

Dietrich von Hildebrand

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It is sometimes alleged that the study of emotion and the study of value are currently pursued as relatively autonomous disciplines. As Kevin Mulligan notes, “[t]he philosophy and psychology of emotions pays little attention to the philosophy of value and the latter pays only a little more attention to the former.” (2010b, 475). Arguably, the last decade has seen more of a rapprochement between these two domains than used to be the norm (cf. e.g. Roeser & Todd 2014). But there still seems to be considerable potential for exchange and dialogue if the situation is compared with their intimate relationship in central strands of early realist phenomenology. The philosopher perhaps most representative of this ecumenical approach is Husserl’s early student Dietrich von Hildebrand (1889-1977). From the very early stages of his philosophical career, Hildebrand has developed one of the most original, comprehensive and nuanced accounts of emotions at whose core is a detailed examination of their connection to value. While his central concern with the ethical significance of our affective life is in many ways continuous with Scheler’s work¹ and draws crucially on Reinach’s philosophy of mind, Hildebrand’s own reflections considerably expand on and substantially modify the picture of the ontology and normative role of emotions defended by these authors. In the following, I reconstruct Hildebrand’s view of emotions with a particular focus on those aspects which represent his most distinctive contribution to this subject.²

1. Emotion and position-taking

Hildebrand in fact rarely uses the term “emotion” for the phenomena at the center of his work on affectivity. This is, at least in part, in order to distance himself from metaethical emotivists about value judgments who are seen as misconceiving these phenomena by assuming that what they call “emotions” is a non-intentional type of experience.³ However, despite these terminological reservations it is evident that his main concern is with phenomena that are both in ordinary and philosophical discourse known as emotions. These include affective phenomena such as joy, anger, sadness, fear, admiration, contempt, respect, gratitude, love and hatred. In order to highlight their specific intentional structure, Hildebrand refers to these phenomena as *affective position-takings* or *affective responses*.⁴ In what follows, I explicate

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this characterization in some detail. In doing so, I will, *pace* Hildebrand, keep with common parlance and refer to them as emotions.

It is worth adding that von Hildebrand distinguishes affective position-takings from a further class of closely related intentional affective phenomena. This class comprises experiences such as being moved by a piece of music or being wounded by an offensive remark, which he groups under the heading “being affected” (cf. 1953, chap. 17).⁵ There is an interesting question as to whether experiences of this kind are emotions, too (cf. Cova & Deonna 2014), and whether Hildebrand is correct to distinguish them from position-takings. In what follows, I shall however set these questions aside and focus only on those paradigmatic emotions, which are in the center of Hildebrand’s work .

1.1 The Intentional Structure of Position-Taking

Within early phenomenology, the notion of a position-taking (*Stellungnahme*) first appears in Reinach’s article “Zur Theorie des negativen Urteils” (1911). On Reinach’s account, position-takings are mental occurrences that are characterized by an opposition between positivity and negativity. More specifically, for Reinach the mark of a position-taking is that it has a polar opposite: belief is opposed to disbelief, striving after something to struggling against something (*Widerstreben*), pleasure to displeasure.⁶ Hildebrand applauds Reinach for calling attention to an important and neglected type of intentional phenomenon. At the same time, he gives it a considerably more detailed treatment and delineates the class of position-takings in a different way.⁷ For Hildebrand, it is emotions that display most clearly its essential features. As he notes at the start of his dissertation *Die Idee der sittlichen Handlung* (1969a, 11):

If we consider joy about something, enthusiasm, longing, love of something, then all these experiences display a common character. Despite their qualitative differences, they all constitute position-takings of mine towards the world of objects. The moment of joy or the moment of enthusiasm are contents (*Gehalte*), which are embedded into the experience on the *subjective* side, and which are *directed at* (*gelten*) a content (*Inhalt*) in front of me. (own transl.)

