

## How do you feel? Why emotions matter in psychiatry

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### Summary

*This article argues for the importance of investigating emotions in psychiatry. In a time dominated by striding naturalistic explanations of mental illness, phenomenological psychopathology provides a crucial investigation into the subjective aspect of the disordered mind. Emotional phenomena are Janus-faced in the sense that they bring out the complex interplay of impersonal, biological and personal features of mental illness. We propose a framework for understanding emotional experience that is grounded in four key points: a general concept of "affectivity", the definition of "emotion" as felt motivation to move, the distinction between "affect" and "mood" according to their intentional structure and the dialectics between affects and moods. The reason why emotions matter in psychiatry is that mental suffering brings out an emotional fragility that we argue is constitutive of personal identity. Emotional experience reveals an intimate alienation at the heart of our mental life. What we feel is our own experience, but in this experience we may feel*

*that we are not ourselves. To be a person is to live with this affective experience of selfhood and otherness. Emotions disclose an inescapable fragility at the heart of our identity that plays a significant role in our vulnerability to mental illness. We propose a model constructed upon the theoretical assumption that the fragility characterising human personhood stems from the dialectics of selfhood and otherness at the core of being a person. These dialectics become particularly evident in the way our moods challenge our sense of personal identity by complicating our relation to norms and values. In fact, we argue that moods are the most conspicuous epiphany of otherness in human life, in that they, more than other experiences, complicate our sense of being who we are. By way of conclusion, we illustrate our model with a phenomenological and hermeneutical analysis of the experience and meaning of shame.*

### Key words

Philosophy • Personhood • Emotions • Moods • Naturalism • Shame

*"I fear those big words, Stephen said, which make us so unhappy"*  
James Joyce, Ulysses<sup>1</sup>

### Emotions, identity and vulnerability

Mental suffering challenges our understanding of what it means to be a person more urgently than does the suffering we experience when we, for instance, hurt our forehead against the kitchen cupboard or struggle with a kidney disease. What we consider to be easily localised physical pain is, of course, not as simple a phenomenon as it is often conceived to be<sup>2-4</sup>. Nevertheless, the complexity of mental suffering is even more daunting due to the fact that it, among other things, brings out the fragility constitutive of personal identity.

In this paper, we will focus on the emotional dimension of this fragility. To exist as human persons is to live with the

emotional fragility that makes us the persons that each and every one of us is. The reason why emotions matter in psychiatry is, we shall argue, because this emotional fragility plays a major role in the constitution of our personal identity as well as in our vulnerability to mental illness. To assess, explore, care for and cope with the suffering involved in mental illness, we need to make sense of our emotional fragility. The emotional aspect of mental illness is often characterised by diffuse and impalpable constellations of fleeting sensations, long-lasting dispositions, bodily fluctuations and pressures, nebulous atmospheres, hazy intimations and other affective colourings that are difficult to describe, communicate and make sense of. This broad and encompassing aspect of our emotional life is commonly described with the concept "mood". Unlike most of our emotions, moods normally do not direct a person towards anything in particular. But that does not mean that moods do not carry any informative value. On the contrary, they are perhaps the most densely informative phenomena of our emotional life. Moods do not in-

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form us about the “what” or the “why” of our feelings, but they disclose “how” something is felt. This, in turn, tends to problematise and transform into open questions the “what” and “why” of our moods. In other words, my questioning about myself is often elicited by my mood before my identity becomes an explicit problem. Moods are connected to self-understanding. Moods situate me with respect to a given situation. I understand who I am in the context of a given situation, of my practical engagement, as embedded in a certain world (private as social), and this engagement is primordially enveloped in a certain mood. Moods may disclose to me what words and deeds do not. They are no hindrance to “cognitive” knowledge, as rationalistic theories argue, but the *via regia* to understanding myself as embedded in the world.

This informative overload disclosed by our moods is one of the reasons why philosophy of emotion tends to refrain from questions about moods. Literature, poetry, and not least phenomenological psychopathology, on the other hand, are all concerned with deciphering this overload of information. A novel or a piece of poetry can be about almost nothing, and yet make us understand what seems to be everything. For example, the famous opening of *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville’s monumental allegoric exploration of the fragility of human identity, may be read as a poignant description of dysphoric mood: “Call me Ishmael. Some years ago – never mind how long precisely – having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people’s hats off – then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can”<sup>5</sup> [p. 1]. Like skilled novelists, phenomenological psychopathologists know that our attempts at understanding the “what” and “why” of moods, especially bad moods, depend on the accuracy of our description of the “how” the person actually feels.

Our moods are, arguably, the clearest expression of the ambiguity of rationality (subjectivity) and a-rationality (biology) constitutive of being a person. Personhood is ambiguous because of the fact that we are biological organisms who experience and understand ourselves as being more than our biology. We call this the ontological ambiguity of being human. A human person is both a *what* (impersonal organism) and a *who* (personal self), and this ambiguous ontology affects our experience and

understanding of the world, other people and ourselves. The fact that the fluctuation of moods involved in mental illness cannot be explained by (or with) our peculiar rational engagement with the world makes it evident that a-rational, biological factors sometimes gum up or even destroy our cognitive endeavours. Thus, to make sense of the emotional fragility at the core of this ambiguity we do best to follow the advice of the philosopher of George Graham: “Seek for explanations of a mental disorder that combine references to brute, a-rational neural mechanisms and to the rationality of persons. Examinations of the immediate forces behind a mental disorder reveal that they carry two distinct inscriptions”. “Made by unreason” and “Made by reason”<sup>6</sup> [p. 7]. That I am “made by unreason” means that I cannot choose my moods. And yet, I am not just a passive and helpless vessel for my moods. I can actively relate myself to them. In fact, my personal identity is constituted by my *active relation to the embodied and situated self that I am, including my moods*. Thus, “made by reason” means that through reflection and narratives, moods can be incorporated actively, reflectively and thematically into a person’s identity.

