

# Affective Self-Construal and the Sense of Ability

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## Abstract

How should we construe the unity, in affective experience, of felt bodily changes on the one hand and intentionality on the other, without forcing affective phenomena into a one-sided theoretical framework such as cognitivism? To answer this question, I will consider the specific kind of self-awareness implicit in affectivity. In particular, I will explore the idea that a bodily sense of ability is crucial for affective self-awareness. Describing the affective ways of “grasping oneself” manifest in a person’s felt sense of ability will help us understand the intimate connection between bodily feelings and intentionality in affective processes. In order to illustrate these experiential structures in a concrete case, I will discuss experiential changes often reported by sufferers of depression.

## Keywords

affective intentionality, depression, emotion, lived body, self-construal, sense of ability

At least since Aristotle, affective phenomena have been described as consisting of both bodily states of upheaval and intentional states directed at aspects of the world. On accounts most sensitive to the experiential dimension of affectivity, these two elements are not seen as distinct components but instead as aspects of the same unitary experiential process: Felt bodily changes are no longer merely seen as accompaniments of emotional intentionality, but increasingly as *inextricable from* the evaluative awareness of the person’s current situation. In the philosophy of emotion, this unitary intentional-cum-bodily experience at the base of affective states has been called by various names, among them *feeling towards* (Goldie, 2000), *felt evaluation* (Helm, 2001), *concern-based construal* (Roberts, 2003), *affective perception* (Döring, 2003), *embodied appraisal* (Colombetti & Thompson, 2008; Prinz, 2004), or, in a slightly different theoretical context, *existential feeling* (Ratcliffe, 2008). Valid theoretical accounts of affective experiences need to achieve a sufficient understanding of the relationship between these two dimensions: How to construe the intricate unity of felt corporeal changes on the one hand and intentional relatedness on the other? In the following, I will attempt to shed some light on a dimension of affectivity that has not been explored very much thus far. While many approaches deal primarily with the world-directed aspect of affective intentionality, it is worthwhile to pay closer attention to the “backside” of emotional experience:

to the specific form of *self-awareness* or *self-disclosure* that is proper to affective states. Understanding the format and dynamics of emotional self-awareness can help sharpen our conception of affective intentionality. Accordingly, the main goal in what follows is to elucidate the nature of what I call “affective self-construal.” In particular, I will explore the idea that a modifiable corporeal *sense of ability* constitutes the backbone of affective self-construal. Describing the affective ways of “grasping oneself” that are inscribed in a person’s embodied and dynamic sense of ability will help us gain a better insight into the fundamental connection between the corporeal dynamics and the intentionality of affective experiences. In order to illustrate the affective structures under discussion in an especially striking case, I will briefly deal with affective changes typically reported by sufferers from depression. Depressive conditions go along with marked changes in the bodily dynamics of affective self-awareness and might thus function as a model case for gaining a clearer insight into these structures.

## Affectivity and Agency

It can seem natural to start with an analysis of forms of experience in order to shed light on the emotions’ intentionality, and surely the notion of a construal—usually understood as a

mental image in the sense of an appearance “before the mind”<sup>1</sup>—has experiential connotations. In treatments of emotions, this default orientation towards experience is not entirely misguided, but it risks setting us on the wrong track, particularly if experience is understood in a narrowly *perceptual* sense (as it is, for example, in perceptual accounts of emotion). In order to start from where the action is, I propose to locate emotional intentionality in closer vicinity to agency, in relation to our modifiable ability to act, to engage with the world in practical ways. While surely not themselves actions or activities, affective states are the area of “interface” between experiential awareness and intentional action. Affective states are the switch point, so to speak—the point at which awareness of situation (“threat over there!”) is phasing over into active situation access (“flight or fight”). This, I think, is the right way to unpack the common idea that emotions are responses to *what matters*—to what is grasped as immediately significant. Affective responses consist in a felt pressure or pull to act on behalf of whatever is grasped as important in an emotional state. This situation-directed motivational pull is not accidental but essential to affective states. In emotions, there is no distance between the apprehension of the importance of something and one’s being motivated to act in accordance with this situational significance—to be emotional *is* to be pulled to act in the relevant ways (see Helm, 2001, 2002). The absence of this immediate motivation—*not* the absence of the action itself, as we can surely often abstain from acting even despite feeling a pull to act—would inevitably speak against construing the relevant experience as emotional. This is the correct intuition behind accounts of emotion centered on the notion of action tendencies (see, for example, Frijda, 1986).<sup>2</sup>

