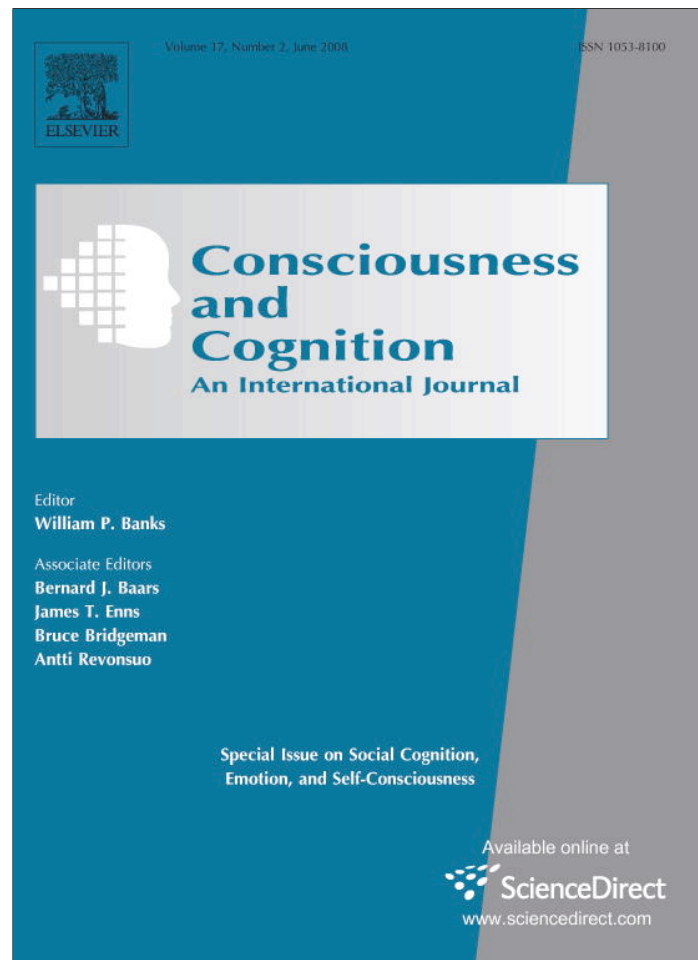


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Affective intentionality and self-consciousness

Jan Slaby¹, Achim Stephan*

Institute of Cognitive Science, University of Osnabrück, Albrechtstr. 28, D-49069 Osnabrück, Germany

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ABSTRACT

We elaborate and defend the claim that human affective states (“feelings”) are, among other things, *self-disclosing*. We will show why affective intentionality has to be considered in order to understand human self-consciousness. One specific class of affective states, so-called *existential feelings*, although often neglected in philosophical treatments of emotions, will prove central. These feelings importantly pre-structure affective and other intentional relations to the world. Our main thesis is that existential feelings are an important manifestation of self-consciousness and figure prominently in human self-understanding. We offer an ordering of four levels of existential feelings and also give considerations in favour of the essential bodily nature of these feelings.

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1. Introduction

One feature of emotions and most other affective phenomena in humans is of particular interest to philosophy: It is the way these states have “content” or relate to something in the world—what is usually called the emotions’ intentionality, which is *affective intentionality*.² A central result of the recent philosophical debate on emotions is that affective intentionality is *sui generis*—it differs significantly from other ways of relating to the world.³ That’s why emotions cannot be conceptually reduced to purely cognitive intentional states. In this paper, we will show that a proper consideration of affective intentionality has important implications for an account of human self-consciousness.

As de Sousa (2002) has pointed out, human emotions are Janus-faced in that they are both: about something in the world, and simultaneously a form of awareness of ourselves—they face both inward and outward, so to speak. When I feel afraid, I apprehend something as a threat, and at the same time I feel threatened, i.e., I have an awareness of being vulnerable in a specific way. Thus, feeling an emotion amounts to feeling oneself in a certain relation to something (usually an event, object or situation)—an evaluative awareness of which goes hand in hand with a registering of one’s existential situation.⁴ This peculiar affective awareness of “oneself” is not easy to characterize. Obviously, we are not dealing with an explicit, propositional awareness. On the other hand, when we experience an affective state or process, it is equally obvious that there is something more and in addition to the affective (and evaluative) attitude we have towards some object or event. Something about *ourselves*

* Corresponding author. Fax: +49 (0) 541 969 3381.

E-mail addresses: jslaby@uos.de (J. Slaby), achim.stephan@uos.de (A. Stephan).

¹ Fax: +49 (0) 541 969 3381.

² In the following, when we speak about emotions or affective states or processes, we concentrate on such states and processes as *experienced by human beings*. We do not discuss if there are states and processes which also could rightly be called emotional without being consciously felt by their bearers.

³ This has been argued for extensively by authors such as Goldie (2000, 2002), Helm (2001), and Döring (2008); for an overview of the arguments see Slaby (2007).