### Hermeneutical phenomenology of emotions

This complexity of rational and a-rational factors at work in mental suffering remains a major challenge to the current naturalistic atmosphere in psychiatry. On the one hand, human beings are biological organisms on a par with other biological organisms in nature<sup>7,8</sup>. This means that human suffering is caused by, and subjected to, the same anonymous mechanisms as other biological functions in nature. On the other hand, human beings are strange creatures<sup>9,10</sup>. Human suffering is not anonymous, but painfully personal in the sense that our experience of suffering is structured by, and permeated with, the subjective features that make us human. It is *our* experience of suffering, and *our* rational endeavour to make sense of our experience, that makes us suffer.

Phenomenological psychopathology presents a strong corrective to the naturalistic negligence of serious investigations of subjectivity in contemporary psychiatry. It is difficult, if not to say impossible, to dismiss the subjective dimension of human experience and action as irrelevant or illusory when dealing with mental illness. Or, to put it differently, subjectivity is a kind of “objectivity” that psychiatry has to deal with.

However, the fragile ambiguity involved in mental suffering demonstrates that clarifying subjectivity is not enough. Whereas phenomenology as a philosophical position may be allowed to focus its investigations exclusively on the experiential structure and dynamics of subjectivity, leaving out (or merely adding on at a later stage)

the subpersonal biological (evolutionary, genetic and neuroscientific) factors of human experience<sup>11,12</sup>, this is not the case for phenomenological psychopathology.

The overwhelming evidence for the crucial role that biological factors play in mental illnesses compels phenomenological psychopathology to acknowledge the brute, a-rational workings of human nature, which mark a blind spot in our phenomenological explanations. Sometimes feelings are simply a-rational bodily feelings. This, of course, should not overshadow the fact that phenomenology is perhaps the best tool we have for articulating and distinguishing the multifarious feelings involved in our emotional life. This phenomenological work must be done, though, with the humble awareness that even though, most of the time, phenomenological analysis and narrative articulations are the best way to understand and cope with our feelings and emotions, sometimes causal explanations are the ones that do the job. In order to deal with this complexity of biology and subjectivity involved in mental suffering, we have developed a theoretical framework for psychopathology inspired by the hermeneutical phenomenology of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur<sup>13</sup>. This particular hermeneutical version of phenomenological psychopathology is constructed upon the emotional fragility involved in mental illness, and argues that human personhood is constituted by the fragile dialectics of selfhood and otherness. Before going into our explanations of what emotions are and why they matter to psychiatry, we will (very) briefly introduce this theoretical framework.

Phenomenology is a vast and highly diverse tradition in philosophy that continues the patient systematic investigation of human experience inaugurated by Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the twentieth century. Contemporary phenomenology persists in examining basic philosophical questions about subjectivity, intersubjectivity, selfhood, otherness, perception, agency, etc., in order to clarify and make sense of the first-person perspective involved in pre-reflective experience<sup>14,15</sup>. Hermeneutical phenomenology goes back to the severe critique of Husserl delivered by his own reckless student Martin Heidegger. It differs from more traditional Husserlian phenomenology by arguing that we cannot understand subjective experience if we do not pay close attention to the *interpretative* character of subjective experience. Our pre-reflective experience of the world, ourselves and other people is not simply given, but always saturated by our emotional and reflective engagement with the world, other people and ourselves. This critique of “pure” phenomenology is not so much a break with the phenomenological insistence on the need for a thorough investigation of subjectivity as it is a shift of exploratory emphasis. Traditional Husserlian phenomenology focuses on the structures and dynamics pre-reflective of subjective ex-

perience. To hermeneutical phenomenology, a human being is not merely a *self* who *experiences* the world, but a *person* who *exists* in the world. Human existence is more than experience in the sense that what we experience as human beings is constantly shaped and influenced by *what* (ontology) and *who* (normativity) we are. That is to say, our experience is ineluctably influenced by the peculiar beings that we are and by the norms and values that orient our understanding of who we are.

Our version of hermeneutical phenomenology revolves around the notions of personhood and emotion<sup>13</sup>. Our sense of selfhood is troubled in the sense that our experience of ourselves is characterised by a basic emotional fragility that makes us question who and what we are. Ricoeur describes this existential condition by saying that human thinking is always “wounded thinking [*cogito blessé*]”<sup>16</sup> [p. 425]. Our model for exploring this fragility, and making sense of the ensuing vulnerability, is constructed upon a rather simple explanatory anvil that, however, has immensely complex consequences. We argue that the fragile character of human experience stems from a basic dialectical interplay of selfhood and otherness at the heart of our identity as human persons. To be a person is to live with the intimate alienation that we experience in our emotional life. Our emotions are intimate in the sense that they are *our* emotions, and they are alienating in the sense that at work in those self-same emotions is an otherness that constantly disturbs our sense of being an autonomous self. We are *what* and *who* we are, but our identity is fragile because the *what* and the *who* we are is constantly challenged in our existing as persons. We do not ourselves decide the persons that we are, and our experience of being the unique self that we are is thus constantly challenged. Our self-understanding is complicated by the fact that we are not merely (our)selves, but persons with a particular biological constitution living in a world shared with other persons (un)like us. Examining this particular emotional fragility at the heart of our identity, we shall argue, helps us to make sense of, and cope with, our vulnerability to mental illness.

