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In Search for the Rationality of Moods

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1 Introduction

A sad mood can affect our way of thinking by slowing down our reasoning process, making us pay more attention to detail (Wong 2016; Clore et al. 1994; Mineka and Nugent 1995; Clark and Teasdale 1982; Forgas 1992; Burke and Mathews 1992; Forgas 1995; Salovey and Birnbaum 1989; Forgas and Bower 1987; Isen et al. 1987). Elation appears to have the opposite effect, allowing an abundance of information to flow through our senses, painting a multi coloured picture of our social environment with a broad brush. Moods, therefore, are affects which themselves affect how we reason (Clore et al. 1994; Bless et al. 1992; Bodenhausen et al. 1994; Murray et al. 1990; Forgas and Fiedler 1996; Wegener et al. 1995; Isen and Daubman 1984; Wong 2016). However, that is not the issue I will explore in this essay.

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Moods also set the stage for a variety of human activities, enabling and facilitating, or obstructing and undermining our self-centred or other-regarding projects. Moods have, thus, a direct effect on the realisation of our intentions, setting limits on the potency of practical reason (Griffiths 1989). However, that is neither the issue I will address here.

What I am interested in is the rather more basic question as to whether moods themselves can be rational. In particular, I would like to consider why the question about the rationality of moods is one that is rarely, if ever, posed. Books and articles on the rationality, or the fittingness, or the appropriateness of emotions are currently an important part of the philosophical literature (De Sousa 1987; Frank 1988; Ben-Ze'ev 2000; Greenspan 1988; Goldie 2000). Why is there no such corresponding interest in the rationality of moods?

Answering that question is a complex matter, whose unfolding might have to take into account not only purely theoretical, but also practical or historical considerations, pertaining to the formation of the philosophy of emotion as a distinct discipline in the past couple of decades, its inheriting certain topics from other disciplines, primarily from moral psychology and from philosophy of mind, as well as the understandable tendency of junior academics to get things quickly published on issues which are already well-established—and the rationality of moods is not one of them.

Nevertheless, my own concern is not with the historical but with the conceptual issue of what it is about mood, as a specific type of affect, that makes it not easily amenable to standard models of rationality. We may think of that issue through an analogy with other mental types: doxastic states are or should be grounded on epistemic reasons, desiderative states are or should be grounded on normative—prudential or moral—reasons; are mood states in their turn grounded on some kind of epistemic, or practical, or even *sui generis* moody reasons?

The fact that this kind of question is not often discussed, makes me think that the default answer to it, is: 'No—moods are not grounded on reasons'. And my hypothesis as to why that counts as the default answer is that most philosophers of emotion, despite their many and deep disagreements, share a basic line of reasoning. The rationality of an affective

state is somehow depended upon how that state is related to what the state is about, its so-called intentional object; but, given that moods do not seem to bear an intentional relation to an object, it is hard to see how they can be in the offing for rational assessment.

The first part of the paper I shall look at the premises that informs the position that moods do not seem to be intentional states. I shall explore that issue in the context of the current debate over the representational content of affectivity. I will outline three ways of attributing intentionality to moods, raising for each one of them a series of problems. Although none of the problems on its own appears insurmountable, they jointly appear to undermine the plausibility of making sense of the rationality of mood states by giving prominence to their alleged intentional dimension.

Secondly, I look at an account that is encountered in the literature on the psychology and physiology of moods; the account sets moods as mechanisms whose function is to monitor the balance between the demands raised by our natural and social environment, and the physical or psychological resources we may expend in meeting those demands. Thus, moods might after all be subject to criteria of assessment with respect to how well they represent how one fares in the situation in which one finds oneself. That is a promising way to proceed in our exploration of mood states; it faces though some a formidable challenge when it comes to the phenomenology of mood experience, as I try to show in the second part of the paper.

Attention to the phenomenology of affectivity is not an optional means for enriching the conceptual analysis of mood; according to several philosophers of mind, phenomenology provides the right methodological tools for making sense of the apparently diffuse and all-enveloping character of mood experience. Instead of treating moods as a surface colouring of a evaluatively neutral environment, that approach sets moods as the inescapable background of our perceptual, cognitive, and desiderative engagement with reality. In the third part of the paper I address the approach to moods as background feelings and raise some doubts about the ability of that approach to provide standards of assessment of a mood state, standards that would permit appraising the mood itself as rational.

