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On Affect: Function and Phenomenology

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the nature of emotions by considering what appear to be two differing, perhaps even conflicting, approaches to affectivity—an evolutionary functional account, on the one hand, and a phenomenological view, on the other. The paper argues for the centrality of the notion of function in both approaches, articulates key differences between them, and attempts to understand how such differences can be overcome.

“Divinity must live within herself;
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch.
These are the measures destined for her soul.”
“Sunday Morning” – Wallace Stevens

1. Introduction

Investigations into the nature of emotions—philosophical, psychological, medical, historical, or otherwise—often begin with a truism: *emotions are ubiquitous to human life*. The truism is a truism because it is true. A recent large-scale study utilized a free mobile application in order to measure various aspects of the users’ psychological experiences by prompting them to answer short questionnaires at random times throughout the day (Trampe et al., 2015). More than 60,000 users downloaded the application and the researchers collected half a million completed questionnaires. What they found, not surprisingly, was

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that our lives are awash with emotions. On average, individuals reported experiencing one or more emotions 90% of the time. The most popular positive emotion was joy (35% of the time); the most popular negative emotion was anxiety (29% of the time). For 33% of the time, individuals experience at least one positive and one negative emotion simultaneously. “[E]veryday human life,” the researchers conclude, “is profoundly emotional” (p.10).

But why is the truism true? Why are we the emotional beings that we are? Both evolutionary functional and phenomenological accounts of emotions offer their own answers to the *why* question and in doing so, address the *telos* or *purpose* of emotions. Despite obvious and profound differences between these two accounts—chief amongst them phenomenology’s antipathy to the naturalism essential to evolutionary functional theories—a comparison between the two is of value. Just like evolutionary functional views, the phenomenological view of emotions that will be my focus in this paper not only ascribes functions to emotions, but also individuates them in terms of those functions. What is more, the phenomenological account insists on the bodily features of emotions and cites them as part of the character of emotions. Phenomenology thus appears to be both akin to and fundamentally opposed to evolutionary functional accounts of emotions. My aim in this paper is to make explicit phenomenology’s standing in relation to such evolutionary approaches and to show that a measuring of the logical distance separating these two views can help us understand both the limits and distinctive contributions of phenomenology.

2. Emotions as Solutions: From Function to Biology

“An emotion is a bet placed under conditions of uncertainty: it is the evolved mind’s bet about what internal deployment is likely to lead to the best average long-term set of payoffs, given the structure and statistical contingencies present in the ancestral world when a particular situation was encountered.”

(Tooby & Cosmides, 2008, p. 117)

2.1. A Quick Overview

Emotions form a proper subset of the superordinate category of affective phenomena. According to most psychological and neuroscientific accounts, emotions are relatively short-lived, flexible, multicomponent patterns and tendencies that occur in response to specific physical and social situations. Emotions are typically initiated by an individual’s appraisal or assessment of an event

that bears some personal significance to them (Frijda, 1986; Oatley, Johnson-Laird, 1987; Roseman, 1984; Scherer, 1993; Smith, Lazarus, 1993; Lazarus, 1991). The appraisal can be either conscious or unconscious and it gives rise to a cascade of interrelated responses in the individual, such as changes in subjective (felt) experiences, physiology, facial expressions, volitional attitudes, cognition, and behavior.

Many emotion researchers take emotions to be associated with and partly characterized by the specific action or thought tendencies that they bring about (Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991; Levenson, 1994; Oatley & Jenkins, 1996; Tooby Cosmides, 1990). Such specific tendencies are often aligned with physiological changes that an individual undergoes during the emotional episodes and consequently render emotions advantageous. Anger, for example, is associated with an urge to attack and physically prepares the individual to do so (Fredrickson, 2000). Whereas negative emotions typically narrow a person's momentary thought or action repertoire—in fear, e.g., one is inclined to flee, fight, or freeze, but not to mind-wander or to take interest in their surroundings—positive emotions (e.g., joy, interest) are thought to broaden one's momentary thought or action repertoire (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001, 2005; Fredrickson, Branigan, 2005; Fredrickson, Cohn, 2008; Fredrickson, Joiner, 2002).

Functional accounts of emotions emphasize that emotions are best understood in terms of the functions that they serve. Such accounts are interested in figuring out *why* we have the emotions that we do (e.g., Averill, 1990; Frijda, 1994; Keltner, Gross, 1999; Keltner, Haidt, 1999; Keltner, Kring, 1998; Levenson, 1994; Niedenthal, Brauer, 2012; Oatley, Jenkins, 1992; Plutchik, 2001; Scherer, 1984 and 1994. See also Cosmides, Tooby, 2000; Nesse, 1991; Tooby, Cosmides, 2008). Functional accounts of emotions need not be thought of as competitors to views of emotions that explicate them in terms of their action or thought tendencies. Rather, they can be understood as offering a complementary take on the nature and character of emotions by adding a specification of *why* the emotions in question have the features that they do. As a general answer to the question of why emotions exist, functional accounts hold that emotions are solutions to problems of physical or social survival (Keltner, Haidt, and Shiota, 2006; Keltner, Gross, 1999; Weisfeld, Goetz, 2013).

2.2. The Meaning of “Function”

Functional accounts of emotions emphasize that emotions serve a function and such a function is crucial for understanding their nature. But what exactly does the term “function” mean?