On Hildebrand’s account of position-taking there is no explicit mention of polar opposites. Instead, what is seen as essential to position-takings is the possession of a directed qualitative content, which corresponds to the specific intentional mode (or, in Husserl’s terms, ‘act quality’) of the respective phenomenon and ‘fills’ the mind of its subject (e.g. we can be full of joy or conviction). Hildebrand describes the directedness of this content in terms of an “intention”, which goes from the subject to the object (e.g. 1969a, 13; 1953, 196). Moreover, in being directed at something, a position-taking constitutes a response (*Antwort*) to certain

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features of its object: we are pleased about an object *because* or *in light of* some of its qualities (1969a, 13). In being directed and responsive, position-takings are in a specific sense *active*, that is, manifestations of *spontaneity*: in taking a stand, one is active inasmuch as one oneself *brings forth* a specific qualitative content which is *aimed at* the world.⁸

To bring out more clearly these marks of position-taking, it is helpful to contrast this account with his Hildebrand's characterization of a different type of intentional phenomenon, which he calls "apprehension" (*Erfassen*) or "coming to be acquainted with something" (*Kenntnisnahme*).⁹ Paradigmatic cases of apprehension are sensory perceptions and other forms of intuition (*Anschauung*). In these experiences, there is a content (*Inhalt*) on the side of the object (we are conscious *of* something), but no qualitative content on the subjective side (e.g. 1969a, 11; 1953, 196): one cannot be "filled with" perception. Correspondingly, although apprehension is *of* something and thus intentional, it is not directed at anything. In visually perceiving an object, something is presented to us; here, the "intention" goes from the object to the subject (1953, 196). Similarly, it makes no sense to suppose that we apprehend things *in light of* anything. Accordingly, apprehension is a case of *receptivity* rather than spontaneity. While in feeling joy about a scene, we "make something" of the scene before us by bringing forth a qualitative content that is aimed at that scene, in perceiving that scene, aspects of it simply impress themselves on us.¹⁰

Since, in contrast to Reinach's account of position-taking, Hildebrand's considerations focus on its intentional structure, he ends up recognizing many phenomena as position-takings that do not count as such for Reinach. For example, surprise has a directed, qualitative content, but no polar opposite.¹¹ What is more, in arguing that paradigmatic emotions exhibit this intentional structure, Hildebrand undermines a widely held misconception of emotions as a type of apprehension. Both Husserl (e.g. 1989, 196) and Meinong (1972) conceive of emotions as a kind of perception or intuition of value (cf. also Tappolet 2000; Roberts 2003, Döring 2004; Deonna 2006). Yet, to suppose that emotions are apprehensions of value is to ignore their character as position-takings.

Their assimilation to value apprehensions can be seen to conflict also with Hildebrand's view of what emotions are motivated by. While intellectual position-takings like belief are responsive to truth, emotions and volitional responses are responsive to axiological properties. In joy we respond to positive importance (goodness in some respect); similarly, in indignation we respond to negative importance (injustice). However, to respond to *x*, one must be aware of *x* prior to responding. Thus, emotions presuppose grasp of importance. Yet, in this case they cannot themselves apprehend importance: what is already within one's ken

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can no longer be brought within one's ken (cf. also Mulligan 2004, 2010a; Teroni 2007; Müller 2017a).¹²

Incidentally, Hildebrand does not give a substantial account of what it is for an action or attitude to be a response or to have motivating reasons. This may seem surprising given the centrality of this concept to his overall account. At the same time, Hildebrand offers a detailed account of the types of axiological properties that emotions and volitions are responsive to and how these bear on their specific character as responses. I will address this conception in some detail in the following section. Before turning to this issue, I shall however complete the present outline of his basic account of affective position-taking by specifying how Hildebrand distinguishes them from other types of position-taking.

1.2 The Specific Characteristics of Affective Position-Taking

Hildebrand recognizes three basic classes of position-takings—intellectual, volitional and affective—each of which possesses its distinctive marks. In characterizing affective responses, Hildebrand's main focus is on specifying how they differ from volitional responses, which are likewise responsive to importance. One such difference concerns freedom and control: although volitional responses are motivated by importance, they can be freely engendered and directly command our bodily activities, while affective responses are bestowed on us and cannot be directly controlled. As we will see, this difference plays a crucial role for his account of the moral significance of affective position-takings. The perhaps most telling difference for Hildebrand, however, concerns their qualitative richness or plenitude. Hildebrand sometimes proposes that, in affective responses “the entire person is involved” (1953, 202), while the will has a “one dimensional, linear character” (ibid., 202), which commits the entire person, but nonetheless constitutes a stance taken exclusively by her “free personal center” (ibid., 203).