### Feeling theories and cognitive theories of emotions

What emotions actually are is intensely debated. Yet, few contemporary researchers in the interdisciplinary field of emotion studies would disagree with the one of its leading philosopher, Ronald de Sousa, when he characterises emotions as the most profoundly embodied phenomena of human experiences<sup>17</sup> [p. 47]. The real issue at stake, however, is just how to understand the peculiar combination of body and thinking at work in human emotions. In fact, in the last century or so emotion studies have been shaped by prolonged exchanges

between two seemingly irreconcilable conceptions of what emotions are: *feeling theories* and *cognitive theories*<sup>18</sup>. As mentioned above, the emotional experiences most pertinent to psychiatry are the hazy, impalpable phenomena that we describe as moods (e.g. anxiety, dysphoria, depression, euphoria), so in what follows we will present the two dominant theories of what emotions are through an examination of how they deal with the explanatory challenge posed by moods.

(1) *Feeling theories* pick up the thread from the revolutionary biological theories of emotions introduced by Charles Darwin (1872)<sup>19</sup> and William James (1884)<sup>20</sup> in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Emotions, these theories argue, are feelings of bodily changes occurring independently of any voluntary or cognitive interference. Our fear is the felt perception of the bioregulatory changes of our body in interacting with the environment. In a sense, our bodies tell us when to be afraid, when to be sad, pleased, surprised, in panic, and so on, because these emotions are feelings of physiological reactions to our coping with the external world. In recent years, the exceptional advance in neuroscience has substituted the generic term “body” with more specified limbic brain systems, but, all in all, the idea remains the same<sup>21-26</sup>. The phenomenologically rich variety of emotional experiences is reduced to a minimal number of emotions, varying from six to nine so-called “basic emotions” (e.g. fear, anger, enjoyment, sadness, disgust, surprise) that are a decisive part of our evolutionary heritage<sup>27</sup>. These emotions vary only slightly among higher primates and are expressions of our shared mammalian affect-systems that are developed to ensure survival, well-being and reproduction. According to this approach, there are different ways of coping with moods. One can reject their relevance for our lives altogether, as does, for example, the hugely influential psychologist Paul Ekman: “Earlier I argued that emotions are necessary for our lives, and we wouldn’t want to be rid of them. I am far less convinced that moods are of any use to us. Moods may be an unintended consequence of our emotion structure, not selected by evolution because they are adaptive [...] If I could, I would forego ever having any mood again and just live with my emotions. I would gladly give up euphoric moods to be rid of irritable and blue moods”<sup>28</sup> [pp. 50-51]. Or they can be considered as the impersonal workings of our genes, as is the case with the philosopher Dylan Evans: “[W]e saw that the emotions of joy and distress evolved to act as motivators, like an internal carrot and stick. The moods of happiness and sadness may work in a similar way. Natural selection did not design our minds to think directly about how best to pass on our genes. Instead, it gave us the capacity to feel happy, and it made the experience of happiness contingent on doing things that help our genes to get into the next generation”<sup>29</sup> [p. 74].

Although the two statements disagree on the relevance of moods (annoyingly irrelevant vs. very relevant), they concur in establishing the impersonal functioning of the body as the basic framework for the understanding of moods. Emotional experience is shaped, influenced and sometimes even determined by the genetic makeup of our brain. The feelings involved in our emotional life are to be understood in the explanatory context that the evolutionary psychologists Tooby and Cosmides have epitomised as “the past explains the present”, where “past” means the remote past of our phylogenetic development<sup>30</sup>.

(2) *Cognitive theories* reject such a framework. Our emotional life, these theories argue, cannot be reduced to a few basic emotions determined by the evolutionary development of our bodies. There is something more to human emotions than shared mammalian affect-systems processed by our particularly developed cognitive skills. This was already noticed by the physiologist Walter B. Cannon in 1927. He criticised feeling theories for not being able to explain the phenomenological difference between rage and anger, because on a purely physiological level these emotions have the same visceral reactions, and yet they result in clearly distinguishable emotions<sup>31</sup> [p. 110]. Recent efforts to argue for a reductive explanation of the phenomenological and conceptual distinctions of various feelings in terms of a few universal emotions still have difficulty accounting for the experiential variety of human emotions<sup>23 25 32</sup>. Therefore, the cognitive theories establish a different framework for explaining human emotions. Our emotions are drastically different from those of other animals due to our highly developed cognitive skills. Our merely physiological feelings are secondary to the logical or cognitive structure of our emotions. Emotions tell us something about what it means to be human. They reveal what we value and care for as human persons existing in a world shared with other persons. Responsibility, judgment and volition are key concepts in the cognitive approach. The cognitive framework is the one predominantly advocated by philosophers working in the tradition of, among others, Aristotle, the Stoics, Sartre and it has found its most recent advocates in the late Richard C. Solomon<sup>33 34</sup> and Martha Nussbaum<sup>35</sup>. The cognitive framework revolves around the intentional structure of human experience and the cognitive structures of human understanding. An emotion is always constituted by the object(s) of the emotion. When I am angry, I am angry *with* someone *because* of something that this person has said or done; when I love, I always love someone or something, and the same goes for fear, joy, irritation, shame, etc. As Solomon writes: “What is oddly ignored in the discussion of feelings is the whole dimension of *intentionality*, our many ways of being engaged in the world [...] I prefer to talk about *emotional experience* rather than simply “feel-

ings”, which carries the implication of something simple and unstructured”<sup>34</sup> [pp. 140-141].

