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Hidden Summits

Brute affect, phenomenal affect, and members' accounts of emotional phenomena

Anyone who has struggled up a challenging ascent will relay to you the all-too familiar experience of climbing over a ridge one had assumed would mark arrival at the summit, only to find oneself on a ledge or small plateau looking up to see the summit still some way away, reaching into the clouds above.

Ruth Leys has done us all a great service by mapping-out an original and enjoyable path that offers us many rewarding views of the terrain of emotion research, including new illuminating perspectives that bring to awareness new aspects on territory we had thought familiar. Ruth also guides us successfully to the summit of affect theory, by showing us how thinking of emotions as affective states has had impact upon current thinking in the humanities and social sciences. But the summit as presented to us by affect theory is a false one, because, as Ruth so clearly shows, the map of the emotions with which affect theory furnishes us is at best only partial, and at worst actively misleading. Of course, genealogies aren't climbs, and affect isn't a mountain. Metaphors illuminate by shedding light but are also liable to obscure by casting shade.

Looking back, in Anglo-American philosophy at least, the 1990s were the turning point. In philosophy, a renewed interest in the emotions had emerged in the late 20th century, with prominent publications from authors such as Bob Solomon [1], Patricia Greenspan [2], Martha Nussbaum [3] and Gabriele Taylor [4], following on the heels of earlier work by Anthony Kenny.[5] These authors advanced versions of what were widely, though not uncontroversially, referred to as

[1] Solomon, *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life* [1st ed. 1976].
[2] Greenspan, *Emotions and Reasons: An Inquiry into Emotional Justification.*
[3] Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*.
[4] Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment*.
[5] Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will* [1st ed. 1963].

cognitive accounts of emotion [6]. As the century came to a close, Paul Griffiths' rather shouty, though hugely enjoyable and readable, polemic *What Emotions Really Are: The Problem of Psychological Categories* had appeared[7] and shaken things up a little. This was swiftly followed by influential work by authors such as Jesse Prinz [8] and Craig DeLancey [9] that helped reorient the rapidly growing discipline away from cognitivist accounts and toward affective accounts of emotion. Fewer philosophers sought to defend an analysis of emotions undertaken in terms of thoughts and their objects, and more seemed to favour some version of Jamesian physiological accounts, which sought to explain emotions as essentially physiological changes in the bearer of the emotion that were triggered by causal impacts from the environment. In retrospect, the ascent of affect to the central place it now holds, should not, I believe, be understood purely as having its roots in the widespread acceptance of Ekman's research and the promotion of that within philosophy by authors such as Griffiths. There are also wider trends that contribute, and which might be seen to motivate authors such as Griffiths.

This conception of affect is brute, in that alone it bears no informational content. It is the result of environmental triggers with causal powers that have impact on the senses. The affect theorist seeks to reliably associate these sensory impacts with patterned physiological changes, which, the hope is, will serve to reliably explain and type-individuate the emotions. The underlying physiological responses are then variously, putatively, explained in terms of 'sensations', 'somatic changes', 'patterned changes in the autonomic nervous system', 'neurological changes' that are mapped and represented by fMRI scans, and so on.

Part of the problem here is that, as Lisa Feldman Barrett[10] noted, the century-long scientific attempt to identify the underlying physiological patterns which might explain and type-individuate

[6] See Hutchinson, "Emotion-Philosophy-Science," n. 2 for a teasing apart of the terminology here.
[7] Griffiths, *What Emotions Really Are: The Problem of Psychological Categories*.
[8] Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion*.
[9] DeLancey, *Passionate Engines: What Emotions Reveal about the Mind and Artificial Intelligence*.
[10] Barrett, "Solving the Emotion Paradox: Categorization and the Experience of Emotion."

emotions and thereby provide us with the emotion natural kinds has simply yet to deliver and furnish us with those natural kinds and, therefore, the explanations. Nevertheless, philosophers like Prinz, and, indeed, psychologists such as Barrett, remain undeterred. Writing in 2004, Prinz stated clearly that emotions are, first and foremost, or essentially, the physiological changes caused by environmental triggers. This is why, while appealing to computationalism to flesh out his theory, Prinz still defended a neo-Jamesian account of emotion-as-essentially-affect [11].

