into psychology by the Gestaltist Kurt Lewin (1938); for a contemporary adoption of the notion within a psychological theory of emotion, see Lambie (2009).

effectively, in order to *make it right* by critiquing and potentially correcting what had just been said.¹⁶

In a related but slightly different vein, Sartre construes emotions as ‘magical transformations of the world’, often in response to obstacles, problems or hindrances encountered by a person in the course of her activities. Sartre is here clearly influenced by the Gestalt psychologists since, like them, he understands the world as a network of trails and paths presenting opportunities and obstacles. At each moment and each place the world displays an ‘index of adversity’, i.e. the specific degree of practical difficulty and thus nuisance that the world currently presents to our attempts to navigate it. To Sartre, emotions are situated embodied engagements, sometimes employed strategically (not always consciously), acted out in response to unwanted or unexpected disruptions of activities, in the face of the specific obstacles or opportunities that the world offers. An emotion is thus a bit like a play, the emoter is performing a drama geared to an adverse environment, so that, in line with this acted-out performance, certain further activities or actively adopted or maintained stances become appropriate. In an important sense the world is thereby *re-constituted* in the act, so as to be ‘inhabitable’ again – new domains of value are thus opened-up. Sartrean emotions are acted-out plots of social action and interaction and not passive experiential occurrences.¹⁷ Parts of these plots certainly contain moments of passivity – like sitting helplessly in the audience, frozen in one’s seat, watching without any chance to act as one would like to. But even these passive episodes are *acted out* in some sense. You still *do*

¹⁶ This again illustrates the complexity of emotional value disclosure. While anchored in objective features of the world, value also crucially depends on characteristics of the person(s) apprehending it – notably in those that bear on one’s capacities to actively engage the relevant situation in meaningful ways. Thus, a subjective, capacity-based element is introduced into value-constitution, putting limits on the generalizability of value-ascriptions. We can’t go into this here, but see Slaby (2008a) and of course Helm (2001) for more encompassing treatments.

¹⁷ Robert Solomon has followed closely in Sartre’s footsteps, insofar as he spelled out and defended a theory of emotions as essentially active, deliberate strategies or strategic choices (see Solomon 1976). More recently, Paul Griffiths has advocated an approach of emotional content as “action-oriented representations” and of emotions in general as ‘Machiavellian’, i.e. evolved strategic responses to socially significant situations. As an evolutionary naturalist, Griffiths works within a rather different theoretical framework than Solomon (see Griffiths 2004; Griffiths & Scarantino 2009).

something when you shake your head, fold your arms or roll your eyes or even if your whole body tightens in self-restraint. And surely you thereby *engage value*, concretize it, actively dedicate yourself to it and project potential future actions in accord with it (see also Ricœur 1966 [1950], esp. 72-77). With emphasis on cases like these, Sartre's account of emotion begins to seem much less counter-intuitive from the point of view of the standard understanding of emotions as passions.¹⁸

One important issue that comes into focus on the action-centred view is the extent to which emotions are closely linked to an agent's *sense of ability*. Emotional engagements are in part rooted in our sense of what we can do, what we are capable of, and also what we can cope with or what we can 'take' more generally. Emotional engagements take shape within a dynamic '*I can*' or '*I can't*'-schema of relating to the world – a corporeal sense of ability or its opposite, a corporeal sense of *inability* or *incapacity* in relation to what confronts one that marks the heart of action *and* emotion. Depending on this changeable background of capability (unthematically disclosed in experience and agency), different types of emotions unfold according to these changing circumstances.¹⁹

How I affectively engage a situation I find myself in partly results from my sense of ability brought to bear on the accessible relevant features of the situation. In this way, it is plausible to understand emotions as embodying specific manifestations of an active *sense of possibility*: emotional engagements actively disclose what a situation affords in terms of potential doings and potential happenings. Emotional engagement is often even a matter of being forced into a dynamic space of possibilities. The agent is driven into acting in accordance with a specific trajectory of opportunities and obstacles, in a certain style or mode of engagement that can be quite hard to snap out of. Again, and in light of this, it still makes

¹⁸ Obviously, as is well known, Sartre is not willing to let the emoter off the hook by excusing him for allegedly 'involuntary' emotional reactions. Sartre construes even the passive emotions as exercises of a person's freedom (see, e.g., Sartre 1994 [1939], 44).