The problem with the cognitive approach is that it leaves very little room for cognitively impenetrable feelings that do not seem to involve any clear-cut intentionality or cognitive structure, such as moods and bodily feelings<sup>36</sup> [pp. 18-42]<sup>37</sup> [pp. 24-40]<sup>38</sup> [pp. 50-83]. By foregrounding the rational or intentional aspect of human emotions, these theories explicitly downplay the a-rational and functional character of our interaction with the environment. Obviously, cognition is the hallmark of the human species, but many aspects of our emotional experience seem to lack the rational structure of intentionality. Conceptual analyses of, for example, beliefs and desires do not clarify all of what we characterise as emotions, because emotions are not always the expression of what we believe or desire<sup>39</sup> [pp. 28-51]. Although intimately related with desires and beliefs, some emotions do not reflect what we want, think, desire, or hope for – or, more exactly, they do not reflect what we explicitly – that is, consciously and voluntarily – want, think, desire and hope for. My emotions can have a grip on me, overcome me and make me do what I never thought I would do. In other words, sometimes, my emotions appear to be stronger than my will, my desires, and my beliefs<sup>40</sup> [pp. 119-121].

Where does this leave us? We have seen that whereas feeling theories operate within an evolutionary framework, cognitive theories refer to an intentionally and rationally structured framework, and that neither is able to articulate and make sense of moods in any substantial way. However, the fact that we continuously experience moods suggests that there must be more to our emotional experience than what is explained in either the evolutionary or the rationally structured framework. We cannot, as Ekman does in the passage cited above, just wish that we did not have moods. We do have them. And they do not disappear simply because they are not analysed in our theories.

## Emotions, affects and moods

How, then, do we include moods in the analysis of emotional experience? The first thing to do is to get a hold on the terminology. Contemporary research on emotions suffers from a serious conceptual confusion. To feel something is a very multifarious phenomenon, which means that it is not particularly clear what is meant when we say that an experience is emotional. Two concepts, however, seem to dominate the current debate, namely feelings and emotions. Before the end of the nineteenth century, emotional experience was expressed by a variety of different concepts such as sentiments, passions, feelings, affections, appetites, agitations and emotions. The scientific spring-cleaning of the academic vocabu-

lary together with the writings of Darwin and James on emotions put an end to this novel-like variety. Thus, in the twentieth century, any investigation that wanted to be taken seriously focused on the concepts of (structured) emotions and (bodily) feelings.

As we have seen, *feelings* are generally understood as perceptions of bodily changes and affective states such as, for example, discomfort, pleasure, pain, exaltedness, tiredness and sadness. *Emotions*, on the contrary, are mostly considered as intentionally or rationally structured experiences such as anger (with), surprise (at), love (of), pride (in), shame (at), guilt (about) and so on. In addition to these two concepts, *mood* is often indicated as a third kind of emotional experience, but is seldom given much attention.

There is something impoverishing, even unhealthy, about the conceptual dominance of feeling and emotion<sup>41</sup> [pp. 24-25]. This narrowing of focus has certainly produced an analytically strong understanding of emotional experience, but it has also left out many aspects of the analysis. We believe that it is possible to retain the benefits of the twentieth century’s focus on emotions and feelings while enlarging the framework to include the more impalpable aspects of emotional experience that were left out for the sake of clarity. Our version of hermeneutical phenomenology proposes a framework for understanding emotional experience that is grounded in four key points: (1) a general concept of “affectivity”, (2) the definition of “emotion” as felt motivation to move, (3) the distinction between “affect” and “mood” according to their intentional structure, (4) the dialectics between affects and moods.

(1) Human consciousness is *affective* besides being cognitive. Our cognitive skills are always embodied in some kind of affectivity. When we experience something, this something *affects* us in a certain way, and the same goes for our perceptions, thoughts and actions. As Michael Strocker writes: “without affectivity it is impossible to live a good human life and it may well be impossible to live a human life, to be a person, at all”<sup>39</sup> [p. 17]. The affective nature of human experience is basically expressed by the fact that our experiences *affect* or *touch* us. We feel our existence in the world as well as we (partially) understand it. Everything touches us in some way or another. We register this being affected by means of more or less distinctive and more or less conscious feeling-states. There is, in other words, no getting behind or beyond the complexity of our affective lives.

(2) The word “emotion” derives from the Latin *ex movere*. Emotions are the *lived motivation for movement*. Emotions are kinetic, dynamic forces that drive us in our ongoing interactions with the environment<sup>42 43</sup>. They are *functional* states which motivate and may produce movements<sup>13 44</sup> and *protentional* states that project the person into the fu-

ture providing a felt readiness for action<sup>45</sup>. An emotion situates a person, allows her to see the things that surround her as disclosing certain (and not other) possibilities, that is, a given set of affordable actions. Thus, emotions are the core of the person's life-world. They are, in the words of the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, "spatialising and temporalising vortex"<sup>46</sup> [p. 297] that organises the life-world, i.e. the lived time, space, self, otherness and materiality of objects of the world a person lives in. These existential dimensions are the scaffoldings of a person's life-world and, as we shall see, will provide the guidelines for a systematic definition of an emotion.