So, we've two versions of the affect programme: Ekman's experimental programme and the (neo-)Jamesian hybrid versions, like those of Prinz and Barrett, advanced in the mid-noughties. Both these might be seen to be largely motivated by a commitment to a kind of crude naturalism, as Ruth Leys suggests in her introductory chapter (see Leys 2018, 16).

I believe there is third path one can discern. For this we need to look in perhaps-unexpected places. We're not here focusing on approaches to psychology with experimental pretentions, as with Ekman's programme, or as with the neo-Jamesian hybrid affect programmes. The motivation is not a kind of crude naturalism or even scientism. Here the move to affect is given impetus by existential phenomenology and related approaches to philosophy and cognition. There are many places we might look for evidence in support of this claim, but I'll briefly discuss here just two: 1. Some late writing by Robert Solomon, and 2. Hubert Dreyfus's contributions to his debate with John McDowell.

When Robert Solomon, the 'cognitivist', or 'judgementalist', philosopher of emotion sought, in his later writings, to defend his account from attack by authors such as Paul Griffiths, he turned to existential phenomenology to help him out. Here Solomon invoked Heidegger, and the American Heideggerian philosophers, George Downing and Hubert Dreyfus. Building on Downing's writings on absorbed coping, Solomon coined the term "judgements of the body"[12], remarking that he thought

[11] Prinz, "Embodied Emotions," 45.
[12] see Solomon, "Emotions, Thoughts and Feelings: What Is a 'cognitive Theory' of the Emotions and Does It Neglect Affectivity," 14.

that a better way of talking about what Jamesians, such as Prinz and Griffiths, referred to as 'affect'. "Judgements of the body" are, for Solomon, pre-linguistic (embodied) judgements. Downing, in the chapter which Solomon is drawing on, uses slightly different terminology, writing instead of 'cognitions of the body' or 'forms of coping that are pre-cognitive' [13]. This is what affect is for existential phenomenologists, according to Downing and Solomon.

Solomon's late recruitment of Heideggerian conceptions of coping in an attempt to defend his account of emotion from the attack coming his way from Paul Griffiths is telling, because Griffiths had labelled cognitivists in the philosophy of emotion 'propositional attitude theorists'. For Solomon, the task had, therefore, became one of finding a way to retain his claim, his slogan, that *emotions are judgements,* without of-necessity being committed to an account of judgement-as-a-propositional-attitude. That, as they say, is a big ask. Judgement is generally seen as a paradigm or 'textbook' case of a propositional attitude: where the *judgement* is an attitude (like a belief or construal) and the intentional (what it's directed at) and meaningful (what it means) content of the judgement is provided by the proposition, which represents the (intentional) object of the judgement: e.g. 'Luke is threatening me'. Or, 'the dog is dangerous'. What Solomon seems to want and to claim for his 'judgements' is that they are still judgements but that they are not propositional attitudes, because they do not have propositional, or representational, content: there is in-play no proposition serving to represent the state of affairs of 'Luke being threatening' or 'the dog being dangerous'. In a form of words we will see Dreyfus employing, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, we might say that in the 'flow' of 'absorbed coping', I experience the 'force of being repelled' by Luke or the dog. Unfortunately, Solomon didn't get to flesh-out in any detail what precisely he was arguing, before his untimely death.

The difference in terminology between Solomon's account and Downing's make it difficult to invoke Downing's argument to do the detailed work Solomon never got to do and say more precisely

[13] Downing, "Emotion Theory Reconsidered."

what these non-propositional judgements might actually look like. That said, I'm not sure the resources are there in any case. For example, what is it about Luke that generates this 'repellent force' we experience in the flow of absorbed coping and how do our bodies judge this..? Nevertheless, I think we can get the gist of what Solomon was trying to get at. Solomon is gesturing towards there being patterns of behaviour which make manifest, in the way we experience them, our discernment between loci of significance in the environment. This might be thought to meet the criteria for attributing an act of judgement without necessarily entailing the presence of a propositionally structured representation.