It is customary to draw a distinction between *minimal* function and *teleological* (or *proper*) function (Neander, 2017). A minimal function of an entity is simply something that the entity does or an effect that the entity has. A teleological function of an entity is what the entity does that explains its presence (Wright, 1973). It should be clear that not every capacity or effect of something counts as the teleological function of that thing. The presence of a heart is partly explained by its function to pump blood but not by its capacity to make a sound. Although both capacities could be called “functions,” only the former counts as teleological. Teleological functions figure prominently in biology and evolutionary psychology, and are distinguished from non-teleological functions (e.g., Cummins, 1975) insofar as ascriptions of such functions answer *why* questions (e.g., Allen, Bekoff, 1995; Ayala, 1977; Godfrey-Smith, 1993 and 1994; Griffiths, 1993; Häggqvist, 2013; Keltner, Gross, 1999; Kraemer, 2014; Millikan, 1989; Mitchell, 1993; Neander, 1991a, 1991b; Saborido, 2014; Walsh, Ariew, 1996; Wright, 1973).

The teleological function of an entity need not always be performed. In certain cases, it will be performed only infrequently—e.g., the function of a sperm is to fertilize ova and yet only a small minority succeeds in doing so (Häggqvist, 2013). In other cases, the function might never be performed. Caged animals in zoos are not given the opportunity to exercise some of the teleological functions that their organs and body parts possess (Neander, 2017). Finally, a teleological function can *malfunction*, either because the organism or item that has such a function is defective or because environmental circumstances prevent the execution of such function.

Many accounts of teleological functions are etiological: they explicate the function of an item in terms of its past selection. Such accounts hold that the function of an item is to perform what the item was (or what items of the same type were) selected to perform (Neander, 2017). Etiological articulations of an item’s function thus refer both to its history and to its regular consequences. The most common account of an etiological articulation of teleological function is an evolutionary one that holds that functions are grounded in natural selection. According to such an account, if X has teleological function F , then:

- (a) F explains why X is present (why it exists and why it is maintained);
and
- (b) F is causally relevant to the presence of X via the mechanism of natural selection (i.e., X exists because it performs F and because F confers to X [or to an organism that has X] an evolutionary advantage) (see Allen, Bekoff, 1995; Sober 2000, p. 85)

For example, the heart's ability to pump blood would count as its teleological function. Hearts exist partially because by pumping blood they confer to an organism an evolutionary advantage. Of course, not every etiological articulation of teleological function has to be an evolutionary one. Other forms of selection include intentional selection, social or cultural selection, or neural selection (Garson, 2012; Neander, 2017). However, for the case of emotions, I shall assume, following evolutionary functional views, that most emotions are the products of evolution (either adaptations or exaptations) even if they can be influenced greatly by cultural factors (Keltner, Haidt, and Shiota, 2006).

2.3. From Function to Evolution

Assuming an evolutionary understanding of teleological functions, the claim that an emotion E has teleological function F amounts to the following series of claims: (a) our evolutionary ancestors experienced E ; (b) their experience of E had the effect which we now call the teleological function of the emotion under question, F ; and (c) having that effect explains the presence of emotion E in humans insofar as E exists because F conferred an adaptive advantage on individuals who were capable of experiencing E (see Griffiths, 1993; Neander, 1991a). How can one justify such a wide-reaching account of emotions?

Many emotion theorists find no difficulty in answering this call for justification. They cite the integral and necessary roles that emotions play in our lives and conclude that emotions must exist because of their adaptive functions. Emotions, they point out, have many intra- and inter-organismic benefits and as such, they bring about systematic and beneficial consequences. They provide us with information both about the match or mismatch between organism and environment (Schwarz, Clore, 1983) and about our goals (Carver, 2001); they organize response systems (Levenson, 1994); they allow

us to detect and respond to physical and social challenges; they can facilitate decision-making (Oatley, Johnson-Laird, 1987; Schwarz, 2000; Bagozzi et al., 1998; Leone et al., 2005); they structure and prioritize actions and cognitive processes (Clore, 1994, Levenson, 1994; Simon, 1967); they promote flexibility by decoupling stimuli from responses (Scherer, 1984 and 1994); they prepare us for action and move us in ways that promote the achievement of goals (Bagozzi et al., 2000); and lastly, they serve many social functions such as promoting cooperation and group relationships (e.g., Frank, 1988; Gonzaga et al., 2001; Keltner et al., 2006; Nesse, 1991; Shiota et al., 2004; Trivers, 1971).

Reflecting on the many effects that emotions have on our lives, the claim that emotions have teleological functions is dictated, according to proponents of the evolutionary functional view, by an inference to the best explanation. Emotions have the functions that they have *because* they were ‘selected’ (by evolutionary forces) to have them. As Keltner, Haidt, and Shiota (2006, p. 117) write, “[e]motions have the hallmarks of adaptations: They are efficient, coordinated responses that help organisms to reproduce, to protect offspring, to maintain cooperative alliances, and to avoid physical threats.” For the evolutionary functionalists, emotions are thus not only minimally functional but also teleologically functional: their benefits or functions account for their presence. Emotions have evolved precisely because of their adaptive functions in genotypic and phenotypic survival (Hasselton, Ketelaar, 2006; Ketelaar, 2004).

The evolutionary functional account is, of course, not the only scientifically acceptable account of emotions. Nor is it free of problems (Barrett, 2006; Downes, 2017; Lench et al., 2015). All the same, the evolutionary functional story offers an answer—albeit somewhat programmatic and contentious—to the ubiquity of emotions. We are emotional beings because we have been shaped to be so by ancestrally structured and evolutionarily recurrent situations (Tooby, Cosmides, 1990). And even if *evolutionary* functional views of emotions may fail to account for the presence of certain emotions that do not appear to be the obvious solutions to ancestral difficulties, a functional (but non-evolutionary) view could do better. The selection of certain emotions could have come through cultural and social difficulties, one that cannot be reduced to biological difficulties. Ultimately, functional accounts of emotions explain the emergence of emotions by citing their teleological functions. Emotions are ubiquitous because, as living, embodied and social organisms, we are in (biological or social) need of them.

3. Phenomenology and Emotions

“My emotional account was always overdrawn.”