A necessary first step in understanding an emotion is to describe it in terms of the kinds of movements implied in it, that is, of its specific choreography: the coherent combination of the design of the movements of the person who is experiencing a given emotion, and of the design of the environment (the scenario) in which these movements are situated<sup>47</sup> [pp. 41-62]. For instance, in sadness I flow downwards in a slow, sinking manner as things appear to be forlornly sinking and sagging downwards. In joy I flow upwards in a radiated manner as things around me have an uplifted momentum. In retaliatory anger I feel driven forwards, violently attacking as the "object" of anger grows larger and occupies the foreground. In love I flow forwards in a gently binding way as the loved person flows forwards, towards me. In pride I go upwards in an inflated rising as things grow smaller compared to me. In humiliation I flow downwards in a plummeting, quick and violent drop as persons around me grow larger and look at me. In repugnance I flow backwards creating a centripetal vortex as things flow forward towards me, as if attracted by the vortex. In awe I flow backwards and downwards in a shuddering manner as things flow forwards and upwards, towering above me. In fear I move backwards in a shrinking and cringing manner as things flow forwards, towards me in a looming and menacing manner. In anxiety I feel suspended in a quavering manner over an inner bottomlessness, as an atmosphere, not things themselves, is felt as a menace.

(3) "Emotion" is an umbrella term denoting the multifarious affective phenomena that make up our emotional experience. Our emotional experience can be conceived of as a constantly altering continuum of affective phenomena at the opposite ends of which we find two very different kinds of experiences: affects and moods. The basic difference lies in the fact that affects are focused, and possess a clear-cut intentionality, that is, a specific directedness. Also, they are felt as motivated. In general, they are more determinate than moods and more articulated. Affects do not open up a horizontal awareness, but occupy all my attentional space (e.g., in fear I am completely absorbed by the phenomenon that terrifies me) and usually convey an explicit significance. Moods, on

the contrary, are characterised by a lack of a clear, if any, intentional structure. They are unfocused, and thus do not possess a specific directedness and aboutness. They are felt as unmotivated, and there are no "felt causes" for them. They are more indefinite and indeterminate than affects and are often inarticulate. Moods usually manifest themselves as prolonged constellations of feelings. Also, moods have a horizontal absorption in the sense that they attend to the world as a whole, not focusing on any particular object or situation. Moods convey a constellation of vague feelings that permeate my whole field of awareness. Examples of affects are fear, grief, joy, anger and boredom. Examples of moods are anxiety, depression, euphoria, dysphoria and tedium.

Although we said that affects convey an explicit significance, for instance, fear is fear of something, it happens that the significance of an affect cannot be characterised at face value. This is the case with phobias, where the fear of the phobic object as such is just one aspect, the explicit one, of the constellation of felt meanings encapsulated in this emotion. For instance, in the emotional experience of cynophobia, the dog-ness of a dog may condense several felt meanings as, e.g. dirt, animality, fidelity, dependence, etc. Each of these meanings may evoke in the phobic person a specific emotion that complements fear as, e.g. repugnance (dirt), shame (animality), envy (fidelity), contempt (dependence), and so on. Also, each emotion, including moods and affects, next to its explicit and particular significance, conveys an implicit and universal one. This will be explained in the last section, which discusses the case with the emotion of shame.

Furthermore, whereas affects are characterised by their direct relation to action (e.g. fear usually implies flight or avoidance), moods appear to have a more complicated relation. A mood does not prompt me to a specific action, and some (often bad) moods may impede or at least severely complicate action. This is closely related to the lack of object(s). When I am angry, I am normally angry with someone because of something. I have a clear focus for my feelings in the sense that I know where I shall direct my attention and vent my anger or at least deal with it in some way or other. I may be uncertain as to how I should best cope with my affects, but I have a pretty clear idea of what I am feeling and why. Or to put it differently, I have a more or less uncomplicated grasp of the intentional structure of my affects as, e.g. fear, love, surprise, shame, resentment, disappointment, guilt, etc. Moods, however, are different, and bad moods in particular. Moods affect our experience as a whole. We are not able to clearly identify an object for our mood, although we may notice that when we are in a certain mood our otherwise heterogeneous feelings are affected by some general attunement or colouring. Moods take a hold of

the entire person and affect how this person feels about the world, other people and him or herself. Contrary to affects, moods attune or colour our emotional experience as a whole. We explain our own disparate feelings and emotional reactions and those of others by referring to the generality of moods: "Normally, he would not react so aggressively, but he has been in a nervous mood for several days now"; or "I am sorry that I yelled at you, but I am just in a bad mood today". Thus, moods have often been referred to as background feelings, attunement, atmosphere, or emotional climate. Such characterisations are accurate and to the point, but they do not say much about what moods are or anything about their informative value. This is where hermeneutical phenomenology can help to make sense of our moods by articulating their function in our emotional experience and, in particular, their relation to personhood. This approach is not new. Phenomenological philosophers other than Paul Ricoeur such as Max Scheler<sup>48</sup>, Martin Heidegger<sup>49</sup>, Stephan Strasser<sup>50</sup> and the psychiatrist Thomas Fuchs<sup>51</sup> have emphasised this relation. However, our development of Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology offers a theoretical model that allows us to explore the fragility involved in the phenomenology of moods, while showing how to make sense of the vulnerability to mental illness that fragility inevitably exposes us to.