⁴ The notion “existential situation” is in many contexts better suited than the notoriously problematic term “self”. Existential situation, as we use the term, is meant to capture the circumstances relevant to a person’s life at a given time, in so far as they are knowable by the person, at least in principle. Moreover, a healthy adult person usually has, at any time, a more or less accurate construal of her existential situation (which could be called her “self-understanding”). Instead of “existential situation” we could also, in a more colloquial idiom, talk of a person’s “current standing in the world”.

is manifested in consciousness, or rather: our existence, our being in the world at this moment and in this current situation that feels a certain way. This “existential feeling”⁵ is usually not in the centre of our attention. Rather, it is a kind of implicit, background awareness. Often, however, we seem to have immediate access to these feelings, as becomes evident in the case someone asks us about our current state (“How do you feel?” or “What’s up with you?”). Usually, if honest, we are able to provide an explicit answer.

Notions such as “self-consciousness”, “self-awareness” and “self-knowledge” pose philosophical difficulties. We cannot resolve these difficulties in this paper, but we can point to some of them and give some hints as to why these notions stand in need of further explication. First of all, there is good reason to avoid the substantive “the self” completely. Its grammar suggests an entity, and we certainly do not want to claim that there is such a *thing* as “a self”, apart from the organism or person whose self-consciousness is in question. What people usually have in mind when they use the expression “the self” is what constitutes the core of an individual’s specific personality: that what makes this individual the *specific* person that he or she is. And this is not a thing, nor an entity, but rather a (more or less) stable pattern in the sequence of relations this person entertains with her surroundings, its social and physical environment.⁶ This pattern of meaningful relations, more than anything else, seems to be what people mainly refer to when they employ the substantial notion of “self”: a pattern of states and processes through which an embodied agent relates to the world and to “himself” in perception, cognition, evaluation, action, and feeling. We could call this process “personal existence” or simply “existence”. For a person, to exist amounts to be constantly relating to the world in these various modes of intentionality—at least during the waking portions of her life. And, to relate to the world in these various ways can be more or less transparent to the person. In this sense, she can be more or less conscious of her current situation.

Of particular importance for human self-consciousness is one much neglected class of feelings: namely *existential feelings*. These feelings pre-structure both affective and non-affective relations to the world, be they evaluative, cognitive or behavioural relations. They are the basis of the various stances and positions a person adopts towards events and circumstances in general and towards her own life in particular. These background feelings can be described as various forms of evaluative awareness of one’s existential situation—loosely put: a sense of how things are going for oneself. These feelings can even be seen as manifestations of what we are—in this, they can be the basis or the groundwork of our existence as personal agents. Not surprisingly, then, these feelings also play a central role in a more advanced manifestation of self-consciousness, for which it is useful to employ the term “self-understanding”. The account of affective intentionality that we outline offers the possibility to construe a non-intellectualistic, albeit sufficiently complex approach to self-understanding (Section 3).

One further terminological clarification: Many treatments of affective states in philosophy deal exclusively with emotions. It is widely agreed that emotions are affective states that evaluatively relate to certain specific events, objects or situations, and that their particular kind of evaluative relatedness (their “formal object”) is what individuates them. For the purpose of this paper, however, we will not distinguish overly sharply between emotions and other affective states like moods, background feelings and sensations. Our account of affective intentionality and self-consciousness relates mainly to the common features which unite the realm of human-level affective phenomena. It relates much less to those features which differentiate these states into different classes of feeling.⁷ The structure which is of most importance for our purposes—*feeling oneself in a certain way in relation to something*—is, with adequate modifications, common among most kinds of human feelings. When, in the following, we employ the terms ‘emotion’ or ‘feeling’, we use them both to refer generically to affective states with that common structure.

2. Affective self-consciousness and the felt body

Emotional contents display a peculiar double structure. Emotions reveal to us not only what is significant for us, they also make manifest what is going on with ourselves. One can say that emotional experience reveals “how things are going for us”, how things stand with regard to our personal well being or our faring in the world in general. Emotional intentionality is thus both a matter of outer experience and an important dimension of self-consciousness and potentially even self-knowledge.

The approach to emotions we put forward is a version of “unification theory” or “anti-component-theory” of emotion. Emotions are essentially unitary states that do not have separable ingredients. Their features are only conceptually distinguishable, but not such that they could show up in isolation.⁸ Consequently, the same is true of the outwardly directed and self-directed aspects of affective intentionality. These are the two sides of the same coin which cannot be separated from each other. Still, we can *describe* emotional experience as an interrelation of two (conceptually) distinguishable experiential structures: While afraid, we experience something ‘out there’ as dangerous and at the same time ‘we’ feel vulnerable in a specific way. But our experience of the danger is not separate from, but rather *consists in* our feeling vulnerable. Each emotional experience has that structure: Something affects us in a certain way, and *thereby* we feel specifically affected by it. We ‘mind’, and something ‘matters’; where ‘minding’ and ‘mattering’ are constitutively interrelated—there cannot be the one without the other.

⁵ This useful term is introduced by Ratcliffe (2005); we elaborate upon it below, most prominently in Section 3.