Humboldt's Gift – Saul Bellow

3.1. The Need for a Phenomenology of Emotions

“Science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not” (Sellars, 1991, p.173). It is not just scientists who live by Sellars’ description of the explanatory and ontological priority of science; many philosophers do too—and for good reasons. As psychological phenomena, emotions appear to be both biologically and physically grounded and subject to the predictive and manipulative power of our brain sciences. But then why should there be a need for a *philosophy* of emotions? What is distinctive about or endemic to philosophical discourse that is lacking in scientific investigations of the same subject matter?

Such a meta-philosophical worry has been addressed before. First, it has been suggested that philosophy differs from science in terms of its methodology. Philosophers’ engagement in conceptual, logical, or a priori analyses is not only unique to philosophy but also necessary to understanding properly scientific findings and to rendering them free of conceptual and logical inconsistencies. Second, it is said that it is philosophy and philosophy alone that can offer a synoptic picture of the world. Whereas scientific investigations have circumscribed subject matters, philosophy does not; philosophy is in the business of bridge building—it can offer systematic and comprehensive presentations of the empirical literature with an eye toward presenting a picture (a big picture) of human existence. Third, and somewhat relatedly, philosophy goes beyond science insofar as it is both descriptive and normative. As such, philosophy tells us what the sciences cannot, namely, how the world and human conduct ought to be.

All three answers have merit and a ring of plausibility, yet none of them is specific to the philosophy of emotions. At best, what they provide us with are reasons to believe in the value of philosophy. Thus, if we conclude from the aforementioned that there is a need for a philosophy of emotions, then such a need would share its origin with the need for the philosophies of perception, of law, or of economics, just to name a few.

Within phenomenology,¹ however, a more direct answer to the question regarding the need of a philosophy of emotions can be discerned. When we turn to phenomenology, we find not only a justification of the value of phenomenology (and thus of philosophy as such) but also an explicit articulation of the need for a phenomenological study of emotions. Phenomenology offers, it is said, a unique perspective to affectivity, one that can be captured neither by science nor by other philosophical approaches.

Phenomenology's insight is simple: affective phenomena are ontologically significant. What that means is that issues concerning the nature of human existence and the character of affective experiences are necessarily interconnected. By articulating our affective experiences we are at the same time laying bare the conditions for the possibility of human existence. For the phenomenologist, we do not first exist in some non-affective way and only then we are emotionally affected by the world. Rather, we exist in the world only insofar as we can be emotionally affected. Any study of human condition that 'sees' our emotional capacities as an add-on of human existence—something that is separable from what makes us human and which can be studied in isolation—is, according to phenomenology, fundamentally misguided.

Thus, "affectivity" does not denote a set of experiences or a class of mental phenomena that demand classification or a precise articulation of their character; most fundamentally, the term denotes instead an ontological structure—a way, the *human* way, of existing in the world and through which all aspects of human existence (including theoretical reasoning about affectivity itself) must necessarily be understood. Such a characterization of affectivity offers an explicit answer to the question of why we need a phenomenology (and thus a philosophy) of emotions. A phenomenology of emotions is necessary for without it, we cannot hope to come to terms with human existence—affectivity is, after all, a constitutive part of human existence. What is more, the requisite investigation of affectivity must be philosophical and not scientific for only the former, due to the fact that it is both reflexive and synthetic, can articulate the interconnections between affectivity and human nature. Or so the phenomenological story goes.

Phenomenology however also offers an explanation for the ubiquity of emotions in human life. Our everyday existence is permeated by affective experiences *because* we are the type of beings who are susceptible to those

¹ The term "phenomenology" is used in this paper to denote the movement in the history of philosophy that originated with Edmund Husserl.

experiences. It is, in other words, due to our ontological constitution that emotions and affective experiences are everywhere. Without them, we would not be able to inhabit a world of value and personal significance. For the phenomenologists, human existence is necessarily emotional existence.

The phenomenological view of emotions just described is epitomized by Martin Heidegger's existential phenomenology and specifically, by his ontological/ontic distinction between *Befindlichkeit* ("findingness" or "disposedness") and *Stimmung* (mood). The former is a basic ontological structure of human existence. It is that which makes it possible for human beings to find themselves situated in or attuned to the world in a way that is both meaningful to them and affectively laden (Elpidorou, 2013; Elpidorou and Freeman, 2015; Freeman, 2014; Freeman and Elpidorou, 2015; Slaby, 2015). *Befindlichkeit*, Heidegger writes, is the "finding of oneself in being-in-the-world" and "belongs with being-in-the-world as such" (Heidegger, 1979/1992, p. 352/255; translation altered). Whereas *Befindlichkeit* is an ontological structure, moods (*Stimmungen*) are the various, specific, and pre-reflective ways in which we relate to the world and to ourselves. Moods shape the manner in which the world appears to us; they 'open' it up insofar as it is also through them that the world is disclosed to us. Insofar as *Befindlichkeit* belongs to the structure of human existence, we are then always in some mood or another (Heidegger, 1927/1962, §29). We are always in moods but not because moods are the internal (or subjective) states of mind that accompany us everywhere and provide the affective 'soundtrack' of our lives; nor is it because they exist independently or outside of us. Rather, we are always in some mood because moods belong to and constitute our existence. They are an indelible part of human life; they are, as Heidegger writes, the "fundamental ways in which we find ourselves disposed in such and such a way" (Heidegger, 1983/1995, p. 101/67; see also Heidegger, 1927/1962, §29).