At first sight, this proposal may seem counter-intuitive. When I am enthusiastic about the result of the soccer match, I am taking a particular position *insofar as I favour a particular team*. Similarly, in being indignant about funding cuts in the humanities, it is *me inasmuch as I value the humanities* who is taking a stand. There is a straightforward sense in which it is specific attitudes or concerns of a person¹³, rather than the entire person, which shape the respective response. To be fair, in his earlier writings Hildebrand is sensitive to this point. In *Sittlichkeit und ethische Werterkenntnis* (1969b, 204–206), he acknowledges that affective position-takings can have their source in specific attitudes of a person. Hildebrand denies that this is true of all affective responses (e.g. annoyance and desire (*Begehren*) are supposed to be

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exceptions). But he adds that even where there is no such foundation in particular attitudes, affective position-takings are still to some extent constrained by the person's most fundamental attitudes and her overall character or nature. For example, these may impose constraints on which emotions it is possible for someone to feel in a given situation (1969b, 206). Moreover, this constraint is meant not to apply in the same way to volitional responses (ibid., 206). In light of this, Hildebrand is perhaps best read as proposing that the distinctive feature of affective responses is a specific kind of dependence on the person's attitudes and her overall character, which is not displayed by exercises of the will.

2. Responding to Importance

Hildebrand's most innovative claim about the emotions concerns a distinction between different kinds of axiological property to which they can be responsive. This distinction has important implications for his account of their normative significance and their connection to personhood. It is indeed fundamental for his entire moral philosophy, including his proposal that emotions can possess moral value.

2.1 Hildebrand's Taxonomy of Importance

Put in simple terms, Hildebrand's central axiological proposal is to recognize fundamentally different ways in which something can matter (as opposed to being neutral or insignificant). As he uses the term "importance" (*Bedeutsamkeit*), it denotes the specific respect under which an object or event is apt to motivate specific emotional or volitional responses. Crucially, the terms "value" and "disvalue" are reserved for one specific category of importance, which is taken to sharply contrast with another axiological category which he terms the "subjectively (dis)satisfying".

For something to possess (dis)value is for it to be important *in itself*.¹⁴ For something to be subjectively (dis)satisfying, on the other hand, is for it to be important relative to a person's interests and concerns. On Hildebrand's account, the saving of another's life is important in itself, while the fact that some monetary deal comes out in one's favour is subjectively satisfying insofar as it holds the potential to satisfy one's concern to be materially well-off. In both cases, the respective importance of the event makes it apt to motivate a particular response (e.g. joy or enthusiasm), yet it does so differently in each case: while (dis)values *demand* a certain response, the subjectively (dis)satisfying *tempts* us into responding in a specific way. This has an immediate consequence for the normative

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assessment of the corresponding response. To feel joy about another's recovery in response to its value is to give this event *its due* qua valuable (cf. 1953, chap. 18). In complying with this demand, a specific harmony is established between the response and the value, which bestows value on the response itself. No such value is bestowed on responses to the subjectively (dis)satisfying.