⁶ Recurrent sequences (sub patterns) in this pattern can be seen as manifestations of what we usually call character traits, emotional dispositions, second order volitions, and preferences.

⁷ For more on the specific differences between various kinds of affective states see, e.g., Engelen et al. (2008), Slaby (2008), Zinck and Newen (2007).

⁸ See Goldie (2000, 2002), Helm (2001), and Döring (2008), for arguments in favour of unification views of emotion.

Here are some further examples: In anger, we apprehend something—usually another person's action that directly or indirectly affects us negatively—as an offence. At the same time, we construe ourselves as offended, as put down, disrespected, or damaged by what the other person has done. In pride, we experience something belonging or closely related to us as positive, and at the same time we feel enhanced in terms of personal worth. In sadness, we apprehend something as a loss, and at the same time we feel hurtfully deprived. In shame, the self-directed and outwardly directed aspects are even closer entangled than in most other emotions, but even here we can distinguish them: When ashamed, we become painfully aware of something associated with us as a defect, while at the same time we experience ourselves as diminished, as lacking in a certain respect. We apprehend a (often morally laden) difference between our self-image and what we currently display in terms of behaviour or appearance or situation. This is the self-conscious aspect of shame, while the simultaneous construal of something about us as inappropriate or insufficient (by standards that we at least implicitly accept) is the world-directed aspect.

The general content structure in all these cases is this: *You feel yourself in a certain way towards something*. We deliberately make use of Peter Goldie's terminology here: Goldie speaks of “feeling towards” in order to stress the outwardly directed intentionality of emotional feelings.⁹ In contrast to Goldie, we like to shift focus on the other aspect of the intentional double structure. The specific way you feel yourself—whether hurt, deprived, offended, enhanced, threatened etc.—is an evaluation of what goes on in the external world from your specific point of view. Feeling vulnerable, being “fearfully shaken”, is an evaluation of some potential event or situation as a danger to your well being. Feeling offended is an evaluation of some action or some person as an offender, as a reason for anger. Likewise, feeling enhanced or heightened is an evaluation of something as a personal good. It is exactly this peculiar way of evaluating that distinguishes affective ways of relating to the world from non-affective, cognitive evaluations. Self-directed evaluative feelings therefore make up the basis of all affective evaluations. Unfortunately, this important point is usually not explicitly dealt with in the current philosophical debate on emotions and feelings.¹⁰

In one sense, this connects quite well with some aspects of Antonio Damasio's theory of somatic markers (cf. Damasio, 1994, chaps. 8 and 9), and even better with Jesse Prinz's embodied appraisal theory. Both Damasio and Prinz place certain hedonic bodily feelings at the centre of their respective theories of emotion. They both share the Jamesian intuition that felt bodily changes somehow must be the core of affective experience. Nothing but a “neutral states of intellectual perception” would remain, as William James famously put it, when we “try to abstract from consciousness [of an emotion] all the feelings of its characteristic bodily symptoms” (James, 1884, p. 193). Damasio puts much emphasis on rarely noticed bodily background feelings that tacitly influence experience, thought and decision-making (Damasio, 1999, chap. 2). His somatic marker hypothesis is centred on the claim that certain felt body states ‘mark’ perceptions and thoughts as positive or negative and thereby function as crucial aids in decision-making. However, Damasio stays close to James and Lange in conceiving of these somatic markers as inner perceptions of states of the body—states that are then somehow attached to (non-affective) perceptions or cognitions. According to him, these feelings are not directed at the world beyond the body, they lack intentionality. This restricted view of evaluative bodily feelings is widely regarded as unsatisfying. Concerning the intentional double structure of affective states we are concerned with, Damasio leaves too much of a gap between the hedonic bodily feeling which is crucial for affective evaluations, and what is thereby evaluated.

In this respect, Jesse Prinz advances significantly over Damasio's account. Prinz denies that emotional bodily feelings have the body as their intentional object. Instead, he constructs a representational theory of emotional content which is intended to show that these feelings, although caused by bodily changes and felt “in” the body, are nevertheless primarily about significant events and objects in the world. Prinz tries to capture this feature by distinguishing between registering and representing, where “registering” refers to an indirect, collateral form of awareness. Thus, for him, emotional bodily feelings register bodily changes in the sense that they do carry information about one's bodily state, however only indirectly. Primarily, they represent things going on outside the body, usually core relational themes (cf. Prinz, 2004a, p. 58). According to Prinz, emotional mechanisms have been “set up to be set off” by those existentially significant events and objects. That's what he means when he says “emotions are like smoke alarms” (cf. 2004b, p. 82)—detecting significant objects and events is their evolutionary function. The felt body merely is the vehicle *through which* they fulfil their primary task (2004a, chap. 3).