2 Moods as Intentional States

A state may count as rational in a theoretical sense if it represents correctly its intentional object: that is a general statement of the notion of cognitive rationality that seems to be currently in play in many discussions of affective phenomena (de Sousa 2011). Disappointment counts as rational if it concerns an actual failure, and fear is deemed rational if it is directed at a real and imminent threat. It should be noted that different notions have been applied in the literature for conveying what is distinctive of the cognitive rationality of affective states, including reasonableness, fittingness, appropriateness, and proportionality. For the purposes of this paper I treat all those notions—which in certain contexts are significantly different—as falling under the heading of rationality.

Thanks to its generality, that account of theoretical rationality for affective states is spacious enough to accommodate alternative approaches, which see affective phenomena under the heading of evaluative cognition, of appraisal, of judgment, of construal, or of perception (cf. Morag 2016, for an informative yet heterodox overview of the domain).

Despite their substantial differences, those approaches share a commitment to the role of affectivity in referring to something beyond oneself, and thus constituting a means (either direct and simple, or mediated and complex) of acquiring knowledge about the salient features of one's situation. However, the claim that rationality is somehow linked to the alleged representational function of affective states, marks that model of rationality as distinct from theories which focus on the practical, behaviourally adaptive, or strategic function of affective phenomena.

If we are to build a viable model for the rationality of moods by drawing on their ability to represent correctly their intentional target, it is imperative that we supply an adequate theory of the intentionality of moods. The modest aim of the present section is to show that such a theory is hard to come by; and thus, that an attempt to move from intentionality to rationality appears short-circuited from the start.

The standard way to present the intentionality of a mental state is by citing the objects with which it is correlated. In the case of moods, such a correlation looks difficult to sustain. I shall focus here on three scenarios encountered in the literature.

The first candidate for an intentional object that is attributed to moods is the whole world (Solomon 1976; Lyons 1980; Baier 1990). That proposal appears to do justice to the overwhelming character of many moods, the fact that moods pervade our experience, that they suffuse all aspects of our encounter with reality. However, taken literally, the suggestion that the world is the intentional object of our moods is, in my view, problematic for three reasons. First, the proposal employs a notion that is not easy to determine. It is not clear whether we are invited to think of the world as a maximally inclusive situation encompassing all others, or perhaps as an object which has in it everything, or as the totality of phenomena linked by a complex network of references to each other. It can be retorted that the proposal requires nothing more than a loose understanding of the term, as employed in ordinary contexts. However, that retort does not really answer our query; it rather shows that the appeal of the proposal trades on the ambiguity of the basic term it employs. Additionally, the proposal makes excessive demands on the representational capacities of ordinary subjects. An affective state that is intentionally correlated to the whole world would entail an ability to form representations that moves well beyond the perspectival, partial, and limited access to one's immediate environment. Finally, even if we manage to sort out the above issues, the suggestion that moods are intentionally directed at the world founders on the problem of distinguishability between kinds of affective states. For instance, to be outraged with the whole world is not a mood: it is an intense and global emotion.

The second proposal treats the generality of the intentional object in a distributive manner. Instead of setting one object (the whole world) as the intentional correlate of mood, it takes as object the members of a disjunctively defined set composed of anything that comes our way; for any object encountered, we have, during a mood experience, a corresponding intentional relation (Solomon 1976; Goldie 2000; de Sousa 2010;

Sizer 2000). That proposal has the advantage of offering a way of distinguishing between emotions (which are directed at a single object), and moods (which take an indeterminate plurality of objects). However, the proposal appears to me to fail on the issue of intelligibility. A major task for an account of intentionality is to help us make sense of the character of the relevant experience. By correlating the experience with its intentional target, the account should contribute to our understanding why the person is in the mood that she is. However, treating every different object in one's environment as the intentional object of mood, may render inexplicable why one is in the particular mood that he is. A mood is typically a state of long duration: it may last for hours, days, or more. During that period, there is large number of objects which 'come one's way', and which differ in their evaluative shape. In a state of gloom, for instance, a person might happen to listen to a jolly tune. While it would be incorrect to think that just by listening to the tune the person will snap out of her sad mood, it would also be wrong to claim that the person is unable to notice the life-affirming air of that tune. However, decreeing that the jolly tune is the intentional object of the gloomy mood does not render the mood intelligible. Given the wide variety in the evaluative profile of the objects in one's environment, the postulated intentional connection between mood and any object that happens to come one's way, fails to discharge the task of rationalizing explanation.