Solomon's late attempt to accommodate something like affect while defending his claim that *emotions are judgements*, draws, as we have seen, on the existential phenomenological tradition, and specifically the work of Heidegger's American interpreters. That tradition has largely depicted emotion as affect, not owing to commitments to a crude naturalism, much less in following Ekman's research, but rather as grounded in accounts of human embodied ways of negotiating the world which do not draw upon representations of the world and manipulations of those, prior to acting. This is what is invoked by Heideggerian talk of coping, and specifically, absorbed coping, and one can find very similar ideas in Merleau-Ponty.

To understanding further, let's turn attention to Hubert Dreyfus, in the context of his debate with John McDowell. Dreyfus serves to indicate how the phenomenal affect of the existential phenomenologists is both distinct from the affect of the affective sciences, and of Ekman, Griffiths and Prinz, but equally distinct from cognitivist accounts of our emotional responses:

> [W]hy would one let oneself be led to make the counterintuitive move of relegating our nonconceptual, nonlinguistic yet meaningful comportment to instinct rather than introducing a third space, namely that of meaningful normative forces? […]
>
> We have seen that in fully absorbed coping, mind and world cannot be separated. Rather, at ground level, we are directly merged into a field of attractive and repulsive forces. Thus, there is no place in the phenomenon of fully absorbed coping for intentional content mediating between mind and world.[14]

[14] Dreyfus, "The Myth of the Pervasiveness of the Mental," 26–28.

Phenomenal affect is nonconceptual and nonlinguistic, while remaining *meaningful* comportment. It is not to be understood as, on the model of, or by analogy with, instinct. This is how phenomenal affect differs from brute affect, found in Ekman. Phenomenal affect is the experience of attractive and repulsive forces—we experience the repulsive force of the dangerous dog, without representing that dog propositionally as 'the dog is dangerous', we just 'feel the force', so to speak, while in the flow of fully absorbed coping. So, while not instinctual, phenomenal affect is therefore, equally not explained in terms of propositional attitudes. There is no intentional content. Phenomenal affect makes manifest to us the existence of a space between, on the one hand, the space of the instinctual responses of our first biological nature, and on the other hand, the space of the rational reactions and reflections of cognitivism, when we understand that as implying processes with propositionally structured representational contents.

So, the ascent of affect, it's ubiquity as a way of talking about the emotions and of applying emotion research in disciplines as diverse as philosophy and architecture, film studies and medicine, draws upon some rather diverse sources. It might draw upon the affective sciences, and what I'm here calling brute affect. Equally, it might draw upon existential phenomenology, and what I'm here calling phenomenal affect. What are the commonalities? Well, in both brute affect and phenomenal affect the invoking of affect serves to illustrate the reflex-like phenomenology of basic emotions and the absence of ratiocination. Regarding the differences, it is illustrative to consider Solomon again. Solomon thought he could recruit phenomenological talk of affect-as-embodied-judgements-of-the-body to defend his judgementalist account of emotion against criticisms coming from advocates of the affective sciences of emotion, such as Paul Griffiths. This led us to observe that there are two types of affect at large in the wild: brute affect and phenomenal affect. Brute affect can be explained in purely causal-material terms, while phenomenal affect is a kind of—phenomenologically-speaking—reflex-like responsiveness to loci of significance in the lifeworld, which is enacted without

invoking cognitive, or mental, processes. So, while both emphasise the reflex-likeness they differ in the explanatory space they occupy. Brute affect occupies the space of natural scientific explanation, a disenchanted objective world disclosed to us by subsuming it under law-like generalities: laws of nature. In contrast, and this where the debate between Dreyfus and McDowell gets started, phenomenal affect is operative in the lifeworld—the world as it is experienced by people who are partly constitutive of that world. Basic interaction with the lifeworld in the flow of fully absorbed coping, is still a form of interaction and is still experienced, only neither as brute affect nor cognitively, so to speak.

Phenomenal affect is then a quite different beast to the affect discussed by Ekman and Griffiths. Indeed, phenomenal affect is much closer to what cognitivists in the philosophy of emotions have advocated in one significant way: it resists the depiction of emotions as passions and preserves some degree of subjectivity and even agency in emotional experience. Brute affective accounts, by contrast, depict the person experiencing the emotion as subject to that emotion, the emotions can thus be depicted as '*passions*' and a person who is in an emotional state is *passive*.