¹⁹ These and related ideas are expressed in a slightly more detailed manner in Slaby (2012) and Slaby et al. (2013).

sense, even on the activist view developed here, to view emotions as ‘passions’ – as something that the agent might in some part passively undergo, and not actively initiate herself. But one has to note that many emotions indeed *become* thoroughly active after their comparatively passive onset, often even in the full-blown sense of intentional action deliberately executed to fulfil specific aims (see Griffiths & Scarantino 2009 for a related view).-

In all cases of emotion, there are two distinguishable aspects – one situational, the other one agentive – which come together to form a unified mode of relational and dialogical engagement with the world. Together they make up a *performative* or *enacted* affective awareness of situation, where ‘awareness’ must not be construed as narrowly mental and passively experiential but instead as something inextricable from our practical dealings with and comportments in the world.

With this, the corporeal nature of emotional engagement comes into sharper focus. The central ‘vehicle’ or performing medium of emotion is the acting and acted-upon *lived body* (Merleau-Ponty 1962 [1945]. see esp. Part I, § 19). The lived body is the dynamic framework of a person’s active, corporeal situatedness in the world.²⁰ The environment, the hodological surround becomes manifest, concretizes in and through one’s corporeal sense of ability, in and through one’s felt capacity to act or to cope with what affects one. It is here where self- and world-disclosive aspects of emotional engagements come in view as always already unitary, because my sense of agency and capability is from the outset a sense of both *myself* and the *world*: as the space of *my* possible acting or being acted upon – and these aspects are inseparable.

4. The active-affective minimal-self

²⁰ For more detailed phenomenological explorations of the corporeal nature of emotional engagement, see Colombetti & Thompson (2009); Ratcliffe (2008a); Schmitz et al. (2011) and Slaby (2008b).

Let us narrow our focus somewhat. So far we have seen how agency in one important way defines affectivity even when it is crucially shaped by the *environment* (2). We then tried to explain the *engagement* of the agent with this environment in terms of inter-*action* and by that shed light on a more basic understanding of what agency might entail (3). With this, our account also begins to explicitly link affectivity, agency and *the self*. What is the relationship between affectivity, understood actively, and that which might lay claim to be called ‘the self’ (in its most basic form)? This is what we turn to in the present section. With some due caution, one might speak of the self-disclosive aspect of emotional engagement as a kind of *affective self-construal*. As outlined above (at the end of section 3), this is not a separate experiential structure, but comes in view primarily as a *modifier* of the process of active engagement, as an accompanying sense of ability and possibility, and is thus inseparable from the actions and activities of the emoting agent. An affective self-construal does not comprise a separate structure of self-directed mental contents. It is caught up in the act – it, too, is *enacted* (see Slaby 2012).

Affective self-construal constitutes a kind of ‘minimal self’. It is crucial to see that this basic structure is a matter of agency from the outset. Not through reflection, but in an immediately affective way, our being is disclosed to us in relation to what we are currently concerned with. This affective-agentive sense of *possibility* comprises a sense of *facticity* – what the current situation manifestly presents; and second, a sense of ‘what’s next’, ‘what needs to be done’, including, most importantly: ‘*can* it be done?’ – i.e., specific contentful ways of projecting ahead of what is currently manifest.²¹

21 This is deliberately reminiscent of Heidegger’s famous account of the care-structure of the being of dasein: *thrown projection, discursively articulated* – or, in Heidegger’s more vivid explication: dasein’s essential ‘*being-ahead-of-itself*’ in ‘*being-already-in*’ as ‘*being-alongside*’ that serves to also articulate the primordial temporality of the being of dasein (see Heidegger 1962 [1927]; esp. § 41 & 64; and Haugeland 2013 for illumination). Besides much else, what we especially take from Heidegger is the conviction that no meaningful distinctions can be drawn between selfhood and a basic form of self-consciousness (Heidegger of course wouldn’t use the latter term), and neither between selfhood and dasein’s care-structure as such, so that selfhood is an always already affective thrust toward significance and value.