We agree with the basic idea: The felt body is that through which one emotionally apprehends something significant. Only collaterally, these feelings also inform about aspects of one's current bodily condition. However, our overall conception of affective intentionality differs in some important respects from that of Prinz. The main point of divergence between us and Prinz concerns the experiential nature of emotions: Smoke alarms can be like zombies, they need not and they do not have experiences. In that respect, consciously experienced emotions are exactly not like smoke alarms, since they usually are forms of awareness of the matters of concern to which they are “calibrated”. Conscious emotional experience *discloses* or *makes manifest* what is currently of relevance to us. What emotions do and how they do it is much closer entwined than Prinz's account allows. Emotions, at least in the standard cases, are *transparent*, whereas the bodily mechanisms that Prinz has in mind could as well be entirely *blind*. This is also evidenced by the fact that even creatures incapable of conscious awareness could be equipped with the affective alarm mechanisms that Prinz talks about. Emotional mechanisms that are sufficiently like human emotions certainly require consciousness, moreover, consciousness of significant goings-on in the world, not merely consciousness of bodily changes.¹¹ We cannot elaborate upon this; instead, we focus on some of the

⁹ Cf. Goldie (2000, chap. 3, 2002).

¹⁰ See Slaby (2008) for a fuller treatment of this important point.

¹¹ What we say here does not imply anything about the potential existence and nature of unconscious emotions. We only claim that the standard cases of human emotions require consciousness.

common ground between our respective accounts. Thereby, we think we can make some progress concerning the complicated task of understanding the phenomenology of the subjectively felt body.

Up to now we have seen that the self-directed dimension of affective intentionality is essentially bodily. Feeling affected by something is quite literally a bodily experience. Our emotional “experience of ourselves” is a bodily feeling of being positively or negatively affected by something. The felt body is the “sounding board” (to use William James’ term) of things affecting us adversely or favourably. We can call this the *bodily dimension of personal well being and suffering*. Feeling bad emotionally (as opposed to feeling bad due to physical illness or injury) is not a disembodied, intellectual appreciation of things going badly—although it surely is *some* kind of appreciation of things going badly. It is also essentially a bodily experience. To understand in which way exactly it is also and essentially bodily will, moreover, pave the way to a better understanding (at least of the phenomenological sense) of the notion of “embodiment”.

Let us consider again the example of anger. If you feel offended by your colleague and become more and more angry, you run through a sequence of self-disclosing bodily feelings. In the anger case, you might first have the physical impression of being “pushed down”, of being literally “oppressed” by an external force. Subsequently, you might get poised for revengeful deeds or at least for expressive actions insofar as your felt body seems to be under some sort of stressful pressure, ready to extend or even explode; in this case, full-blown anger is instantiated. The same initial conditions (feeling offended) might, of course, also lead to other affective states, e.g., dejectedness. All of this is played out in the arena of your felt body. Depending on whether you indulge in your feelings or whether you rather try to suppress (or otherwise regulate) them, you experience a range of bodily proto-motoric feelings of varying intensity. Thus, in addition to what figures as ‘action tendencies’ in component theories of emotion, we often experience mere ‘movement impulses’ which are not meant to lead to actions proper. An example would be the impulse to sink into the ground in the case of shame (see Slaby, 2007).

It is important not to conceive of these peculiar bodily feelings in a too narrow sense. Although a range of observable bodily changes certainly plays a role in the causation of the feelings in question, they are much more than merely a qualitative awareness, a conscious registering of these particular changes, as William James seems to have thought. As we just tried to show for the case of anger, these feelings are rather spread out through wider parts of the field of one’s perceivable body. At least the most interesting among these bodily feelings are not punctual like a localized itch or a pain in one’s left ear, but rather broadly distributed in the area of one’s felt body in general. “Body schema” might be the appropriate notion here. As we understand this term, it refers to the subjective field in which (some) bodily processes and states *can* be consciously registered. While usually not at the forefront of consciousness, the body schema can become conscious once we actively focus on it. Of course, in the midst of emotional experience, we are consciously focused primarily on what we are emotional about. We are wholly absorbed by the play on the stage so that we do not notice the stage as such. But we *can* bring the stage to our attention. We can feel the body schema as what it is if we know that it is there.¹²

The felt body is essentially the arena in which affective self-consciousness manifests itself. The next section serves the purpose of showing more explicitly what this implies for an account of self-consciousness and (human) self-understanding.

3. Existential feelings and self-understanding

Imagine you are on a conference, it is the morning session at 9 o’clock and you are suffering from a terrible hangover, because you have been out too long the night before. Now you are sitting there in your chair, listening to a talk, and you feel really bad—you feel physically sick, but you also feel bad emotionally: you are highly irritable, easily annoyed, feel displaced, uncomfortable, not at home. Moreover, in a hangover, just as in states of extreme fatigue or states of illness, some of your usual self-protection mechanisms are not operating in the way they usually do. Therefore you are now specifically susceptible to certain feelings which you would, on normal occasions, routinely suppress or otherwise regulate: Fears might get a hold of you, as a fear of failing or not living up to expectations; anger or even hatred at specific people in your surroundings and also forms of self-contempt, or a general misanthropy. In short, your entire way of experiencing yourself and the world around you has changed.