While accounts of emotions along these lines have been proposed several times, the intimate links between emotion and agency have not been explicated with regard to some of their more interesting philosophical consequences.<sup>3</sup> To begin to make progress here, I will explore one specific assumption that comes into view when focusing in detail on the action-orientation of emotional states, viz. that affective states are closely linked to an agent’s *awareness of ability*. Many emotions seem to grow out of 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. To put it in a slogan, affective states seem to develop within an “*I can*” or “*I can’t*” schema of relating to the world—an embodied sense of capability (or its marked opposite, a specific sense of *inability* or *incapacity* in relation to something that confronts one). Depending on this changeable background awareness of capability, different emotions take shape differently under changing circumstances. How I affectively construe a situation I find myself in can be seen as a function of my sense of ability in combination with the accessible relevant features of the situation. In this way, it is adequate to understand emotions as a *sense of concrete possibility*: Emotions disclose what a situation affords in terms of potential doings and potential happenings affecting me that I have to put up with or adequately respond to. These two distinguishable aspects—situational and agentic—are amalgamated together

to form a unified state of dynamic situation-access. It is an action-oriented awareness of situation (where “awareness” should not be construed too narrowly but instead as something inextricable from our practical access to what it is awareness of).

In light of the entanglement of situation-focused and self-directed aspects of emotional states, the dynamic, physically moving, corporeal nature of emotional processes comes into sharper focus and presents less of a riddle. The basic “location” of emotional processes is the acting and acted-upon *lived body* (“body” here understood in the sense of the German word *Leib*, as opposed to *Körper*). This is not a closed-off sphere of pure experience, but rather a dynamic framework of a person’s active, corporeal situatedness in the world. The lived body understood in this sense is also where we have to locate the process of being-affected-by-something that is crucial to emotional episodes. The core process in an emotional episode is the lived body’s affectedness by something—and the lived body is understood as the medium of an agent’s acting in the world and resistance to the world.<sup>4</sup> Whatever is encountered in the environment is processed by default through one’s corporeal sense of ability, through the feeling of one’s capacity to act or to come to grips and cope with what affects one. It is here where self- and world-directed aspects of emotional states come in view as always already unified, as a sense of agency and capability is, almost by definition, a sense of both *myself* and the *world* (as the space of *my* possible acting/being acted upon), and these aspects are inseparable.<sup>5</sup>

We are now in a position to draw a more detailed picture of affective self-construals, the self-directed aspect of affective intentionality. Bringing this into clearer focus will help to get a better grip on the corporeal dynamics that seem to play a key role as carriers of complex emotional contents.

## Self-Feeling

The notion of a self-construal can still mislead us—if we continue to understand it as a kind of representation that is occupying a level of experience ontologically distinct from what it is about, as if it were the somehow “stabilized” result of a process of internal self-monitoring. The best way to break free of such problematic associations is to further draw out the consequences of the dynamic view of affectivity. In view of the intimate link between affectivity and agency sketched above, we have to acknowledge that affectivity is a dynamic, temporally extended process—the very dimension of an agent’s active responding to and engaging with the world. This applies also to affective self-construals. Affective self-construals come in view primarily as *internal modifiers* of the process of active engagement, inseparable from the actions and activities of the emotional agent. Thus, these construals do not comprise a separate structure of self-directed contents. Affective self-construals are bound up with action—they are *enacted*. Of course, they can *subsequently* be reflected upon, articulated and made explicit—a process that generates propositional self-representations. Quite often, explicit self-related thoughts

will exert formative influences on the primary affective self-construals: thinking explicitly about oneself feeds back into one's self-directed feelings. What interests us here, however, is a level of affective self-construal prior to reflection and articulation. How should we understand the way that self-related contents are felt *before* they are reflectively thought of and rendered explicit?

In some by now almost forgotten quarters of early phenomenology, the term *self-feeling* (*Selbstgefühl* in German) was used to refer to something that comes close to enacted affective self-construals. There is a clear lineage from self-feeling to what is today called self-confidence or self-esteem; however, self-feeling is the more inclusive term as it also encompasses the opposite of self-confidence, that is, states of low self-esteem, self-depreciation, submissiveness and the like.<sup>6</sup> Importantly, and in contrast to today's common understanding of self-esteem and similar affective states, self-feeling was thought to comprise also a very basic bodily, postural, organismic dimension—basic feelings of vitality or “vital tonality” of a person's existence, not unlike what Damasio today calls homeostatic background feelings (Damasio, 1999, 2010) and even more closely resembling what Stern describes as “vitality affects” (Stern, 2010). This ground-floor dimension of self-feeling was thought to be closely entwined with the more elaborated, higher level, concept-informed and often trait-related forms of self-feeling. Is the basic dimension of felt vitality (feelings of energy, strength, freshness, weakness, fatigue, etc.) capable of instantiating contents that reflect more complex facts about a person's situatedness in the world? This is where we have to look for the more informative among a person's affective self-construals.