I've argued elsewhere that the brute affective account of emotions is unsustainable, and I am far from the only one to have done so. In *The Ascent of Affect,* Ruth Leys provides us with much which draws the account's explanatory abilities into serious question. Even those prominent recent writers who have tried to defend the approach, such as the psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett [15] and the philosopher Jesse Prinz [16], have acknowledged that in its own, brute, terms it cannot serve as an explanation for human emotions without us finding some way of hybridising it with elements of cognitivist or social constructivist accounts. So, *brute* affect has failed as an explanation of emotion, the question is whether affect can be defended by finding some way of imbuing it with the capacity for information pick-up, without invoking cognitive processes that serve to represent. Phenomenal

[15] Barrett, "Solving the Emotion Paradox: Categorization and the Experience of Emotion."
[16] Prinz, "Emotion, Psychosemantics, and Embodied Appraisals"; Prinz, "Embodied Emotions."

affect *suggests* there is such a way, but the precise nature or the most plausible way of articulating this kind of affect-information is still an open question.

The writings of existential phenomenologists on this can seem a little metaphor-heavy, with talk of 'flow' and 'attractive' and 'repulsive' 'forces' being employed to try to depict this kind of experience of and responsiveness to loci of significance in the environment without invoking conceptual capacities, much less propositional contents. The task has, in recent decades, been taken up by Ecological Psychologists [17], Enactivists [18], and others who subscribe to 4E—embodied, embedded, extended and enacted—accounts of cognition [19]. This work is now filtering through to emotion research, so we now have a born-again Jesse Prinz proposing an enactivist account of emotion and in doing so employing the language of affordances, taken from Ecological Psychology [20]. It is notable that in a manner that rather undermines the progress this might be thought to represent, Shargel and Prinz throughout this paper still talk of *representations*. Similarly, we find Rebekka Hufendiek [21] invoking Gibsonian affordances (via Turvey and Chemero) in her "naturalist" account of emotion while similarly undercutting the extent to which this might amount to progress over older representationalist accounts by then writing "The notion of affordances adds something fundamental to the story of how we **represent** the world when being emotional"[!] [22]. So, these new enactivist and ecological accounts of affect still, in the final analysis, seek to smuggle in a lot of the old version of content, by still talking of representations. Another trick, otherwise called *committing the mereological fallacy*, is that of *theoretically* postulating sub-personal mechanisms as the bearers

[17] see Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*; Costall, "Socializing Affordances"; Heft, *Ecological Psychology in Context: James Gibson, Roger Barker, and the Legacy of William James's Radical Empiricism*; Chemero, *Radical Embodied Cognitive Science*.

[18] see Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitve Science and Human Experience*; Hutto and Myin, *Radicalizing Enactivism: Basic Minds Without Content*; Hutto and Myin, *Evolving Enactivism: Basic Minds Meet Content*.

[19] for overview, see Menary, "Introduction to the Special Issue on 4E Cognition"; & for criticism Hutchinson, "The Missing 'E': Radical Embodied Cognitive Science, Ecological Psychology and the Place of Ethics in Our Responsiveness to the Lifeworld."

[20] see Shargel and Prinz, "An Enactivist Theory of Emotional Content."

[21] Hufendiek, *Embodied Emotions: A Naturalist Approach to a Normative Phenomenon*.

[22] 159 [emphasis added].

of content, content which has been denied to the person. Popular theoretically postulated subpersonal candidates in 4E and Enactivist cognition are sensorimotors. Other E-accounts of emotion which have recently appeared struggle with the similar dilemmas [23].