We think that these hangover feelings are an alteration of an affective background that is constantly there, albeit less saliently on most other occasions. In this, we are in line with Matthew Ratcliffe, who is elaborating suggestions found in Damasio and equally in Heidegger and other phenomenologists. There is a constant background of feelings that manifest or display our current existential situation. Basically, it is the feel of life as such. These feelings are different from both bodily sensations such as hunger, fatigue or headache and from emotions such as jealousy, anger, or joy, because they are not directed at some *specific* situation, event, or object, but rather at a *more general* relationship we have with the world. In that they are to some

¹² In his recent study “How the Body Shapes the Mind”, Gallagher (2005) has done an excellent job of explaining the notion of “body schema” by carefully distinguishing it from the related notion of “body image”. The *body image* is the conscious image a person has of her own body, its position, its current condition etc., whereas the *body schema* is rather a pre-conscious system of sensory-motor capacities that encompasses main aspects of motor control. It is mainly involved in the preparatory stage of bodily action. However, as Gallagher also indicates (pp. 57–64), the body schema is usually also a part of the background structure of consciousness as that *in which or through which* a person experiences something significant in the world. That is why we do not agree with Ratcliffe’s (2005) suggestion that intentional bodily feelings belong to the body image instead of to the body schema. Rather, processes on the level of the body schema are involved as the structuring background of affective awareness. In an emotion, for instance, our attention is not directed at our body as our body, but rather *through our body at something in the world*. What we suggest, then, amounts to an extension of the application of “body schema” from the domain of bodily action to the domain of affective experience. Thereby, we use this term roughly in the sense in that German neo-phenomenologists use the term “leibliches Spüren” (Landweer, 2004). See Slaby (2007) for a more detailed discussion of this.

extent mood-like, constantly present during a certain time span, influencing experience in various ways. But most of the time, these background feelings are less intense than full-blown moods such as euphoria or depression, because they do not dominate consciousness and behaviour as moods usually do. Instead, they bring about their effects in a more subtle, unremarkable way. Nevertheless can these effects be quite far-reaching and highly important. Matthew Ratcliffe offers the following general characterization of these “existential feelings”:

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. This relationship does not simply consist in an experience of being an entity that occupies a spatial and temporal location, alongside a host of other entities. Ways of finding oneself in the world are presupposed spaces of experiential possibility, which shape the various ways in which things can be experienced (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 45).

The most striking evidence for existential feelings, their pervasiveness and importance, comes from the field of psychopathology. Patients suffering from schizophrenia, sufferers from Capgras and Cotard delusions as well as clinically depressed persons often self-report emotional experiences which fit into Ratcliffe’s theoretical framework (cf. Ratcliffe, 2002, pp. 295–300, 2005, pp. 53–56). It seems to be the case that one tends to notice the general existence of these feelings most strikingly in cases of their absence or sudden, radical alteration.

When we look more closely at the various candidates for existential feelings, it turns out that we can distinguish several levels of growing situational specificity and increasing conceptual impregnation, although it makes little sense to try to establish exact boundaries between these levels. To have a rough ordering to start with, we suggest a coarse clustering into four groups, which distinguishes between *pure* existential feelings at a basic level, feelings of *basic familiarity* and *security* on a second level, thirdly more *specific* existential background feelings, and finally on the fourth level emotional feelings in *mood-like* variations (see Table 1).

The basic level comprises what we call “pure existential feelings”; these feelings reflect one’s basic bodily functioning—typical examples are feeling alive, feeling fresh or tired, or feeling that one has (or “is”) a body. The second level subsumes more specific relations to the social and physical environment, e.g., the feeling of familiarity or unfamiliarity with a certain setting or social group, and relatedly the feeling of a basic existential “security” or “insecurity” (e.g., feeling safe and in control vs. feeling unspecifically threatened or vulnerable in a given environment). Feelings of general relations towards objects and persons also belong to this second level, i.e., the more specific feeling of familiarity one has towards one’s loved ones. It is particularly this type of feeling that seems to be pathologically altered or entirely absent in Capgras patients. Third level existential feelings are more specific still: Here, we have more conceptually sophisticated feelings like the feeling of ‘belonging to the elite’ and the feeling of being in control or not in control in a *specific* setting (in one’s job, in a relationship, etc.), the feeling of being part of a larger machine or system or the feeling of being excluded from a *certain* group or social practice. On the fourth level we find the most inter-individual variation and the closest connections to the more specifically directed emotions. Examples for fourth-level existential feelings are the situational feelings of *being* flawed and diminished, the situational feelings of being a moral failure, being unloved, hated, or torn (between two or more options).