To fully appreciate the theoretical significance of Hildebrand's distinction between responses to (dis)value and responses to the subjectively (dis)satisfying, it is helpful to highlight how the type of importance to which an emotion or volition is responsive makes a difference to the character of the response itself, as well as to relate his distinction to Kant's familiar opposition between the categorical and the hypothetical. Roughly, the phenomenon that features on Kant's ethical theory as the conformity with a categorical demand is reconceived by Hildebrand in terms of responsiveness to value, while the systematic place of Kant's notion of conforming to hypothetical imperatives is occupied by the response to the subjectively (dis)satisfying. As Hildebrand characterizes value responses, they display a specific aspect of self-transcendence. In giving a (dis)value its due (in contrast to being lured in by the subjectively (dis)satisfying) we do not approach the bearer of the (dis)value from the point of view of our own concerns, but move beyond our interests to engage with something important for its own sake. There are strong echoes here with a Kantian notion of autonomy. In a spirit similar to Kant's recognition of autonomy as the mark of personhood, Hildebrand goes on to claim that affective and volitional value responses reveal our most decisive feature as persons. That said, there are also important differences between these respective strands of Kant's and Hildebrand's thinking. Crucially, Kant does not recognize emotions as potential manifestations of the core of personhood. Moreover, for him categorical demands are not grounded in value; hence conformity with them is not a case of value response. But for Hildebrand it is crucial precisely to look beyond the demand to its axiological ground in order to make proper sense of the opposition between the categorical and the hypothetical, as well as to explicate the corresponding difference at the level of our conduct by substituting responsiveness to this ground for simple conformity with a demand.¹⁵ It is this focus on value, and the distinction between different species of importance, that brings emotions within the purview of (broadly) Kantian considerations on personhood.¹⁶

Perhaps this picture will seem to come at a rather high metaphysical price, given that Hildebrand conceives of (dis)values in strictly realist terms, i.e. as fully mind-independent properties. It is worth noting, though, that one might develop a structurally similar account of responsiveness to importance independently of Hildebrand's notion of (dis)value. For

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example, one might distinguish between different ways in which something may be important relative to the subject's concerns by identifying a subset of those concerns as constitutive of her normative self-conception, i.e. of the person she finds worth being.¹⁷ A somewhat similar contrast might then be seen between responses to what is important relative to concerns that are integral to a person's normative self-conception and responses to what is significant in relation to concerns that fall outside it. Although these two types of response do not contrast as sharply as responses to (dis)value and responses to the subjectively (dis)satisfying and cannot be related in the same way to the contrast between conformity with categorical demands and conformity with hypothetical demands, they can arguably be distinguished by an aspect of self-transcendence that is specific to the former: in these cases, the subject distances herself from her superficial interests and engages with objects under the respect of what bears on whom she actually finds worth being. In fact, this proposal echoes a distinction that Hildebrand himself draws in later work between the subjectively (dis)satisfying and what he calls the objectively good (harmful) for a person (cf. e.g. 1953, chap. 3).¹⁸ This additional category of importance is exemplified by things that (positively or negatively) bear on the persons true interest. It is worth stressing, though, that responding to what is significant to concerns that are integral to one's normative self-conception is not the same as responding to what is objectively good (harmful) for one since what is objectively good (harmful) for one need not depend on one's concerns: it may be in a child's true interest to acquire moral virtues even if she has no concern to be morally virtuous. Relatedly, if something may be objectively good (harmful) for a person independently of her mindset this further axiological category of importance is not obviously less objectionable to opponents of axiological realism than the category of (dis)value.¹⁹ Certainly, it will seem no less contentious in light of the fact that Hildebrand takes objective goods (harms) for a person to be grounded in (dis)value.

2.2 The Moral Value of Affective Position-Takings

Affective and volitional responses to (dis)value are themselves valuable. However, the value conferred on an emotion which is responsive to (dis)value is not necessarily moral value. Thus, to admire an artwork in response to its aesthetic excellence is valuable, but not morally significant. As the same time, it is Hildebrand's declared aim to show that affective position-takings can be bearers of moral value: to rejoice in the saving of another's life—as opposed to being indifferent towards it—can be morally worthy.²⁰ Accordingly, Hildebrand devotes a crucial part of his opus magnum *Christian Ethics* (1953) to specifying the conditions under which paradigm emotions count as morally valuable (cf. e.g. 1953, part II, esp. chap. 27).