The problem is that the embracing of affect, or, as it came to be called, Basic Emotion Theory (BET), whether as brute affect, drawn from the affective sciences, or phenomenal affect, drawn from existential phenomenology, is often motivated by a misunderstanding of the alternatives, which in turn is based on a conflation of the conceptual with the propositional. One finds, I would suggest, this misunderstanding and conflation in authors as otherwise diverse as Paul Griffiths, Hubert Dreyfus and Dan Hutto & Erik Myin. Throughout his 1997 book, Griffiths depicted cognitive accounts of emotion as "propositional attitude theories" of emotion, rejected them and favoured the affect programme research on those grounds. Griffiths' thought seemed to be that if we reject propositions we reject concepts, and brute affect is what remains. Hubert Dreyfus's contributions to his debate with John McDowell [24] had central to them his rejection of any role for concepts in absorbed coping. Concepts, he maintained, served to ensure a gap between mind and world. Nevertheless, when he comes to criticise McDowell his target turns out to be McDowell's propositionalism and his invoking of linguistic capacities, so the perceived requirement for rejecting concepts remains somewhat obscure. One also finds the conflation active in the Radical Enactivism of Dan Hutto & Erik Myin, in their rejection of content, or what they call CIC—"cognition (necessarily) involves content" (*op. cit.*). Hutto & Myin rightly want to reject propositional (representational) content, but in executing this task they deny a non- or pre-propositional role for concepts. The conflation in all three cases is of propositionalism—the commitment to content being essentially propositional—with conceptualism—the commitment to our ways of meeting the lifeworld, experiencing and being responsive to loci of significance in that world, being enabled by

[23] e.g. Colombetti, *The Feeling Body: Affective Science Meets the Enactive Mind*.
[24] Dreyfus, "The Return of the Myth of the Mental"; Dreyfus, "Response to McDowell"; Dreyfus, "The Myth of the Pervasiveness of the Mental."

our conceptual capacities, which are prior to (though essential for) our linguistic capacities. In response to Griffiths, Dreyfus and Hutto & Myin, I would argue that one can and should reject propositionalism without rejecting conceptuality. There is no need to turn to affect.

It should be noted that the ascent of what I'm here calling *phenomenal affect* owes much to a well-founded rejection of (Cartesian) representationalist cognitive science, certainly in the work of Dreyfus and in the work of Hutto & Myin. But we can reject representationalist cognitive science, as Wittgensteinians always sought to do, and Ethnomethodologists sought to do, without dispensing with conceptuality. If you do dispense with conceptuality, the result is that you have to exogenously introduce theoretical terms, such as 'affordances', or go to work introducing analysts' metaphors, such as those of 'force' and 'flow' to do the work our everyday concepts were already doing before you banned them. For example, 'stairs' might *afford* 'climbability', and 'stairs' might exert an 'attractive force' on me in the flow of fully absorbed coping, but it is also the case that the concept of 'stairs' is internally related to the concept of 'climb'. You simply would not be said to have grasped the concept of 'stairs' if you had no concept of 'to climb'.

There's another way we might go, which is, I believe, shown to us by Harold Garfinkel. Garfinkel's *Studies in Ethnomethodology* [25] is one of the great works of the 20th century, is overlooked by philosophers to their cost, but offers, I would argue, a better alternative path for existential phenomenology (Garfinkel was heavily influenced by Alfred Schutz). For Garfinkel, people, or *members* (of social orders), already act in and are responsive to loci of significance in the lifeworld, and in so acting and being so responsive they endogenously make these actions and responses accountable, without the need for the exogenously introduced theoretical terms or metaphors imposed on them by phenomenologists, engaged in formal analytic work. Indeed, Garfinkel and Wittgenstein might be seen to complement each other here, for it is not merely the thought that we have no need for the exogenously produced and introduced theoretical terms or for

[25] Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*.

the phenomenologists' metaphors, it is that in imposing these exogenously produced terms we do violence to, change, or render obscure the phenomena in which we are supposedly interested. If, as the phenomenologists argue, as we saw Dreyfus argue above, the task is to acknowledge, to do justice to, the absence of a gap between mind and world when depicting people in the flow of absorbed coping, then we need to report that lifeworld as it is for the members who are a constitutive part of it. We do not do this by introducing new ways of conceptually configuring that world, which are divergent from the members' own ways of accounting for their world, as they experience it and as they are partially-constitutive of it; we do it by describing those members' activities and responses in ways which match their own accounts, drawing on members' categories and refusing to exogenously introduce concepts (theoretical terms and analysists' metaphors) unavailable to those members and their ways of accounting for their experience of and responsiveness to the worlds of which they are a part.

In short, we need to dispense with affect in both its brute and phenomenal guises and instead undertake an Ethnomethodological study of emotion.

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