(4) There exists a dialectics between affects and moods. An affect may transform itself into a mood that imposes itself on me for days (grief => depression; anger => dysphoria; boredom => tedium). Affects may transform themselves into moods and finally become a permanent part of our temperament (grief => sadness => dysthymia). Moods may determine affects because they alter the way we are affected by objects and thoughts (dysphoria => anger). Perhaps the most relevant aspect of this dialectics is that a given mood may become an affect when by reflection I can articulate it and find its motivations and "felt causes", that is, the way it roots me in a given situation (anxiety => fear for x)<sup>52</sup>. This issue will be discussed in the next two paragraphs.

## I feel therefore I think

It is generally agreed that there is an intimate relation between emotions, ontology and values<sup>53-56</sup>. Experience becomes qualified by means of feelings. My emotions reveal my concerns and the fact that things matter to me. One way to illustrate the normative and ontological complexity involved in my emotional experience is to take a brief look at how a leading feeling theorist, the philosopher Jesse J. Prinz, explains (away) this complexity in terms of an evolutionary framework. Prinz has proposed a theory about how biological properties control our emotional life in the form of an "embodied appraisal theory" where

"emotions are gut reactions: they use our bodies to tell us how we are faring in the world"<sup>26</sup> [p. 69]. Emotions are bodily appraisals of our conduct in the world and express the values that guide our life and well-being.

We fully agree with this conception of emotions as being intimately connected with values, but strongly disagree with Prinz's understanding of the values that shape and determine our life. He writes: "To qualify as an appraisal, a state must represent an organism-environment relation that bears on well-being. On the view I have been defending, emotions qualify as appraisals in this strict sense. They represent core relational themes"<sup>26</sup> [p. 77]. This kind of framework accepts two forms of influences on human emotional experience: on the one hand, somatic core relational themes concerning survival, reproduction and well-being; on the other hand, the variegated ways culture nurtures these basic themes in different socio-cultural contexts. In other words, our emotions disclose biological and cultural values, and our well-being is a matter of how we accept and live by these values. Thus, the notion of well-being becomes reductive (to survive is better than not surviving) and relativistic (just do like the others are doing or isolate yourself and do what you like to do) at the same time. Our well-being is constituted by how we relate ourselves to our "organism" and our "environment". Although Prinz strongly emphasises that he is contrary to evolutionary reductionism and pleads for what he calls integrative compatibilism between biology and culture<sup>26</sup> [pp. 117-130, 158], his notion of well-being still remains problematic. And this is due to his simplistic conception of what it means to be a person. In fact, in his theory (as in most evolutionarily inspired theories) the question of personhood is not discussed at all.

A person is not simply the product of biology and culture, and well-being is not merely a matter of accepting biological needs or following cultural norms. This is not to say that biology and culture do not play important roles in the constitution of human values. Our emotions reveal that biological needs (I may be irritated because of lack of sleep or food) and cultural norms (I may be ashamed of myself if I display bad taste or manners) are important to our well-being. Nonetheless, human well-being is more fragile than such an account makes it out to be. A reference to the biological or cultural constitution of our values does not explain the fragile character of personhood. The life of a human person is significantly different from the lives of other highly developed primates. The hypertrophy and spectacularly complex development of our brains<sup>57</sup> is just one of the major differences that make the wisdom of our bodies an extremely "fragile wisdom", as convincingly demonstrated by the recent studies of the biological anthropologist, Grazyna Jasienska<sup>58</sup>. We are not what we are simply by being born, growing up, blossoming in our prime years, becoming old and eventu-

ally dying. There is more to the human animal than its organism and environment. An important part of human vulnerability lies in the fragility involved in the fact that a person *can want to be different from who she actually is*. Every human being is a person, and yet to be the person that I am is always a *task of becoming* the person that I want to be. In this task, emotions play a determinant role as I *feel* who I want to be before I *know* it.

The normative dimension in which I as a person orient myself is permeated by emotions. I have certain character traits, dispositions, desires, ideas, dreams and habits that furnish and shape my values, which are expressed in my *felt* concerns and by what I *care* about<sup>59</sup>. Or, to put it differently, what I acknowledge as my values derive from my “felt meanings” of the world<sup>47</sup>, that is, from my emotional experience. Before I cognitively know that a given person or thing means something and is valuable to me, I *feel* it.

This is not to say that my values are merely passively felt. I am able, by thinking about how I feel, to appropriate my feelings and thus to make an explicit meaning and value out of my emotional experience. However, in spite of my cognitive endeavour to circumscribe and explain my values, there always remains an emotional non-transparency in my values that may challenge my self-understanding. I may be a self-confident person, convinced of my values and firm in my actions, and yet question and doubt are still there, intimately lurking in my understanding of the person that I am. I may be inclined to something that I am not all that clear about. I may honestly believe that I am satisfied with my life, and even try to convince others that I am. And still, there is something that seems to disturb the glossy surface of my self-proclaimed stability. Of course, I can ignore this and go on living without paying attention to the supposedly insignificant whims played by my feelings. But I cannot control my moods when they are elicited in a given life situation. They do not abide at my command. Human well-being is fragile due to this unrelenting nature of our emotions and their relation to our understanding of the person who we are. Moods are not superficial whims. If we let them be an integral part of our understanding of our emotional life, they may be able to shed some light on the particular relation between the emotions that we feel and the person that we are.