Even though Heidegger's understanding of affectivity exemplifies phenomenology's central insight into the ontological significance of emotions, my focus in this paper will not be on (early) Heidegger. Instead, I focus on Jean-Paul Sartre, and specifically on his account of emotions as this is given primarily in his *Sketch for a Theory of Emotions*. My (perhaps not obvious) choice to focus on Sartre is motivated by the following three key features of Sartre's account. First, although Sartre shares Heidegger's conviction of the significance of affectivity, unlike Heidegger, he deems it necessary to engage in a critical dialogue with the psychological sciences. Second, Sartre's view of emotions is

embodied; Heidegger's is not. Third, in articulating his view on emotions, Sartre makes explicit use of the function of emotions. These three features of Sartre's position allow us to draw a meaningful comparison between his phenomenological view on emotions and evolutionary functional views.

3.2. Sartre on Emotions

The Sartrean view of emotions holds that emotions are embodied, enactive, and unreflective ways of existing in and engaging with the world that aim to resolve insurmountable difficulties.² Although during our emotional episodes we could turn inwards, so to speak, and make our emotions and ourselves the intentional objects of our affective experiences, we rarely do—and even if we were to do so, our emotional experiences would be significantly transformed. Emotions, for Sartre, are first and foremost “a specific manner of apprehending the world.” (STE 35)³ And as ways of apprehending the world, we are aware of our own consciousness only pre-reflectively. As Sartre writes, “The emotional consciousness is at first non-reflective, and upon that plane it cannot be consciousness of itself, except in the non-positional mode.” (STE 34) Emotions are thus not experiences of ‘internal’ psychological states, but of the world. In fact, they are not *mere* experiences (if by that we mean passive happenings), but active ways of interacting with and disclosing the world.

As ways of existing, emotions bring about a purposeful transformation in the manner in which we experience the world. “The onset of emotion,” Sartre states, “is a complete modification of the ‘being-in-the-world’ (STE 63). Before the onset of our (strong)⁴ emotional experiences, we find ourselves immersed in a world characterized by concerns, obligations, and possibilities. We experience the world as “hodological” (STE 38)—as containing *hodoi* (roads)—i.e., as being governed by a plurality of means-ends relationships: “The world around us...appears to be all furrowed with strait and narrow paths

² Here I offer only a brief description of Sartre's account of emotions and thus concentrate almost exclusively on the claims that he makes in the *Sketch*. My focus, however, should not be taken to mean that the *Sketch* is the only place in which Sartre talks about emotions nor that it is the only text worth considering when it comes to the topic of emotions. For more comprehensive attempts to articulate Sartre's views on the emotions, see, among others, Barnes (1984), Elpidorou (2017), and Fell (1965).

³ All references to Sartre (1939/2004) and Sartre (1943/1984) will be indicated respectively by “STE” and “BN” followed in both cases by the pagination of the English translation.

⁴ This qualification is necessary because Sartre's theory works best for *strong* emotional reactions. In the *Sketch*, he does offer an all-too-brief description of two other kinds of emotions, “subtle emotions” and “weak emotions” (STE 55). For a discussion of how one can make sense of different types of emotions and affective phenomena using Sartre's phenomenology, see L. R. Barrett (1982), Elpidorou (2017), and Fell (1965).

leading to such and such determinate end” (STE 39). Worldly entities, other persons, and situations all stand in such relations to each other forming a causal and pragmatic nexus. In this everyday and concerned mode, the world appears to be both instrumental and deterministic: our desired ends can be achieved only by the attainment of prescribed and fixed means while, at the same time, we remain subject to rules and laws—those of physics and society, of biology and economics. Precisely because of the instrumental and deterministic nature of our everyday existence it is unavoidable that we will encounter situations that do not yield to our desires—either because we cannot readily procure the means leading to our desired ends or because the necessary means of achieving those ends are missing. The world is exacting and difficult. And it makes demands that we are not always capable of meeting.

Sometimes we will be able to overcome our experienced difficulties using ordinary (that is, practical) means—when one plan falls apart, another might materialize. Sometimes we succeed; other times, however, we do not. And when we do not, when we are faced with a pressing and insurmountable obstacle, emotions arise. By interacting with a world that does not yield to our desires, we are changed; we become emotional, and with us the world itself is changed. Sartre explains:

We can now conceive what an emotion is. It is a transformation of the world. When the paths before us become too difficult, or when we cannot see our way, we can no longer put up with such an exacting and difficult world. All ways are barred and nevertheless we must act. So then we try to change the world; that is to live it as though the relations between things and their potentialities were not governed by deterministic processes but by magic. (STE 39-40)

Sartre describes the world that emotional consciousness reveals as *magical*. It is so partly because it possesses qualities unlike the ones that we encountered before. For example, disgust changes innocuous objects into repulsive ones; anxiety renders familiar situations overwhelming; and contempt makes a person unworthy, morally inferior. Emotional consciousness confers such qualities to the world without however bringing about a material transformation. The world is not really changed; only our

consciousness of it is. Importantly, and concurrently with the formation⁵ of these new qualities, the world of emotions is revealed as magical also because it is not “governed by deterministic processes” (ibid.) To say that deterministic processes do not characterize our emotional existence is not to assert that somehow physical laws cease to apply. Rather, what has changed during our emotional episodes is that the rigid means-ends relationships that previously dictated our concerned, everyday existence no longer apply. It is precisely because of this feature that emotions are capable of providing solutions to experienced difficulties.

During emotional episodes, we can achieve the desired ends without procuring the means that previously appeared to us to be absolutely necessary. A fit of anger, for instance, offers an escape from a losing argument, not by helping us to deal with the argument or to outsmart our interlocutor—we can do neither. Rather, with the help of anger we impose our view on our interlocutor by yelling and silencing them, or by walking away before they have a chance to respond. Moreover, by changing the manner in which we perceive the world, emotions can also solve experienced difficulties by leading us to denounce a previously desired and cherished end and thus absolving us of the responsibility to act. Even if life appears to be unimaginable without some cherished end, certain emotions can drastically change our outlook. Sadness is one of them. By affectively neutralizing the world (STE 44), it offers us a much-needed respite from the world’s demands. When we are sad, nothing attracts us; no end appeals to us. Because of that, we need not act.