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One of these conditions is that the emotion be responsive to a morally relevant value.²¹ Morally relevant values include, for example, the value of a man's life and his dignity. They are not themselves moral values, but possess moral relevance since responding adequately to them (e.g. in being glad that another's life has been saved or by willing to save it) can be morally valuable. Whether an affective response to a morally relevant value is actually morally valuable crucially hinges on further constraints. Most importantly, it depends on whether it is suitably related to our capacity for freedom. Hildebrand identifies the capacity for freedom as an essential mark of personhood and takes great efforts to show that legitimate ascriptions of moral value to a response are premised on its exercise. The exercise of freedom is required since the presence or absence of moral value is necessarily a matter of a person's responsibility. Accordingly, we must be able to make sense of our being responsible for emotions if they are to become intelligible as bearers of moral value. Yet, how is this supposed to be possible if we can neither freely engender nor directly control them?

Hildebrand answers this question by introducing the idea of a cooperative freedom with affective responses. This capacity constitutes for Hildebrand the core of human freedom and allows us to sanction or disavow affective responses (cf. e.g. 1953, chap. 25). Like willing, the higher-order position-takings of sanction and disavowal originate in our free personal center. Crucially, they modify the respective first-order response "from within" rather than affecting only its expression. In sanctioning a response, we identify with it, while in disavowing position-takings we dissociate from them and thereby revoke a certain kind of implicit identification with them which is in place as long as we do not disavow them. It is in fact only by sanctioning a response to (dis)value that it becomes a genuine case of self-transcendence or conformity with the call of the (dis)value for its own sake (e.g. 1953, 323). Moreover, and crucially, when sanctioning an affective response to a morally relevant value, the response is thereby itself accorded moral worth.²²

Hildebrand's notion of cooperative freedom is evocative of familiar higher-order views of autonomy. On these accounts, for a desire or emotion to be autonomous, it must be the object of a second-order attitude (typically, a second-order volition) which properly authorizes it as one's own. However, this analogy is imperfect. One important difference is that Hildebrand recognizes an important "external" constraint on the second-order endorsement of first-order affective responses in that it is possible to sanction only responses which are motivated by (dis)values.²³ Moreover, unlike in the case of the higher-order endorsement invoked on hierarchical accounts of autonomy, the primary significance of cooperative freedom is ethical. That said, Hildebrand's conception suffers from similar

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difficulties as the former. Chiefly, his notions of sanction and disavowal remain somewhat obscure.²⁴ In which sense precisely are these attitudes supposed to modify the affective response “from within”? And what type of attitude precisely are they? Whilst actualizations of the free personal center, they are not supposed to be acts of willing in the strict sense of the term, but a distinct kind of position-taking which endorses or rejects extant responses.

In light of this, it is hard to dispense the impression that Hildebrand’s attempt at making intelligible emotions as bearers of moral value remains less developed and perspicacious than the underlying distinction between different kinds of responses to importance. However, this is not to dismiss it as by and large failing its declared aim. Aside from the numerous examples Hildebrand adduces to motivate this proposal, he helpfully focuses the problematic on the connection between moral value and responsibility and thereby identifies the most difficult obstacle to a plausible account of morally valuable emotion whilst also pointing towards novel conceptions of the control we may exercise over our emotions. Hildebrand thereby lays the grounds for further attempts to work out and defend such an account.

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¹ Cf. Mulligan’s contribution in this volume on Scheler’s views on emotion and affectivity, as well as Mulligan 2008.

² I shall here set aside those of his reflections that are targeted specifically at the role of affectivity in Christianity (cf. esp. 2007, pt. II and pt. III).

³ Cf. his remarks on the term in 1953, 204. I take it that his mention of a confusion associated with this term relates to back to his discussion of meta-ethical emotivism in *ibid.*, chap. 9. Hildebrand (2007, 7, 10) similarly draws a contrast between intentional affective experiences and mere emotional states which lack intentionality.

⁴ I opt for the literal English translation of the German expression “Stellungnahme” as opposed to “attitude” (cf. e.g. Mulligan 2013, 2017), or “stance” (cf. e.g. Salice 2015).

⁵ Hildebrand gives a detailed taxonomy of the domain of the affective in Hildebrand 2007, chap. 2.