Quite often, we experience the transmutation of an existential feeling of one level into an existential feeling of another level. Let us consider again the example of having a hangover. Here, what originally are basic bodily feelings, for instance feelings of being weak, without energy, tired, combined probably with the distress involved in the headache that accompa-

Table 1
Four levels of existential feelings

Basic level—pure existential feeling (reflective of one’s basic bodily functioning—might shift into bodily illness)	2nd level—feeling of basic familiarity and security (might be connected to basic social relations, i.e., to one’s standing in a family or social group)	3rd level—more specific existential background feelings (cultural variation might start here; strong influence of education and social context in general)	4th level—emotional feelings in mood-like variations (high degree of individual and cultural variation likely; higher conceptual sophistication)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feeling alive • feeling that there is a world and that one is a part of it • feeling that one has or is a body • feeling of basic vital functioning (i.e., feeling healthy, fresh, weak, tired, sick etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feeling of familiarity or unfamiliarity • feeling at home or not at home in one’s surroundings • feeling of a basic existential security (“Urvertrauen”) or a felt absence thereof (“existential unease”) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • general anxiety (feeling threatened) • feeling in control • feeling strong, powerful • feeling at one with nature, part of a larger machine or system or group • feeling invulnerable, vulnerable, lost, like a stranger, generally unwelcome, generally useless, incapable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feeling ‘watched’, ‘stared at’ (related emotions: shame, humility, social unease) • feeling ‘overwhelmed’ in a specific situation • feeling ‘unloved’, ‘abandoned’ (fear, sadness, loneliness), ‘torn’ (anger, mixed intensive emotions of various kinds)
<i>mainly related to:</i> one’s organic being in a world in general	<i>mainly related to:</i> one’s relations, projects, existential contexts in general	<i>mainly related to:</i> more specific social relations, projects, contexts, capabilities, coping potentials	<i>mainly related to:</i> specific situations currently unfolding

nies the hangover, can easily transmute into a feeling of uncomfortableness in one's current surroundings. This would be a transmutation from level 1 to level 2. Subsequently, this feeling of largely unspecific uncomfortableness might further develop into more specific feelings of being unwelcome, misplaced, incapable, or lost. The latter feelings can be subsumed under the heading concrete uncomfortableness—i.e., here the specifics of the situation and our position in it (in this case: the conference we are at, the other attendants, the concrete situation of the morning session, etc.) are experienced in various negative ways. It would be a transformation from level 2 existential feelings to level 3 existential feelings. This extended example should suffice to illustrate that there are such transformation tendencies and that they are quite pervasive in our affective lives.

However, these different levels should not be conceived of as entirely distinct. It is crucial to note a point that pertains to many affective states, not only to existential feelings: Even the most conceptually sophisticated affective states share to some extent their bodily character with much more primitive bodily feeling states. In effect, this means that crucial aspects of the phenomenology of very complex feelings are often not so distinct from that of low-level biological states. The same applies to existential feelings insofar as third- or fourth-level existential feelings are often “played out” in the same bodily arena as are primitive feelings of one's bodily state, although they are of course different in content. Moreover, this is also reflected in the fact that there are various transformation tendencies from higher- to lower-level existential feelings, and vice versa. For example, a concrete feeling of alienation in a specific social situation (level 4) can downgrade one's feeling of control and strength (level 3), and furthermore lead to more general existential feelings of unfamiliarity and lack of security (level 2).

What is crucial about existential feelings is that they often are the basis of the ways that a person relates to the world, i.e., the basis of her various intentional states, including many of her actions and behaviours, as well as the various stances she consciously or habitually adopts towards her surroundings. Thus, in a certain sense, these feelings manifest what we *are* at a certain time period, because with them, all our meaningful relations to the world and to ourselves get off the ground. These feelings pre-structure our relationships to the world and to ourselves, they importantly shape the various ways we construe and evaluate what goes on within and around us. Echoing Heidegger, one can say that these background feelings are the various ways in which we are “open” (in the sense of being “receptive”) to the world.¹³ Out of the background feeling of fearfulness, for example, we tend to see dangers everywhere and regard ourselves and our close friends and relatives as severely vulnerable in various respects. An implicit appraisal of our and our friends' coping capacities as limited and insufficient in face of the potential dangers is also contained in this feeling. The background feeling amounts to a readiness to “take” the world in a specific, in this case a “fearful” way.

Existential feelings like these also are what remains on our mind in moments where we are not affected emotionally by some specific event or object. Take the example of “free-floating anxiety” (objectless fear). We are afraid, but there is nothing we are concretely afraid of. When we are in such a state what we feel only pertains to our existential situation, our stand or position in the world viewed more abstractly, independently of any specific relation to objects, events or other persons. Therefore, one might say that in these moments we merely feel how we relate to the world in general, and in that we “feel ourselves”.¹⁴

We argue that existential feelings are forms of self-consciousness. To see this, consider first their contents: In typical cases (levels 1–3), existential feelings have no standard form of intentional content since they are not of or about something *specific*. But on the other hand, these *quasi* objectless feelings cannot be viewed as devoid of any kind of content whatsoever. Viewing them as merely qualitative sensations without any content would be a severe under-specification, utterly out of step with the subtle distinctions we are able to make concerning them. The content specifications that we are able to provide point to the fact that these feelings are forms of an awareness of ourselves: We feel generally threatened, at home or not at home in our current surroundings, welcome or unwelcome, like strangers, in control, or on top of things. All of these are ways that we are, or at least ways we take ourselves to be, at a given moment in time—i.e., specific modifications of our personal existence. Thus, the feelings in question *disclose*—to use a technical term introduced by Heidegger in a comparable context—our standing in the world.¹⁵ Disclosure subsumes more ways of relating to the world than merely forms of direct explicit conscious awareness—it includes also forms of an implicit, background givenness of something. By actively focussing on existential feelings we can bring what is implicit in them more directly to our attention. But even where such reflective engagement with our current affective situation is missing—as it is in most cases of real-life affective experience—it makes sense to view these feelings as forms of self-consciousness.