Hence, emotions disclose to us a world in which the demands of our concerned existence cease, at least temporarily, to apply to us. In doing so, they attempt to offer solutions to experienced difficulties. Even if reality does not admit of an escape—as Sartre reminds us in a famous line from *Nausea*⁶—we can still relieve ourselves of its burdens by transforming it with our emotions.

⁵ The new qualities that our emotions magically confer to the world are taken by us as real. “Consciousness does not limit itself to the projection of affective meanings upon the world around it; it *lives* the new world it has thereby constituted—lives it directly, commits itself to it, and suffers from the qualities that the concomitant behaviour has outlined.” (STE 51)

⁶ “Existence is a plenum from which one cannot escape” (Sartre 1938/1964; translation altered).

3.3. The Function and Effectiveness of Sartrean Emotions

There is a lot more that can be said about Sartre's view of emotions. And indeed a lot has been said that is critical of his approach. Here I take up neither a critique nor a defense of Sartre—I and many others have done both elsewhere.⁷ For present purposes, I accept the phenomenological account on offer and consider one specific application of this account in order to explicate further Sartre's views regarding the function and purpose of emotions.

Consider the emotion of fear. For Sartre, fear is not a monolithic experience. Indeed, in the *Sketch*, Sartre distinguishes between two distinct types of fear, active and passive. Both of them deserve the name "fear" because both arise on account of the perception of a threat to one's well-being and because both, at least according to Sartre, attempt to negate the threat when deterministic means fail us. Still, the two types of fear are distinct because they attempt to negate the threat in different ways.

In the case of active fear, we attempt to resolve the experienced difficulty (i.e., the threat) by fleeing. Flight in active fear "is magical behaviour which negates the dangerous object with one's whole body, by reversing the vectorial structure of the space we live in it and suddenly creating a potential direction on the *other side*." (STE 43) Because we cannot address the threat with deterministic means—because we cannot fight it, overpower it, or sustain it—we run from it. And by running away from it, we escape from it, but only in the sense that we have put it behind us. Fleeing "is a way of forgetting, of negating the danger," Sartre writes (STE 43). It is crucial to Sartre's view that we do not mistake fleeing for a calculative reaction to the perception of a threat. If it were so, it would not be the embodiment of an emotion but the deployment of a prudential strategy. We do not flee *in order* to escape, according to Sartre. Rather, we flee because we cannot deal with the threat. Fleeing is a solution only because there is no other (practical) solution.

Just like active fear, passive fear is also an attempt to negate the threat. Whereas in active fear, we flee; in passive fear, we faint. As Sartre writes in an often quoted passage:

I see a ferocious beast coming towards me: my legs give way under me, my heart beats more feebly, I turn pale, fall down and faint away. No conduct could seem

⁷ See, for example, Anders (1950), L. R. Barrett (1982), Elpidorou (2016), (2017), Emerick (1999), Fell (1965), Hatzimoyisis (2014), Richmond (2010), Solomon (2006), and Weberman (1996).

worse adapted to the danger than this, which leaves me defenceless. And nevertheless it is a behaviour of *escape*; the fainting away is a refuge. (STE 42)

The threat in the case of passive fear is inescapable. We cannot fight it, but nor can we outrun it. We thus take the only action that is at our disposal. We annihilate it by annihilating our own consciousness. Passive fear, it seems, is a last-ditch effort to overcome an otherwise overwhelming and insuperable difficulty.

The case of fear is instructive. It reveals that fear is functional insofar as it serves a purpose. And at least under one description, it shares its function with all emotions: fear, just like all other emotions, aims to offer a solution to an encountered difficulty that could not be resolved by instrumental, pragmatic means. Consequently, what makes fear an emotion is both its aim (its “finality”, to quote Sartre (STE 34, 58)), and the fact that such an aim can be accomplished only by transforming our instrumental world into a magical one. What makes fear the emotion of *fear* is both the specific difficulty that gives rise to it and the way in which the experience of fear, by transforming our bodies and the world, attempts to resolve the difficult. Sartre’s account offers us a way of distinguishing emotions from other experiences and of individuating between different emotion types.⁸

The purposefulness of fear and indeed of all emotions⁹ appears to render Sartre’s phenomenological account akin to evolutionary functional views. After all, both endow emotions with functions and both individuate emotions in terms of their functions. Upon closer inspection however, such a similarity, although real and important, does not suffice to close the gap that separates the two views. The conflict between the two views is made evident once we focus on two characteristics of Sartrean emotions.

First, emotions as magical transformations are rather meager ways of dealing with most threats. Thus, even though emotions are functional they are not so because they can objectively solve the difficulties that give rise to them. Such a conclusion follows not only from the fact that emotions arise *after* all other ways

⁸ “In every case the problem is different, and the behaviour is different. To grasp the signification and aim, one would have to know and analyse each particular situation.” (STE 47-8)

⁹ As readers of the *Sketch* know, it is unclear whether the *Sketch* contains a single and consistent account of emotions that can accommodate all examples of emotions that Sartre considers, including the sudden ones of horror and awe. For present purposes, it matters little whether and how one can resolve this interpretative difficulty. Even if fear cannot be used as a model for all emotions, it is still a model for most.

of dealing with the difficulty have failed, but also because emotional conduct, is, according to Sartre's own admission, "not *effectual*" (STE 41). In elaborating on this point, he writes:

Its aim is not really to act upon the object as it is, by the interpolation of particular means. Emotional behaviour seeks by itself, and without modifying the structure of the object, to confer another quality upon it. (ibid.)