The third attempt to articulate an account of the intentionality of moods is presented not by reference to some object, either singular or plural, but in terms of their representational content. We are invited to think that what is represented during a mood occurrence is a property, as such: in an anxious mood, it is threateningness, in an irritable mood, it is offensiveness, in a mood of contentment, it is delightfulness, etc. The property represented by a mood is not attached to anything in particular: it is unbound (Mendelovici 2013, 2014). The proposal admits that moods appear to lack intentional object; but it claims that this lack does not deprive them of intentionality, since moods are states with a content which represents an unbound affective property. That approach initially appears promising, since it sets a criterion for distinguishing emotions (which are directed at an intentional object), from moods

(which are not thus directed), while acknowledging that each mood has a different character precisely because it involves a different mental content, due to the unbound property that it represents (scariness, offensiveness, delightfulness, etc.). However, in my opinion, the proposal is problematic on conceptual grounds. More precisely, it is an account of intentionality that combines some conceptual confusions regarding the idea of an unbound affective property. Here I shall mention only one of those confusions, which concerns a fundamental metaphysical issue. The intentionalist claims that moods are intentional because they represent unbound properties. But what exactly is an 'unbound property'? Unless the proponent comes clear on this issue, her proposal is hard to understand, and even harder to assess. At a minimum, we require a disambiguation of the meanings that may be involved in that notion. First interpretation: unbound is a property that is not bound to one particular substance. That is a claim easy to understand, because it is trivial. No property is ever bound to one particular substance, each property is in principle instantiable at more than one place at once, and that is why we often call objects particulars, and properties universals. A second interpretation could be: unbound is a property that is not instantiated. If that is the meaning of the notion of 'unbound property', then it is hard to comprehend how someone can be in a particular affective state that represents a non-instantiated property. Notice that the intentionalist does not claim that someone is in a particular affective state because that state represents that a certain property is not instantiated: that would be the representation of a fact (or of a state of affairs, or of a proposition), and our representationalist denies that this is the meaning she intends. A third interpretation might venture to focus not on what type of property an unbound property is but on how we might think of it: 'unbound' is a property thought of not as instantiated by an object, but thought of merely as a property. Again, that claim offers little help in making sense of what is distinctive about the representational content of mood, or indeed, of any affective state. Considering a property merely as a property appears to me to be a task for logical, conceptual, or metaphysical analysis; it is simply not clear why the representation of the properties—not as being (or soon to be) instantiated, neither as owned (or soon to be owned) by some object, nor as exemplified

(or soon to be exemplified) by some situation, but—merely as properties, should have any affective significance at all.

The moral to be drawn from the above discussion is that we still lack a satisfactory account of the intentionality of moods; such a lack might, for some, indicate that moods enjoy a rather complex intentional relation to the world, whose structure is not easy to articulate; while for some others, it might corroborate their suspicion that no such intentional relation exists. In either case, appealing to intentionality may provide little joy to anyone who would attempt to ground the rationality of moods on their ability to correctly represent their intentional object. A theory of rationality that appeals on the state's alleged intentional relation to an object would be hard to sustain in the absence of a viable account of how an intentional relation between moods and objects might be possible in the first place.

3 Moods as Second-Order States

Scepticism about the prospects of the intentionalist accounts, have led to the articulation of alternative models that approach moods as second-order states, which bear no direct correlation to the world, but which may activate first-order cognitive, conative, or affective states that are intentional in their nature. The literature on the second-order approach to moods is voluminous, but here we shall limit ourselves to three theories that seems to be directly relevant to the question at hand.

The first theory treats moods as non-intentional states that select, out of the vast number of intentional states a person may have, which are presently active, and which remain latent (Lormand 1985; for critical discussion see Griffiths 1989; Wong 2016; Tappolet 2017). Hence, among our numerous beliefs and desires, only some of them enter into the explanatory, inferential, and justificatory processes which account for our, presently occurring, emotionally expressive behaviour, and our mental or physical actions. Moods are not to be identified with the first-order cognitive or conative states whose intentional contents are interconnected so as to give rise to certain pieces of behaviour or the performance of particular actions. Rather, moods form a higher-order

mechanism of selecting and, in that sense, activating those intentional states which form our direct engagement with reality. That theory has both some theoretical virtues; regarding, though, the question of the rationality of moods, it seems to me rather unhelpful. The problem it faces is simple, but rather hard to resolve: let us assume that a mood explains and—given certain assumptions about the rationalizing role of psychological explanation—renders intelligible, and, in that sense, justifies the first-order states it activates; however, what accounts for the occurrence, the explanation, or the justification of that mood itself? What could be the criterion for assessing, in the context of the present theory, whether the second-order state itself is rational? Unless we are offered a satisfactory answer to that question, the activation theory could not help in grounding the rationality of moods.