⁶ On Reinach on position-taking, cf. also Mulligan 2013, 100ff.

⁷ The notion of a position-taking is also taken up by Husserl’s early pupils Moritz Geiger, Kurt Stavenhagen and Edith Stein. Cf. Salice (this volume) on Geiger’s views on emotion. On emotions as position-takings, cf. also Wittgenstein 1984, §836. Cf. also Mulligan (2013) on the history of the notion of position-taking as well as on the history of the view that emotions are position-takings (2017, 229–234).

⁸ On the directedness characteristic of position-taking, cf. also Müller 2018. Hildebrand’s use of “spontaneity” raises a number of questions of its own, which I will here have to set aside. On this issue, cf. also Salice (2015, section 2.1.2).

⁹ In his later writings, Hildebrand refers to this type of phenomenon as a “cognitive act”, cf. e.g. 1953, chap. 17.

¹⁰ Hildebrand further refines his original account of position-taking by distinguishing between actual and “superactual” attitudes (e.g. 1969b; 1953, 241–243). The former are necessarily consciously experienced, while the latter need not. Paradigm examples of superactual attitudes are love and hatred.

¹¹ Hildebrand sometimes speaks of the “sign” of a position-taking, by which he means its positive or negative character or valence (cf. e.g. 1953). Relatedly, he proposes that some position-takings have contrary qualitative contents (e.g. joy and indignation; cf. esp. 1922 (1969b), pt. 4, chap. 1). However, he never explicitly requires that every position-taking have a sign or a polar opposite.

¹² Hildebrand (1969b) offers a detailed epistemology of importance, which builds on Scheler’s notion of feeling value (*Wertfühlen*; 1973, 35ff., 68ff., 96ff.). Cf. also Mulligan 2009; 2010b, 486–487.

¹³ These may be conceived as superactual attitudes in Hildebrand’s sense.

¹⁴ For discussion of Hildebrand’s account of value as importance in itself, cf. also Crosby 2002, 478–479.

¹⁵ For a more thorough comparison with Kant's views, cf. von Hildebrand 1969a, 52–57.

¹⁶ To be precise, Hildebrand recognizes not all paradigm emotions as responsive to value. Cf. 1953, chap. 17.

¹⁷ There is also a sense in which a thing's aptness to satisfy concerns is an objective property of that thing. However, this notion of objective importance should be less contentious than a strict realism which takes axiological properties to be fully mind-independent properties.

¹⁸ For discussion, cf. also Crosby 2002, 482–485.

¹⁹ To be fair, matters get more complicated if one considers sophisticated versions of the so-called desire-fulfilment theory of goodness for a person. Cf. Heathwood 2016.

²⁰ Hildebrand conceives of affective responses also as potential bearers of moral disvalue. My focus here will be on his account of their possession of moral value since I take this to be most central to his concern to establish their ethical significance.

²¹ Hildebrand tends to focus his discussion on affective responses to morally relevant values or goods. But it seems congenial to his approach to suppose negative affective responses (e.g. indignation) to morally relevant disvalues can be morally valuable, too.

²² To be precise, two further conditions must be met which I will not discuss due to limitations of space: the subject must also be aware of the moral significance of the situation and possess the superactual will to be morally good.

²³ In the case of disavowal, the response itself must possess a disvalue. In light of the foregoing subsection, one might feel disappointed that what initially looked like an account of freedom entirely in terms of first-order responsiveness to importance-in-itself is ultimately supplemented by introducing a higher-order attitude that is itself representative of the person's freedom and which authorizes first-order responses. More would here be needed to detail Hildebrand's conception of freedom and to show that this impression simplifies the systematic role of sanctioning and disavowal. Note also that, while his initial account of value responses resonates with Kantian notions of autonomy, Hildebrand never explicitly claims that value responses are *ipso facto* manifestations of autonomy.

²⁴ This concern arises less for the classical hierarchical account of autonomy than for modified accounts, which invoke an act of identification with second-order volitions in order to make them intelligible as apt to authorize first-order desires (cf. Frankfurt 1987).