Without an ability to change materially the world, the effectiveness of emotions is substantially limited. In the case of passive fear, nothing is really gained by fainting. We might have forgotten the threat and negated it in our consciousness, but the threat has not forgotten us. It is still there. To quote Sartre, "Such are the limitations of my magical power over the world" (STE 42). Similar comments can be made about the inadequacy of anger, sadness, and most other emotions that fit Sartre's model. Thus, whereas evolutionary accounts of emotions understand emotions in terms of their real, material effects that they have (or have had) on the world and ourselves, Sartre's account understands emotion in terms of the effects that they have on our embodied and enactive consciousness. It is not the emotions' job to change our material conditions nor is it to confer to us any kind of biological (evolutionary) advantage. All that is beside the point for Sartre.

Second, the function that emotions possess and which characterizes them is not biological but *personal* (or existential). According to Sartre, emotions are not mere happenings (or passions) (BN 445). Although emotions arise spontaneously, insofar as we do not choose to have our emotions, there is an important sense according to which emotions are our own and hence we are responsible for them. Our emotions are our own because our emotional conduct (when it arises and how it expresses itself) depends to a large extent on how we already structured our lives, priorities, and projects. But what this means for Sartre is that emotions as responses to existential difficulties cannot be understood from a third-person (objective) perspective. Indeed, if we were to adopt an evolutionary perspective, we would completely miss the nature of (Sartrean) emotions. Such affective experiences are neither possible nor meaningful outside the context of personal, and not just animal or biological, existence.

3.4. Sartre's Critique of Psychology

The aforementioned considerations suggest that if one adopts the phenomenological perspective, then affectivity in general and emotions in particular are placed out of reach of scientific (psychological or biological) approaches. The same conclusion regarding the limits of science also shows up in discussions of phenomenology's critique of naturalism. Much has been written about this topic, so my remarks will be both succinct and specific to Sartre.¹⁰ By addressing this issue, my aim is to show how Sartre's own criticisms of psychology support the assessment reached in the previous subsection, namely, that, for the phenomenologist, phenomenological and evolutionary ways of thinking about emotions are worlds apart.¹¹

In the introductory section of the *Sketch*, a part of the book often neglected by commentators, Sartre lays out his criticisms of a scientific, mainly psychological, approach to affectivity. His aim is twofold: first, to criticize psychology by highlighting its limits as an empirical investigation of human nature; and second, to motivate a phenomenological study of emotions by showing how phenomenology, by going beyond psychology, is uniquely suited to uncover essential features of human existence.

Sartre's criticism of psychology stems from his contention that psychology is a discipline that is empirical through and through. Psychology's primary concern is the collection of facts about the human psyche. But psychological and scientific facts are by their very nature incapable of carving out the essence of the lived experience of emotions, and consequently of articulating the nature of human existence. Although the reality and existence of emotions is readily admitted by psychology, the existence of emotions can only be treated as an accident. For psychology, emotions are just another class of psychological phenomena. They are "the subject of one chapter after the other chapters, much as in chemical treatises calcium might come after hydrogen and sulphur." (STE 5)

Why does Sartre think that psychological (and scientific) facts about emotions cannot amount to a satisfactory conception of emotions and of their constitutive role in human existence? Sartre highlights three

¹⁰ For some discussions about the prospects of naturalizing phenomenology and what that exactly means, see De Preester (2006), Gallagher (2012), Moran (2013), Petitot et al. (1999), Yoshimi (2015), and Zahavi (2013).

¹¹ My discussion of Sartre's criticisms of psychology draws upon Elpidorou (2017).

interconnected features of psychological facts that render them fundamentally unsuitable for an understanding of the ontological and existential significance of emotions.

First, psychological facts are fragmentary insofar as they are given to researchers not already as part of a synthetic whole but as atomistic and disconnected from other facts. Psychologists, for Sartre, do not have access to an a priori conception of human nature—as an empirical enterprise, psychology precludes such access. Thus, from the perspective of psychology, the discovery of each and every fact must then be taken on its own. However meticulous and comprehensive such an empirical undertaking may be, it is severely limited: it “can furnish no more than a sum of heteroclitic facts” (STE 4). As a result, psychology, Sartre holds, fails to provide a holistic and structured picture of human existence (STE 6-7, 13).

Second, in virtue of being fragmentary, psychological facts are also non-significant insofar as they do not and cannot signify anything beyond themselves. “For the psychologist emotion signifies nothing,” Sartre writes, “because he studies it as a fact; that is, by separating from everything else” (STE 11). Facts must then be accepted at face value. In other words, facts are what they are, what they appear to be, and nothing more than that. Thus, psychology cannot connect emotions to human nature and existence. And it misses the (phenomenological) point of affectivity for it is simply incapable of seeing how affectivity relates to—constitutes and is constituted by—human nature. “[I]f every human fact is in truth significant,” as phenomenology holds it to be, then “this emotion of the psychologists is of its nature dead, non-psychic, inhuman” (ibid.). Phenomenology and psychology appear to be studying distinct phenomena.

Lastly, and as a joint result of their fragmentary and non-significant character, psychological facts can only describe accidental features of human existence. Psychology cannot go behind the facts, so to speak, and uncover what gives rise to those facts. “[T]he psychologist, questioned about emotion, is quite proud to affirm: ‘It exists. Why? I know nothing of that, I simply state the fact’” (ibid.). Psychology cannot reveal to us the structures of human existence that make affectivity possible in the first place. It is empirical, not transcendental. Because of that, it inevitably fails to come to terms with human reality.