Touch is a good case to illustrate the interrelatedness of activity, self-disclosure and world-disclosure on the most basic level. In touch, I obviously have a correlation between feeling *myself* and, in the very same experience, a feeling of something in the world as that which is touched. But quite importantly, only the fact that *I am active*, that I *do* the touching, lets both self and world take shape in contrastive correlation (see Ratcliffe 2008a, ch. 3 & 2008b). This point generalizes: without the moment of activity, no experience could take place, because no basis for a self/non-self distinction would be provided for. The ‘I do’ is as deep as it gets in the constitution of experience. This moment of activity is not an abstract principle (like the Kantian ‘I think’), but a modifiable, qualitative dimension: it can be emphatic or tentative, strong or weak, resolute or shaky. This partly determines the particular kinds of the encounters with the world that the agent might enter into, so different styles of engagement reflect back on the agent and let him or herself take a particular shape, and this is what is ‘disclosed’ in affective self-disclosure or ‘self-feeling’.²²

By now it should seem plausible that a basic agentic affectivity is among the fundamental sources of what constitutes a self-conscious subject; more specifically, it is also what enables a person to assume the *specific* characteristics that are definitive of her as an individual – it is thus a fundamental source of the ‘self’ (if we can speak in that objectifying way). Affectivity constitutes the very dimension in which things *can* possibly concern us or *be* an issue for us. Modify or take away a person’s sense of possibility, and there’s not much left in the dimension of selfhood – no agency, no valuing, no motivation, just a colorless plain condition.

This is a condition that in some (hard) cases might be approached by the unfortunate sufferers of severe depression. Depression, in its extremes, seems to wipe out the self via an annihilation of agency and affectivity. Depression seems to directly affect the deepest point at which talk of ‘selfhood’ is appropriate, if one lends credibility to patient self-reports (see

²² On the outdated phenomenological notion of ‘self feeling’ see Frank (2002); see also Slaby (2012) for an adoption of that notion to the current discussion of emotion.

Slaby et al. 2013; Ratcliffe 2012). In profound melancholic depression, the dimension of affective self construal – the dynamic, agentic core of a person’s perspective on the world – seems to be eroded, and ultimately eradicated entirely. Goal-directed activity, active self-stabilizing, adopting or continuing a stance, resisting impulses or oppositions – all that is made harder and harder before it might eventually get extinguished. A person’s active world relatedness in the mode of *I can* deteriorates into an all encompassing *I cannot*, so that even the most routine of activities become practically impossible. As a consequence, the environment is increasingly apprehended as oppressive, threatening, not manageable, while one’s existence amidst others and amidst the entities of the world is disclosed as fragile, endangered, vulnerable and at the mercy of alien forces. In this way, depression seems to present a kind of negative mirror image of an undisturbed affectivity (again, see Slaby et al. 2013). This is the utter horrifying strangeness of severe depression. Thus afflicted, you cannot simply point somewhere and say, “this is what I have, this is my ailment ...” – but it is the very dimension that is *you*, your agency, the very instance that might lay claim on being called ‘self’ that is affected.

A direct consequence of this is that the universe of value collapses. Without the active capacity, the engagement of the self that is wiped out in depression, there is no basis to the ‘holding’ oneself in a realm of significance, in the thrust and dedication that is needed to let purpose and meaning become manifest. The result is, as so often observed in depressed patients, endless spirals of futile reflection and the anxiety characteristic of the uprooted, degraded self. An agent’s engagement loses its traction on an inhabitable, meaningful environment. Conversely, the world loses its practical shape, its character as something that grips and enthralls, its status as a realm buzzing with significance so that our action and engagement is evidently called-for. Instead, to the depressive, nothing is of value – nothing matters any more. In our view, this profound desertedness, the nihilism of the depressive’s

world is the phenomenal flip side of that deep pre-personal inability and incapacity to act and to ‘hold oneself’ that comes with the catastrophic erosion of the affective minimal self.

5. Conclusion

We have argued for a shift of emphasis in the philosophical study of emotion, a shift from viewing emotions *exclusively* as a certain class of (mostly passive) experiences to viewing them as much closer to and more intimately tied up with our agency: as *engagements* with the world. If the emotions are ‘passions’, then they are the passive modifications of our *active nature* – the various ways our activities are shaped by dynamic goings-on in our surroundings. And we have pointed out that even the basic dimension of selfhood – basic affective self awareness or self feeling – has to be understood as an essentially active structure, so that we can conclude that making sense of our affectivity is making sense of ourselves as agents.

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