¹³ Appreciating this characteristic of existential feelings brings us in a position to understand Heidegger's insistence on the claim that the ways in which we are “open” to specific features of the world are also, most of the time, ways in which we are closed off from other aspects of the world. The fearful man perceives the threats, but not, or less so, the positive possibilities that he has. In contrast, the happy man might systematically overlook the dangers to which his fearful friend is overly sensitive.

¹⁴ Ratcliffe characterizes existential feelings also as „ways of finding oneself in the world“. This statement refers to the fact that existential feelings have as their content our general “standing” or “position” in the world, the “from whence” we might subsequently relate to something specific in the world (cf. Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 45). See also what we say below about the notion of an “evaluative point of view”.

¹⁵ “Erschließen” in German (cf. Heidegger, 1927, esp. Section 29). Heidegger introduces this term as an alternative to standard mentalistic and cognitivist notions in order to avoid a too narrow conception of Dasein's relating to the world (subsumed under the titles ‘understanding’ and ‘attunement’ in Heidegger). There are more ways of relating to the world and to oneself than most standard inventories in epistemology and philosophy of mind allow. Particularly, “disclosure” is meant to capture the inextricability of world- and self-awareness (concerning this, see Footnote 18 below). We use this term to avoid the misunderstanding that the kind of self-consciousness involved in existential feelings is a matter of straightforward representational awareness.

However, they might not give us transparent access to our real situation. Consider a case where I feel irritated by various behaviours of others. After a while, it may turn out that my irritation is due to my allergic coryza. If so, I might afterwards be in the position to recalibrate my emotional responses to their behaviours; but nevertheless my initial reactions have also been forms of self-consciousness: I felt irritated, probably threatened or angered by the people around me, so I had an awareness of being in a certain position vis-a-vis my current circumstances, although it was by no means an accurate construal of my situation. In general, though, even in their occurrent “unreflective” form, existential feelings pre-structure further intentional states and actions and thus influence how a person positions herself and behaves in the world. “Unreflected” does not mean that these feelings are out of reach, they are accessible if we focus on them. Here we see how self-consciousness, properly understood, relates to that broad area of *articulable* mental activity that shapes and structures the contents of all kinds of accountable personal-level relationships to the world. This is often called self-understanding.

It can be argued that a person's *self-understanding* is even more important than her (explicit) self-consciousness, at least as far as properly developed, adult human beings are concerned.¹⁶ A person's self-understanding, which is not fully separable from her understanding of the world, is that through which a person guides her conduct, whether she explicitly thinks about what she does and why she does it, or not.¹⁷ Self-understanding is much broader than what we use to think of explicitly. Roughly, it is the conceptual sphere which contains a person's values, attitudes, goals and also her overall conception of the world and her specific place in it. Usually, this has been construed by philosophers in a rather intellectualistic manner, for instance as a “web of beliefs” (Davidson) or as “total theory” (Quine) or in some other form of a more or less explicitly articulated framework. We think that although a person's self-understanding might still be rightly described as conceptual (since it can be articulated in principle and is *informable* by utterances or other kinds of conceptual contents), it is not primarily an explicit propositional structure like a web of beliefs or a general theory. Also feelings play a central role in it. More specifically, we claim that particularly existential background feelings contribute importantly to a person's self-understanding. These feelings, more than anything else, are the proximate manifestations of both what kind of person a person is and, simultaneously, what the person takes herself to be (how she experiences her own current state of existence and the actual condition of the relevant parts or aspects of the world she lives and acts in). Thereby, the often neglected existential feelings add a crucial dimension to a person's overall beliefs, desires, and emotional and evaluative dispositions, which are standardly thought to constitute her self-understanding.¹⁸

To conclude, we would like to highlight three main claims about existential background feelings.