### Moods as the epiphany of otherness

It is a common experience for a clinician that a patient asks to help him get rid of a bad mood. Patients, and persons in general, experience their bad moods as hindrances to go on being the persons that they used to be. Anxiety, a panic attack, or a state of dysphoria are first and foremost experienced as a source of useless disappointment devoid of meaning, a burden or brute suffer-

ing, and not as phenomena questioning one’s habits and selfhood. However, moods, and particularly bad moods, are an epiphany of otherness and otherness that is a constitutive – not accidental – part of oneself. One’s own bad moods are the epiphany of otherness in oneself and, as such, an opportunity to challenge the lifestyle and the sense of identity one has previously taken for granted.

Contrary to the ontological pre-conceptions at work in the feeling theories and the cognitive theories, our model operates, as mentioned, with the notion of an ontological ambiguity. This ambiguity stems from the dialectics between selfhood and otherness at work in our personal identity. *Who* and *what* I feel I am is constantly challenged by a sense of otherness, that is, of something that is not me. This challenge of otherness comes from the anonymous biological workings of my own body and the sociocultural world in which I live my life. My sense of being an autonomous self is constantly challenged by this otherness (my body, the world and other people), and the full complexity of the dialectics between selfhood and otherness is experienced in my moods. The model is constructed upon the theoretical assumption that the fragility characterising human personhood stems from these dialectics. In other words, we need to understand the close relation between our emotional life and the dialectics of selfhood and otherness responsible for our fragile sense of personhood. This dialectics becomes particularly evident in the way our moods challenge our sense of personal identity due to the way they complicate our relation to the norms and values involved in our more readily identifiable feelings and emotions. This fragile dialectic is first and foremost affective. As Ricoeur writes, “fragility is the human duality of feeling”<sup>60</sup> [p. 142] because of the complexity of anonymous biology and personal rationality at work in our emotional life.

The ethical, and therapeutic, implications of this are enormous. To become capable of seeing one’s own bad moods not as hindrances to one’s identity, but as the epiphany of otherness and, as such, as the opportunity to challenge one’s previously taken for granted lifestyle and identity, requires an ethical *conversion*. This conversion amounts to considering the never-ending task of interpreting one’s own moods as part and parcel of a good life, that is, as part of the care of the self and the otherness that constitute a person’s fragile sense of identity.

This ethical principle, which is not imposed on our model from the outside, but is articulated through our hermeneutic method, is the reason why we used a quote from the Nestor episode of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* as the motto for this article. The book’s significance for our understanding of mental suffering was already noticed by one of the first reviewers, the medical doctor Joseph Collins. Towards the end of his long review he writes: “I have learned more psychology and psychiatry from it than I did in ten years

at the Neurological Institute”<sup>61</sup> [p. 226]. In the quotation at the beginning of this article, Stephen Dedalus (Joyce’s literary alter ego) states that he fears “big words” (e.g. love, courage, sorrow, sex, anger, pleasure, ambition, shame, happiness, grief) because of the unhappiness they cause us. In fact, among many other things, Joyce’s book is one long exploration of a day in the emotional lives of a few persons who struggle with their fragile sense of identity, and consequently with their emotional relation to the norms and values involved in the “big words” that shape and orient their lives.

## The phenomenology of shame

By way of conclusion, we will use shame as an example of the importance of a methodical characterisation of emotions in psychopathology. This analysis first relies on the description of this emotion as felt motivation for movement. This level of description is mainly about the *how* of an emotion. If we want to understand a given emotional experience we must begin with a description of the emotional experience in itself, that is, provide a choreography of the feeling of the emotion in question: Shame is an emotion (an affect) whereby the person has a flowing sensation of suddenly and sharply falling downwards. It is an unpleasant and unwelcome experience that disposes me unfavourably towards the source of humiliation. The source of humiliation (the other) is in a dominant position, growing larger as I sink downwards.

A second, more detailed characterisation of an emotion requires an existential analysis of the life-world that stems from it. This level of description goes a step further than the *how* an emotion is experienced by delving into the *what* of that emotion. This level is articulated in various dimensions of existing as an embodied and situated self: *Lived space*: shame entails an experience of centrality as space in this emotional state has a centripetal structure: its directedness is characterised by someone who looks at what I am. *Lived corporeality*: I feel naked, deprived of any protection; dirtied, soiled. *Self*: my main feelings as exposed to the other’s look are of two kinds: first, I feel unprotected and that I have lost all my power; I wish to hide or disappear. At a later stage, I may feel the drive to reconstruct/improve myself. *Identity*: my identity is constantly threatened by the instability brought about by the feeling of humiliation. My whole identity is confined to the stain that is mercilessly revealed by the other who looks at me. And yet, shame can be a source of self-understanding, in that it provides a sense of what one is. *Other*: the person who makes me feel ashamed is in a dominant position, a watcher or a witness who looks at me with contempt, derision, or avoidance. The main sense implied is sight (being seen). *Lived time*: temporal-

ity consists in the fixation in an instant that grows to infinity. *Cause*: the felt cause of shame is my own omission, failing, defect.

A comparison with cognate emotions may help understand the importance of a phenomenological assessment of emotions to appreciate nuances and differences:

*Humility*, as compared to shame, is a rather gentle and welcomed feeling of lowering myself beneath a reality that I intuitively feel to be absolutely above me. Whereas *reverence* flows downwards and backwards in a deferential and respectful manner, humility does not flow backwards but only downwards. In humility I gaze down at myself. I feel the height, the loftiness of the other indirectly by experiencing the extent of my lowliness. While shame is painful, humility has a pleasurable quality as I want and deserve to put myself beneath this highest reality. I want to be in its intuitive presence.