As we shall see, that basic problem reoccurs in models which, although more sophisticated, treat moods as something like ‘the unmoved mover’ of our psychological life. Take for instance the quite popular dispositional theory, according to which moods are temporarily heightened dispositions to make certain kinds of judgement, to form certain evaluative beliefs, or to proceed with certain sorts of appraisal (for discussion see Wong 2016; Tappolet 2017). Each mood is a second-order, relatively short-term disposition (as opposed to a subject’s overall character, or emotional temperament), which marks that subject’s susceptibility to a specific range of emotions. However, even if we grant that moods do operate as higher-order factors that determine which lower-order emotive states will occur, under certain situations, that would do nothing to assuage the worry that moods themselves are rationally groundless.

Consider finally, the functionalist approach which is currently gaining momentum in affective science. Moods are treated neither as representational states, nor as merely dispositional states, but as a mechanism which effects changes at a deep level of our cognitive organization. More precisely, that approach sets moods as mechanisms whose function is to monitor the balance between demands and resources: the demands raised by our natural and social environment, and the resources (physical or psychological) we may expend in meeting those demands. When the demands exceed the resources, the balance is

negative, and we feel 'low'; when the resources surpass the demands, the balance is positive, and we feel 'high'. By monitoring one's current level of mental and physical energy in comparison to the demands generated by one's situation, mood serves the important function of setting up the agent to engage in the right task using the right amount of energy (Sizer 2000; Wong 2015, 2016).

That is a promising way to proceed in our exploration of mood states; it also provides a theoretical context for addressing the question of rationality of moods. If what makes something a mood is its discharging a certain monitoring role, moods might after all be subject to criteria of rational assessment with respect to how well—promptly, comprehensively, or accurately—they represent how one fares in the situation in which one finds oneself.

I believe though, that the theory faces a serious challenge at the level of the phenomenology of affective experience. Recall that the theory offers a criterium of telling the hedonic valence of a mood by means of checking how our energy repositories fare *vis a vis* the exigencies or requirements which we ourselves perceive as arising in the situation in which we find ourselves. Accordingly, we are invited to think that when the energy available exceeds the perceived demands of the situation, we are affectively 'plus'—what is roughly referred to as being in a 'positive' mood—and when the situation calls upon us to expend energy which our current psychological and physical state cannot supply, we are affectively 'minus'. That line of reasoning appears to me to have the following implication.

If the situation, *as perceived by us*, contains nothing inviting; if there is nothing to attract our interest in way that would trigger a desire to perform any cognitive or practical task; if, in a nutshell, the world around us involves nothing worth pursuing; then our energy level, however little it might be in absolute terms, it is evidently more than sufficient for meeting the energy requirements of a situation which we experience as raising no demands on us. Hence, according to the functionalist theory, that would be a case of being in a truly high mood. However, that claim is highly counter-intuitive, if not outright absurd.

Experiencing the world as devoid of any significance—as a field where nothing could spontaneously call for our attention, and where

values exercise no pull on our affection—is anything but ‘being in a positive mood’: on the contrary, it is characteristic of negative mood states, ranging from passing boredom, to persistent ennui, all the way to deep melancholy, and to major, clinical depression.

Recall that the theory under examination purports to account for the valence of moods in terms of their complex representational function; it could therefore be thought that the theory offers a ground for rationally assessing moods themselves in light of how well they discharge that function. However, looking at the particulars of that process, shows that the theory leads to absurd conclusions. At a minimum, it is a theory that rings false to the phenomenology of affective experience. Therefore, that theory, as it stands, cannot provide the right epistemological context for approaching the question of the rationality of moods.

4 Moods as Background Feelings

Phenomenology might be employed to the benefit of an account that does justice to the intimate relation between the way one apprehends the world, and the mood in which one is. Accordingly, the question of the rationality of moods might be better approached by paying close attention to the felt background of our sense of reality. Perhaps, contrary to traditional accounts of affectivity, the connection between mood and rationality runs deep, yet it is not often noticed precisely because it is ubiquitous and indirect. It is ubiquitous, since any engagement with world takes off from some mood state, whose very presence renders things around oneself salient as appealing or appalling, welcoming or annoying, familiar or uncanny. It is also indirect, since the mood is a pre-intentional state, constituting the background in the context of which intentionally directed emotions target their objects.