(1) Existential background feelings constitute an important part of a person's evaluative point of view, insofar as it is accessible to consciousness. One's concerns, cares, values, and goals are, to some extent at least, *manifested* in the various background feelings one has. In the ideal case, a person's goals, concerns, values—in general, all that does matter for her—are reflected in the spectrum of existential feelings she experiences. In that ideal case, her feelings would be the basis of a coherent evaluative outlook on the world, which would include the rational basis of many of her specific motivations. Obviously, this is a complicated structure and very often, things are not ideal. Instead, people experience characteristic fragmentations: Not all goals, not all concerns of a person are, at any time, accurately reflected in her feelings. There are cases of evaluative dissonance; and such situations are not conducive to well being. Those cases call for intervention: Either something's wrong with the alleged goal or concern (not “really” our goal, not “really” our concern?), or with the feeling (our sensibility might be not properly attuned to what we “really” value, etc.). In hard cases, those dissonances might need therapy.¹⁹

(2) Existential background feelings are the foil of most affective states, especially of emotions, where it makes sense to think of emotions as the eruptive peaks on a continuum of background feelings. When we engage in the difficult task of dissecting the phenomenology of an emotion, we can ideally isolate a background feeling, which reflects our general existential situation (as “feeling specifically vulnerable” in fear), from the world-directed aspect (“feeling fear towards something dangerous in the world”). As already outlined in the last section, such existential feelings play a role in most emotions. The existence of objectless emotions (free-floating anxiety, etc.) is *prima facie* evidence of what is meant here: In objectless emotions, a background feeling assumes a certain salience in consciousness so that it is clearly identifiable as an emotional episode, but the world-directed aspect of a typical emotion is missing: there just is nothing specific “out there” towards which we feel an emotion. It is affective self-consciousness in isolation.

(3) This carries us to the third point: These feelings are, besides being candidates for what makes up our identity as persons, peculiar forms of being conscious of ourselves. In these feelings, something is given—namely, our current state of being

¹⁶ In calling personal self-consciousness *self-understanding*, we follow a suggestion made by Taylor (1985).

¹⁷ Heidegger in particular stresses the inextricability of self-understanding (in his terms: disclosure of one's own being) from the understanding of the entities in one's environment. In the key Section 31 of *Being and Time*, he is most explicit about this. On p. 146 of the German original, we find the following two central passages: “Im Verstehen von Welt ist das In-Sein immer mitverstanden, Verstehen der Existenz als solcher ist immer ein Verstehen von Welt.” And: “Existierendes Seiendes sichtet “sich” nur, sofern es sich gleichursprünglich in seinem Sein bei der Welt, im Mitsein mit anderen als der konstitutiven Momente seiner Existenz durchsichtig geworden ist. Umgekehrt wurzelt die Undurchsichtigkeit des Daseins nicht einzig und primär in “egozentrischen” Selbsttäuschungen, sondern ebenso sehr in der Unkenntnis der Welt.” With regard to existential feelings, we see this inextricable double structure in the fact that through them, we are open to the world in specific ways, but at the same time, and through this very openness, we are in felt touch with our own current state of existence.

¹⁸ In addition, we think that much of what runs under these philosophical standard labels—beliefs, desires, evaluative dispositions etc.—are in fact crucially dependent upon and closely interwoven with existential feelings. As we will point out below, existential feelings often seem to function as the mental “building blocks” from which many other mental states or dispositions, most certainly other affective states like emotions, are “constructed”.

¹⁹ Bennett Helm offers rich descriptions of such fragmentations and of some possible ways to actively work towards a coherent, single evaluative perspective. Cf. Helm, 2001, especially chapter 6.

as we experience it. Take the case of *feeling in control* while you are engaged in a complicated task. What this amounts to is that the way you currently exist, your being the person that you are, as such feels a certain way. In this case: you feel positively self-assured, such that you are able to do what you are up to doing, in general and moreover specifically related to the task at hand. If there is no task you are currently engaged in, this self-conscious nature of your feeling becomes even more evident. You might feel a *general* self-assuredness, a security that lets you view the world as something you control, that you are at home in, and that poses no threat but rather a wealth of positive possibilities. On the basis of this feeling, you are prone to engage in further activities, set high goals, are generally active and motivated to make things happen. Whether you think about it explicitly or not: in and through this background feeling of control, strength and general capability, you *understand yourself* as someone who makes things happen and who has the abilities and possibilities to do so.

The general importance of existential background feelings for human self-understanding has not often been explicitly noticed. What is even less noticed is the fact that many of these feelings have very complicated, high-level contents—contents that only beings with sophisticated conceptual capacities are capable of instantiating. Thus, there can be background feelings like the feeling of being a true American, which might include a complicated conception of what being a true American amounts to. The feeling of being a “moral failure” might require an understanding of what being a moral agent in a given community amounts to. This shows that existential feelings can be interwoven with complex aspects of one's world view. These conceptual structures nevertheless appear instantaneously in form of feelings; feelings which are usually even bodily in a very direct sense. Thus, the traditional cliché which opposes feelings as low level, non-conceptual, bodily states on the one hand and conceptually sophisticated attitudes as high-level, cognitive, disembodied, and language-based on the other hand, is misleading. Instead, even the most intellectual, most conceptually polished attitudes can enter directly into the way we feel ourselves. Feeling and conceptual thought cannot be viewed as opposites. Instead, feelings—and existential background feelings in particular—are a very important way in which thought and intellect are manifested in human beings. It seems that conceptual contents, in order to become attitudes a person genuinely holds, as opposed to being merely entertained in a superficial way, have to be entrenched in feeling. Thus there is a sense in which you have to feel what you think, in order to really think what you think.²⁰

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