Unlike psychology that remains bound to its empirical scruples, phenomenology can “go beyond the psychic, beyond the situation of man in the world, even to the very source of man, of the world and of the psychic” (STE 8). It can ask, “what must a consciousness be, that emotion should be possible,

perhaps that it should even be necessary?” (STE 11) It can investigate emotions not as mere facts or appearances but as significant and meaningful phenomena. And it can treat emotions for what they really: “an organized form of human existence” (STE 12; see also STE 5, 9).

It is clear that from the perspective of phenomenology, scientific approaches to affectivity are fundamentally limited. They cannot uncover the grounds of emotions; consequently, emotions’ full significance in human existence remains unarticulated. The point can be made even more forcefully. By missing the ontological and existential significance of emotions, scientific approaches to emotions have changed the subject—they appear to study not emotions (or the emotions of phenomenology) but something else. Psychology, Sartre concludes, “should recognize that emotion *does not exist*, considered as a physical phenomenon, for a body cannot be emotional, not being able to attribute a meaning to its own manifestations.” (STE 13)

4. The Proper Distance Between Them

It would be easy to conclude by declaring that there’s a methodological rift that separates evolutionary functional accounts of emotions and the phenomenological articulation offered by Sartre; by reminding one that even though both accounts make use of function, they understand function in distinct ways; and by cautioning one that the phenomena they study, though common in name, might after all be distinct in nature. Even though the tension between the two is undeniable, pointing out the tension is not the end of the story. The contrast between the two views should not lead to a kind of comparative and dialectical aporia, but rather to a productive conflict between two differing perspectives. Seen either from a phenomenological or evolutionary perspective, the gap between emotions as existentially significant and emotions as biologically grounded demands either a justification for its existence and persistence or our best efforts to bridge it.

4.1. The Gap, as Seen from Biology

Consider first the issue from an evolutionary functional perspective. One of Sartre’s main criticisms in the introductory section in the *Sketch* is that the psychology of emotions fails to consider the conditions for the possibility of emotions. Given its empirical nature, psychology treats emotions as accidents: unproblematic givens that demand precise characterization and categorization

but which do not and cannot reveal anything fundamental about human nature. Are evolutionary functional views guilty of such superficiality and of a single-minded, even dogmatic, espousal of empiricism? It does not seem like it. Evolutionary views might be motivated by empirical considerations and findings but they are not exhausted by them. What is more, in their attempts to understand the nature of emotions they posit precisely what Sartre accuses psychological views of being unable to articulate: the essence of emotions. As discussed earlier, evolutionary views consider emotions to be adaptive mechanisms capable of providing solutions to pressing and recurring difficulties. The essence of emotions lies in their teleological functions. In this regard, emotions point to something beyond themselves; *pace Sartre, facts* about emotions are indeed significant. Emotions exist and because they do, they are indicative of a fundamental fact of human existence, namely, that humans are biological entities endowed not with fixed mechanisms or faculties but with a flexibility to shape themselves.

Granted, most phenomenologists will not accept such a biological and evolutionarily driven characterization of affectivity and human existence. Still, their criticism cannot be that evolutionary accounts are dogmatically empirical, superficial, or somehow narrow. Evolutionary accounts of emotions neither fail to acknowledge the essence of emotions, nor do they treat emotions as mere accidents. Phenomenology's disagreement with evolutionary psychology, if such a disagreement is genuine, will have to have a different source.

The source, however, is not hard to locate. Most phenomenologists would point out that evolutionary accounts ascribe to emotions a biological significance, whereas their proper significance is personal (existential). And because personal significance is irreducible to biology, evolutionary accounts miss out on something essential to emotions. It is clear that such a view of the significance and, consequently, of the essence of emotions is not one that can be accepted without argumentation. The irreducibility of facts about personal existence to facts about biological existence is a contentious claim and one that would be denied by most evolutionary views. What is more, evolutionary accounts can return the favor. They could object that if phenomenology insists on the irreducibility between the two types of facts, then it has rendered the biology of emotions mysterious. Any connection between their biological and experiential features would have to be taken as brute. It appears then that the existence of a gap between phenomenological and evolutionary approaches to

emotions is merely the beginning and not the conclusion of a philosophically fruitful conversation between the two.

4.2. The Gap, as Seen from (Sartrean) Phenomenology

A similar conclusion can be reached, I wish to show, if we were to adopt the perspective of Sartrean phenomenology. Isn't Sartre, and indeed phenomenology itself, under the obligation to address the origin and biology of emotions? Isn't there something deeply unsatisfactory by insisting that scientific approaches to emotions are inadequate and yet not explaining how an obvious fact about human existence—the fact that we are physical and biological beings—figures into phenomenology's explication of affectivity? In other words, doesn't phenomenology owe us an explanation of how emotions arise out of our biological or physical nature?

Even though Sartre does not seriously engage with evolutionary considerations—Darwin's name is curiously absent from several of Sartre's works—he still considers a more general version of the aforementioned questions. Instead of asking about emotions' origin and relationship to biology, he asks about consciousness' (the for-itself) origin and relationship to the world. His attitude toward those questions is ultimately ambivalent (Gardner, 2010). But this ambivalence is revealing: It shows that even for Sartre the existence of a gap between the personal and the biological cannot be the end of our phenomenological discussion of consciousness and affectivity.

Faced with the question of the origin of consciousness, Sartre offers two answers that appear, *prima facie* at least, to be mutually exclusive—hence, his ambivalence. First, Sartre appears to dismiss the question as meaningless. Certainly, it is within his methodological right to assert that phenomenology is under no obligation to explain the emergence of emotions. Phenomenology has to take emotions' existence as a given. It can theorize *from* their existence and can attempt to articulate the nature of the beings who are in possession of them. Yet, it cannot give an answer to the question of how emotions come to be. The question of the origin of emotions would require us to somehow step outside of the human perspective. But even if we were to do so (perhaps *per impossibile*), we would come up empty-handed. Emotions as personal (existential) phenomena cannot be found outside the human perspective.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre discusses the limits of phenomenological inquiry when he considers the question of why there is a plurality of consciousness (i.e., other people) (BN 394-400). He admits that there are

questions that cannot be answered through the human point of view. And such questions should be dismissed. At most, what one could say in response to such questions is that they are meaningless, because they ask us to do what cannot be done, i.e., “to *take a point of view* on the totality” (BN 400); or they can be answered but only by pointing out “a fundamental contingency” (BN 399), namely, that things are how they are. So, emotions arise, we might say, because they are constitutive of human nature. But if we were to ask, “Why is human nature the way it is?”, we would have to respond with a simple “Because it is.”