The link to what is usually called self-confidence might help us get more of an intuitive grasp of what is at issue here. Let's consider an example. John has recently moved into a new job, in a new, challenging environment, with competitive colleagues, a demanding boss, and moreover into a new city where he is without friends and social support. After some initial mistakes and miscommunications, he increasingly comes to behave tentatively, hesitantly, and insecurely, his attitude towards his coworkers is increasingly shy and submissive, he starts to ruminate about being incapable for the job, begins to fear the more difficult tasks, hopes not to meet his boss in the elevator, and comes to think during lunch break that “everybody is staring at me.” Here, aspects of a problematic environment have crept in upon the feeling person, infiltrating what used to be a self-assured, confident demeanor, resulting in an enacted self-image themed around inability, defect, clumsiness, not belonging, isolation, etcetera. Responses of relevant others will likely be crucial to the further development of John's self-feeling. Maybe a single instance of praise, persuasively expressed by one of the new colleagues, will be enough to break the ice and start to turn his self-directed feelings back into a more positive direction. In this example, several self-construals internally shape a person's activities and ways of addressing the world. What we find here is feelings that reflect one's current standing in the world, one's relationships to other people, and one's sense of one's abilities—all coming in view

primarily as modes of one's actively addressing and confronting the world, in turn shaping subsequent activities and predetermining the goals one might set for oneself and the tasks one deems oneself capable of performing. The affective self-construals themselves, prior to being brought to John's attention, might have been so bound up with his behaving and responding that he probably did not grasp them in an explicit way. The example, of course, also indicates that we can expect quite close interactions and entanglements between explicit conceptual assessments, processes of active sense-making, and affective forms of self-experience.

Matthew Ratcliffe has developed a theoretical proposal that is in many respects similar to the idea of self-feeling. His term for characterizing the affective structures in question is *existential feeling* (see Ratcliffe, 2005, 2008). The central idea is that of a fundamental *felt relatedness* of self and world. As “ways of finding oneself in the world,” felt existential orientations establish the most basic self–world mutuality in experience—usually before conscious reflection sets in and before it even makes sense to separate a subject from the world it confronts. Among existential feelings are feelings of connectedness to the world, feelings of familiarity, feelings of belonging to a group or to other people in general, feelings of having or being a body, feelings of being in control and feeling capable of this or that action, but also a quite general sense of the “being” of worldly entities, of oneself, and of others as fellow persons. In this sense, existential feelings might be understood as ontological—as the experiential foundation of what Heidegger has called *Seinsverständnis* (understanding of being)—so that alterations to this affective background have profound consequences for even one's very basic sense of there being a world, of one's having (or being) a body, and one's being together with other people. On the other hand, on top of those very basic aspects of a person's world orientation, existential feelings encompass more specific aspects of one's particular situatedness, such as one's current social relations or how one is currently faring with regard to one's goals and projects. Pathologically altered existential feelings might be at the base of many psychiatric conditions, notably depression, explaining the profundity, utter strangeness, and impenetrability of depressive being-in-the-world (see Ratcliffe, 2008, 2009). As will become clear in what follows, the conception of existential feelings resonates well with the basic idea developed here: A person's felt relatedness to the world is nothing other than the fundamental sense of ability at the base of his or her perspective on the world—a sense of ability that is at any time bound up with aspects of one's concrete situation. This embodied, modifiable sense of “*I can*” and “*I cannot*” shapes the way the world, others, and oneself are apprehended.