We may note that there is a variety of felt experiences listed under the heading of ‘mood’. The present approach dwells on affective experiences which are variants of a non-localized, felt sense of reality and belonging, constituting a sense of how one finds oneself in the world as a whole (Ratcliffe 2008, 2015, 2017, 2019).

Accordingly, moods can be thought of as existential feelings, which form an inextricable constituent of our experience. We may distinguish between levels of existential feelings, differing in degrees of specificity and conceptual articulation, ranging from a pure feeling of being alive, through to feelings of homeliness or general insecurity, all the way to more sharply defined experiences, including anxiety, *ennui*, or elation (Slaby and Stephan 2008; Stephan 2012a, b). Alternatively, we may think of the felt rootedness of oneself in the world (what Heideggerians would attempt to convey with the notion of *Befindlichkeit*) as being ever present, yet subject to a variety of more specific configurations which mark the distinctive character of different world attunements (*Stimmungen*) (Hatzimoysis 2010; cf. Fernandez 2014).

The importance of such an account for our understanding of moods is hard to overemphasize. I am in sympathy with many of its methodological strictures, and consider its combination of first-person narrative analysis, and analysis of data from the neuropsychology of affectivity, as highly illuminating of mood phenomena. It is worth asking therefore whether that account can aid us in our search for the rationality of moods.

Generally speaking, we may assess the theoretical rationality of a state by checking its two ends: where it comes from (epistemically), and where it is heading at (cognitively). According to the account under consideration, moods are not headed towards anything; they are *non-intentional* states. That claim is not meant to imply that they are disconnected from the world; after all each mood constitutes one's sense of one's being in the world. Neither does it entail that moods are unrelated to our perception, cognition, or volition, since moods are taken as forming an anticipatory structure of experiencing the world, a structure which makes intentional, mental and bodily, acts possible. Hence, the term often employed by proponents of that account for characterizing moods is not 'non-intentional' but 'pre-intentional' (Ratcliffe 2019). However, that notion should not blind us to the fact that, according to that account, moods are not themselves intentionally directed towards anything. Hence, it is not possible to build a theory of the rationality of moods in terms of how well or badly they fit, or match, or represent, their intentional object.

What about the other end of the mood state: what we may call its epistemic source (or its cognitive basis, or its rational ground)? The answer to that question I think may be given through a further question: *what* source (or basis, or ground)? The latter question is intended as rhetorical, for it appears to me that a core claim of the present account is that mood states are not *grounded* but *grounding*. That is indeed the very reason why moods are characterized as *background* feelings, or as possibility *structures*, or as styles of *anticipation* of experience (Ratcliffe 2019; Slaby 2008; McLaughlin 2009). They do not follow upon intentional activity; rather, moods open up or foreclose certain ranges of possible experience, enabling or disabling different ways of engaging with things, allowing one to be attuned to the world and to one's own self, in some, usually unthematized, manner. If that is the case, then looking for an epistemic basis of moods will be in vain. A mood cannot be simultaneously what grounds and directs all epistemic activity, *and* what epistemic activity may independently assess, since any assessment would be already conditioned by what the corresponding mood deems as appropriate, or fitting, or correct—in one word, as rational.

5 Conclusion

Our short journey through the sea of contemporary theories of mood has steered toward a sceptical destination. We saw that some of the most prominent views about mood states fail to offer a secure ground for a viable account of the rationality of this type of affective states. Part of the explanation for that failure lies, in my opinion, with an implicit assumption made by most of those views, to wit that moods may somehow operate either independently of, or clearly prior to emotions. Perhaps, that, currently prevalent, hierarchy needs to be rethought. Alternatives that can be put on the table may range from a simple reversal of priorities—treating mood as derivative from a type of long-term or low-intensity (Delancey 2006) emotion, to a more radical re-categorisation of affective states, by thinking of both mood and emotion as varied exemplifications of feeling consciousness (cf. Hatzimoysis

2017), or passions (cf. Charland 2010). Addressing the merits and limitations of each one of those approaches requires a separate, and much longer analysis. However, what I hope is made apparent from our preceding discussion is that the search for a rationality of moods raises a host of philosophical puzzles that deserve our attention.

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