*Modesty* is a self-protecting feeling by means of which I conceal myself. Modesty is the natural veil of the soul. As Nietzsche writes, “The most chaste utterance I have heard: ‘Dans le véritable amour c’est l’âme qui enveloppe le corps’”<sup>62</sup> [p. 635]. Our feeling of modesty is a flowing backwards, while opening up to the world. It is a feeling of concealment that reveals my fragility without imposing my lingering insecurity upon the other. By flowing backwards it allows the gaze of the other to see me without letting my intimacy intrude upon the other. The essence of modesty is, as Scheler once wrote<sup>63</sup> [p. 28], a revelation of beauty in the manner of concealing itself.

## Hermeneutics of shame

We will conclude with an outline of the felt meanings disclosed by the experience of shame. This level of description extends to the *why* of an emotion and more generally to its *importance*. In virtue of its felt significance, a phenomenon acquires a universal (not merely contingent or particular) meaning and embodies a universal theme or problem. It reveals the way an emotion belongs to human existence as a whole, to the human condition. To grasp the importance of a phenomenon is, as Ricoeur argues, to unfold “the revelatory power implicit in his discourse, beyond the limited horizon of his own existential situation”<sup>64</sup>.

The feeling of shame, as argued by Scheler<sup>65</sup>, belongs to the chiaroscuro of human nature due to the restlessly unique place of human beings within the structure of the world and its entities. Humans are strange creatures who live their life between the divine (thinking) and animality (biology). This duality of the human position in the cosmos expresses itself nowhere so clearly and immediately as in the feeling of shame. Shame arises originally by way of the contiguity between higher levels of conscious-

ness and lower drive-awareness. “Guiltless guilt” is the oxymoron with which Scheler tries to grasp the specific form of this experience of opposites that appears to be at the root of the gloomy and peculiar feeling of shame<sup>66</sup>. It is always conjoined with an element of astonishment and confusion, and with an experience of being between what ideally “ought to be” and what, in fact, is. It is in this peculiar experience that we find the foundation of the myriad ideas of the “fall” of the human being that is central to religious myth<sup>67</sup>.

To the origin of the feeling of shame there belongs something like an imbalance and disharmony in man between the senses and thinking, between the claim of spiritual personhood and embodied needs. It is only because the core of the human being is tied up with a “lived body” that we can get in the position where we must feel shame. And only because spiritual personhood is experienced as essentially independent of the “lived body” and of everything that comes from it, is it possible to get into the position where we can feel shame.

Shame also reveals the position of the human being as a transition, as, in shame, spirit and flesh, eternity and time, essence and existence touch one another in a peculiar and obscure manner. In shame one has the opportunity to know oneself to be a transition between two orders of being in which one has such equally strong roots that one cannot sever them without losing one’s very humanity. A human being must feel shame – not because of this or that reason and not because we can be ashamed of this or that. We feel shame inevitably because of our being a continuous movement, and a restless transition.

## Conclusions

Mental suffering brings out an emotional fragility that we argue is constitutive of personal identity. Our emotional experience reveals an intimate alienation at the heart of mental life. What we feel is our own experience, but in this experience we may feel that we are not ourselves. To be a person is to live with this affective experience of selfhood and otherness. In a time dominated by striding naturalistic explanations of mental illness, phenomenological psychopathology provides a crucial investigation into the subjective aspect of the disordered mind. Emotional phenomena are Janus-faced in the sense that they bring out, more urgently than other phenomena, the complex interplay of impersonal-biological and personal features of mental illness. We proposed a framework for understanding emotional experience that is grounded in four key points: a general concept of “affectivity”, the definition of “emotion” as felt motivation to move, the distinction between “affect” and “mood” according to their intentional structure and the dialectics between affects and moods. The reason why emotions are central in human existence

and vulnerability is twofold: first, emotions play a determinant role in the construction of my own identity as I *feel* who I want to be before I *know* it. The normative dimension in which I as a person orient myself is permeated by emotions. What I acknowledge as my values derive from my “felt meanings”. Before I cognitively know what something means and how it is valuable for me, I *feel* it. I can, then, by reflection, appropriate this feeling and make of it an explicit meaning and value. Second, the fragility characterising human personhood stems from the dialectics of selfhood and otherness at the core of being a person. Emotions, and moods in particular, are the most conspicuous epiphany of otherness in human life. This dialectic becomes particularly evident in the way our moods challenge our sense of personal identity due to the way they complicate our relation to norms and values. In other words, emotions disclose an inescapable fragility at the heart of our identity that is a principal factor in our vulnerability to mental illness.

We usually see our own bad moods as hindrances to remaining the same, and hence to our personal identity. Yet, moods are the epiphany of otherness in our life and, as such, they provide a unique opportunity to challenge one’s previously taken for granted lifestyle and identity. The awareness of this entails an essential ethical and therapeutic move: from considering emotions as passions of the soul that gum up our capacity to behave appropriately and rationally, to considering the task of interpreting one’s own moods as part and parcel of a good life, that is, of self-knowledge and self-acquaintance and, more in general, in the practice of the care of the self and the otherness (the body, world, and other people) that constitute a person’s fragile sense of identity.

## Conflict of interest

None.

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