### Corporealization and Self-Construal in Depression

It makes sense to combine the idea of a changeable existential background with the notion of self-feeling and with the idea that the basic “location” of affective self-construal is in the

vicinity of a person's active engagement with the world. The basic sense of ability and agency, intimately tied to an agent's corporeal existence—the lived body as the medium of one's acting and being acted upon—comprises the basic dimension of affective self-relatedness from which all other dimensions originate. It is here where we have to look for the contents and processes relevant to affective self-construal, and it is this dimension that seems particularly vulnerable to pathological modification. Affective changes occurring in depressive illness seem to pertain to this dimension of corporeal-agentive self-feeling, as many autobiographic patient narratives vividly illustrate.<sup>7</sup>

Depending on my sense of ability and (potential or actual) agency—a sense that is surely varied and multiple—and as a consequence thereof, the world appears as a space of specific possibilities and as devoid of other possibilities, or as something removed and unreachable, or as a site of impending disaster, of threat and danger. Likewise, my sense of other people *as people* depends upon my felt ability to connect, to make contact, to engage in interactions and also on my capacity to be reached or affectively touched by others, and my sense of being part of interpersonal relations or arrangements such as a certain group or community. And when I feel fundamentally *unable* to connect, other people will as a consequence come to seem awkward, alien, probably even hostile and dangerous, appearing like strangers, and in the end even as not being persons at all but instead as mere “dummies” or “soulless automata.” Reflected back to myself, this profound disconnectedness from others might in turn lead to feelings of solitude and aloneness as there are no longer, in a certain sense, any others with whom one *could* make contact or be together. With this, we have moved right into the core dimension of the experiential world described by sufferers from severe depression.

Even more intimate than the relations described thus far is the link between the sense of ability and the feelings that one has of one's own body. Once we understand the body phenomenologically as the active and affectively responsive *lived body*, we see that there is no gap between our sense of ability and our sense of the body. When the body, as part of a pathological process, ceases to be experienced as a smoothly operating medium of potential engagement with the world, it will increasingly turn into what is felt as a mere object—a transformation that has been called “corporealization” (Fuchs, 2003, 2005). In many depressed patients, the lived body seems to “rigidify” and turn into something resistant, into an obstacle and hindrance to one's projected engagements and activities. One's taken-for-granted relatedness to the world is altered completely as one no longer finds oneself within a context of seamless activity and amidst routinely encountered possibilities. The objectified, dysfunctional body amounts to a break between oneself and the world. Obviously, this marks a fundamental alteration in self-feeling: What we have here are bodily feelings of being trapped within oneself, feelings of being isolated from one's formerly meaningful surroundings. This might give rise to feelings of being engaged or imprisoned and of being unable to reach out to make contact with the world or

with other people. As a further consequence, feelings of estrangement, of depersonalization, even of not being bodily existent in the world any more might ensue—amounting to a fundamental sense of self-alienation. This dimension of self-feelings—feelings of *inability* that are inextricable from severely modified, alienated corporeal experience and thus also from a radically altered sense of the reality of the world and of other people—seems to comprise the most basic level of self-related feelings in depression.

One last dimension presumably resulting from the affective changes under discussion is the experience of time. Depressed patients often complain about a radical disruption of everyday temporality. Most notably, the patients' orientation towards the future as a temporal dimension potentially different from the present seems profoundly distorted. Often, time seems to stand still, as the very idea of a potential change of the current state seems absent from experience. Again, the distortion of the patients' sense of capability might account for this pathological change. Finding oneself unable to act and thus unable to effect any change in the world undermines the practical basis of the very idea of a change of situation (and correlatively, of a change of one's own state). Being unable to act amounts to one's being tied to the current state of affairs and thus to the present moment. The experienced present may in this way extend indefinitely and turn into what Heidegger has called a “standing now” (cf. Heidegger, 1995, pp. 123–126). In light of this it is not surprising that this altered experience can give rise to strong feelings of dread and despair—emotions quite often reported by depressed persons.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, in all, the condition of clinical depression seems to present an encompassing “mirror image” of human affectivity. Depression marks a distortion of the root dimension of our affective orientation in the world and therefore can help us gain insight into the complex structure of human feelings. With regard to affective self-awareness and self-construal, depressive experience seems to confirm the suggestion that a basic form of self-awareness comes in view as a modification of a person's sense of ability and capacity, a sense that, in nonpathological cases, is often not distinct from action itself—in that case, it is a fundamental sense of agency. However, in depression, the capacity to act is severely distorted, leaving the patient with a debilitating sense of inability and impossibility. This sense of incapacity and impossibility then “infects” other practical and experiential dimensions, negatively affecting the depressed person's relationship to the world in general, to other people, and certainly to her own embodied existence—it is always a distorted awareness of oneself.