Sartre, however, is not entirely satisfied with such a deflationary approach to the question of the origin of consciousness (and thus, of emotions). In the Conclusion to *Being and Nothingness*, he raises explicitly the question about the genesis of the for-itself (consciousness). Not only that, but he denies that it is inappropriate to ask such a question. “The for-itself,” Sartre tells us, “is such that it has the right to turn back on itself toward its own origin” (BN 788; for discussion see Wilson, 2000). However, Sartre is quick to point out that even though we can pose such a question, we cannot pursue an answer to it through ontology. “To this question ontology cannot reply, for the problem here is to explain an event, not to describe the structures of a being” (BN 788). Indeed, raised within the perspective of ontology the question of the origin of consciousness becomes meaningless. Sartre explains:

Ontology here comes up against a profound contradiction since it is through the for-itself that the possibility of a foundation comes to the world. In order to be a project of founding itself, the in-itself would of necessity have to be originally a presence to itself—*i.e.*, it would have to be already consciousness. (BN 789)¹²

We do not have access to the prehistory of consciousness, because, for consciousness, there is no before itself. Consequently, ontology cannot address the question of the origin of consciousness.

All the same, and immediately after reaching this conclusion, Sartre announces that “metaphysics must nevertheless attempt to determine the nature and the meaning of this prehistoric process” (BN 790). For Sartre, it is thus

¹² As Wilson (2000, pp. 55-6) points out, it is not entirely clear how to understand such a claim by Sartre given that earlier in *Being and Nothingness* he does appear to offer an ontological answer to the question of origin. Sartre writes: “For us, on the other hand, the appearance of the for-itself or absolute event refers indeed to the effort of an in-itself to found itself; it corresponds to an attempt on the part of being to remove contingency from its being” (BN 132-3).

metaphysics and not ontology that can engage with the question of the origin of consciousness. What is, however, the difference between the two? “[O]ntology appears to us capable of being defined as the specification of the structure of being of the existent taken as a totality, and we shall define metaphysics rather as raising the question of the existent” (BN 395). Metaphysics can thus ask *why* questions—indeed, it can ask the (or one of the) most fundamental *why* questions. And as such, it can attempt to articulate a teleological description of consciousness’ origin.

Why does the for-itself arise in terms of being? We, indeed, apply the term “metaphysical” to the study of individual processes which have given birth to *this* world as a concrete and particular totality. In this sense, metaphysics is to ontology as history is to sociology. (BN 788).

It appears then that metaphysics can take us not only beyond appearances but also beyond the structure of our being, to our prehistory. Thus, even if our prehistory is not and cannot be given as *prehistory* to us, it must still be constitutive of our present. The past of consciousness is not a thing of the past. Consequently, our prehistory does not lie outside of our investigatory and theoretical bounds.

Even so, metaphysical inquiry, Sartre insists, is limited insofar as questions concerning our prehistory must receive speculative answers.

It is up to metaphysics to form the *hypotheses* which will allow us to conceive of this process as the absolute event which comes to crown the individual venture which is the existence of being. It is evident that these hypotheses will remain hypotheses since we can not expect either further validation or invalidation. What will make their *validity* is only the possibility which they will offer us of unifying the *givens* of ontology. (BN 790)

This passage is crucial. Metaphysical answers to the question of the origin of emotions (and consciousness in general) will be judged not in terms of their veracity or accuracy but in terms of their utility. The metaphysical answer that we are looking for, although speculative and unverifiable, has to be one that accounts for the givens of ontology. But the givens of ontology include in addition to the existential significance of emotions, their embodied nature and biological origin. “[T]he body is what this consciousness *is*. It is not even anything except body. The rest is nothingness and silence” (BN 434). The

question of the origin of consciousness arises naturally from within Sartre's phenomenological ontology. On the one hand, the distinction between consciousness and the world has been established—consciousness lives in a world that is not itself. On the other hand, we are entitled to question the prehistory of the structures of human existence because such structures are available to us for immediate descriptive analysis (Wilson, 2000). Thus, through phenomenology itself, we are led to look outside of phenomenology—to a metaphysical investigation that can provide a theoretically fruitful account of the origin of consciousness. Sartrean phenomenology—or at least, my reading of it—legitimizes such metaphysical questioning. In doing so, it opens up the possibility for a type of philosophical inquiry on the nature of consciousness and emotions that would account for the origin of consciousness without denying its personal significance and, at least for Sartre, its freedom.

5. Conclusion

Although marked by a profound tension, a comparison between evolutionary functional views of emotions and phenomenological approaches proves to be a fruitful one. It reveals not just a difference between their respective understandings of emotions' function but also a pressing need to bridge the gap between facts about biology, on the one hand, and facts about first-personal, conscious, and personal existence, on the other hand. The ambivalence that Sartre displays regarding the question of the origin of consciousness is important. We should not dismiss it, but take it to heart; as an attitude, it allows us to take both phenomenology and biology seriously. It is unclear whether there is a way of doing justice to both outlooks on emotions. All the same, such a reconciling effort is certainly worth our time. The problem that the existence and ubiquity of emotions pose is too important to ignore.

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