## Conclusion

The fundamental sense of agency and ability that is inextricably tied up with a person's corporeal existence as an agent, and from there to the surrounding world and to what it affords in terms of concrete possibilities, *manifests* a person's standing in the world—it forms the structure of the existential perspective of a corporeal agent, a practical point of view. This practical

dimension is one's basic, affective sense of self, and a person's various affective self-construals are the different shapes and qualitative modifications of this corporeal structure under varying circumstances. In light of this, it is not surprising that the contents of affective self-construals are in many cases not readily available to conscious reflection in the manner of conceptual representations. Instead, these contents are enacted within one's bodily engagements, and comprise the overall frame or background structure of intentional agency. As the descriptions given so far suggest, it would be wrong to look for sharp demarcations between the sense of self and the sense a person has of her surrounding world, likewise between a person's sense of her abilities to connect to other people and her sense of other people *as people*, and also between feelings of what one can do, what one can "take," and how one's lived body is experienced as the medium of potential engagements with the world. This again underlines the assumption we started with, *viz.* that affective states are experientially homogeneous conditions that can only be artificially split up into distinct components. This inevitably also pertains to the relationship between the intentional contents and the corporeal dynamics that jointly constitute emotional states. At base, these are not two separate dimensions, but just the two sides of the same coin—a unified corporeal engagement with aspects of the world.

I hope to have succeeded in motivating the proposal that a person's corporeal sense of ability is a promising place to start when the task is to get a phenomenological grip on human affectivity in general and affective self-construal in particular.

## Notes

- 1 See Roberts (2003, Chapter 2) on the standard use of the term "construal" in the philosophy of emotion.
2. In a more encompassing treatment, one would have to talk about the hedonic dimension of affective states at this point. I hold that the qualitative nature of emotions—whether emotions are felt as pleasant or painful—is intimately tied up with the motivational or action-oriented nature of emotional processes. I have argued for this elsewhere (see Slaby, 2008a, 2008b; for related ideas, see Helm, 2001, Chapter 3; 2002).
- 3 It would be worthwhile to discuss Sartre's *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* (1939/2001) in relation to the ideas developed here. Sartre construes emotions as "magical transformations of the world" in response to specific obstacles, problems or hindrances encountered in the course of one's activities in the world. Thus, to Sartre, emotions are passively enacted and embodied "coping strategies" consequent upon disruptions of activities—the world is construed differently so that different activities or stances become appropriate. From the perspective of the proposal developed here, these intuitions seem on the right track.
- 4 Very helpful in this regard is recent work by Giovanna Colombetti (see Colombetti, 2007; Colombetti & Thompson, 2008). See also Slaby (2008b); Slaby and Stephan (2008); and Schmitz, Müllan, and Slaby (2011) for explications of related ideas.
- 5 Besides the intentional, action-related bodily feelings discussed here, emotional experience also often includes apparently nonintentional, merely body-related visceral feelings such as a tightening of the chest or a churning of the stomach. In some cases, these are just artificially isolated aspects of more encompassing world-directed intentional feelings, but there are also self-standing instances of more immediate visceral sensations accompanying the core dimension of affective intentionality. I have sketched my position on the different kinds of bodily feeling in emotion in Slaby (2008b); see also Schmitz, Müllan, and Slaby (2011).
- 6 I draw here primarily on a reconstruction of some of these ideas by Ingrid Vendrell-Ferran (2008, § 6.3.); another source is a resourceful book by Manfred Frank (2002).
- 7 The following discussion is rather general and abstract as it attempts to synthesize a broad range of first-hand reports of depressive experience in limited space. The material used is mostly from a selection of recent English-language memoirs of depression. I have drawn on books by Brampton (2008), Kuiper (1995), Solomon (2001), Styron (1990), Thompson (1996), Wolpert (1999), and Wurtzel (1995). Helpful in organizing the wealth of autobiographical material have been texts by Ratcliffe (2008, 2009) and Paskaleva (2011); see also the contributions in Clark (2008).
- 8 Of course, one could say much more on the altered temporality of depressive experience. For example, not always does it seem that the patients have lost any sense of the future. Often, the future is anticipated in terms of expected mischief, of impending disaster, letting the patients reckon with ever more pain and misfortune. The future is feared and dreaded. This specific negative framing of anticipated happenings might also be a result of the diminished sense of ability: When I find myself utterly unable to act, it might seem natural to frame possible future events as uncontrollable and thus potentially threatening. A sense of being incapable and powerless in general might amount to construing oneself as being at the mercy of uncontrollable events. For a more general phenomenological analysis of the lived temporality in psychopathology, see Wyllie (2005).

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