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Emotions, Existential Feelings, and their Regulation

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Abstract

This article focuses on existential feelings. To begin with, it depicts how they differ from other affective phenomena and what type of intentionality they manifest. Furthermore, a detailed analysis shows that existential feelings can be subdivided, first, into elementary and nonelementary varieties, and second, into three foci of primary relatedness: oneself, the social environment, and the world as such. Eventually, five strategies of emotion regulation are examined with respect to their applicability to existential feelings. In the case of harmful existential feelings, it turns out that none seems fitting except one, attentional deployment.

Keywords
emotion regulation, existential feelings, intentionality, regulation of existential feelings

Affective Phenomena and their Intentionality

Traditionally, we distinguish between *emotions* and *moods*, sometimes also between emotions and *emotional episodes*, and also between these and *character traits*. Whereas emotions and emotional episodes are seen as directed to the world, as referring to particular situations, objects and events, moods and, in particular, character traits are not treated that way very often. In addition, there are affective phenomena not captured in the usual taxonomy and terminology, which nevertheless deserve our attention. Some of them have recently been called *existential feelings* (I will introduce them in the next section).

Emotions—such as, for example, hate, love, jealousy, shame, guilt, or despair—are manifested in various *emotional episodes*, in which the person who is jealous, in love, hateful, or desperate feels the very way which is characteristic for the respective emotion (see Goldie, 2000). Whereas the particular emotional episodes may last from seconds to several minutes, the emotion may last for days, weeks, months, even years. Think of the persisting hate that over years fueled the terrorists' plans and actions that eventually culminated in the September 11 events, or—at the other end of the spectrum—think of the love that may bind a couple together during their whole adult life. During these (long) time frames, the emotion seems to shift from foreground to background and vice versa, whereas the emotional episode is gone when the episode is over.[1] Whereas all emotions are manifested in emotional episodes, not all emotional episodes need to be manifestations of longer lasting emotions. An episode of startle, a feeling of disgust while looking at a spot of vomit, or the sudden feeling of fear while a car is approaching on the wrong side of the street— none of these emotional episodes are part of longer lasting emotions.

Particularly in psychology, experimental research clearly is focused on emotional episodes—usually artificially triggered by standardized pictures or short narratives. In Scherer's component process model, for example, emotions are even defined as *episodes* of "interrelated, synchronized changes in the states of all or most of the five organismic subsystems in response to the evaluation of an external or internal stimulus event as relevant to major concerns of the organism" (Scherer, 2005, p. 697). In contrast, in clinical contexts in psychiatry or psychotherapy, long-lasting emotions (such as enduring shame, guilt, anxiety, sadness, or feelings of loss) are often the topics of treatment. The challenge of regulating them also differs considerably from regulating short-lived emotional episodes.

There is, however, wide agreement among philosophers and psychologists that emotions and emotional episodes have intentionality—they relate to objects, situations, and events in the world (see, e.g., de Sousa, 2010; Frijda, 1994). Furthermore,

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emotionally affected persons always relate both to the world and to themselves in specific ways. Some examples might illustrate this type of intentionality (for more details, see Slaby & Stephan, 2008): While afraid, we apprehend something as a threat (which is a kind of world reference), and at the same time we feel threatened, that is to say, we have an awareness of being vulnerable in a specific way (which is a kind of self-reference). Furthermore, feeling fear indicates a discrepancy between the current state of affairs and our deep concern about our own security and bodily integrity. In anger, we apprehend something—usually another person's action that directly or indirectly affects us negatively—as an offence (world reference). Simultaneously, we construe ourselves as disrespected, offended, or damaged by the other person's behavior (self-reference). Feeling grief and despair about the loss of a beloved one (world reference) goes hand in hand with the painful feeling of loneliness and deprivation (self-reference). Each emotional feeling, thus, comprises feeling oneself (in relation) towards something, where the two poles of *feeling oneself* and *feeling towards* are inextricably bound together. In addition, the reciprocity of reference to oneself and to the world, as occurring in emotional processes, has to be conceived with respect to the environmental and cultural background. It is essential for the significance of emotions as specific subjective appraisals of the world: Via emotions we feel our concerns and evaluations towards those dimensions that have particular significance for ourselves—the feeling beings.

Existential Feelings

Existential feelings have been in the focus neither of affective science nor of emotion research until recently. It is mainly through the work of Ratcliffe (2005, 2008) that they have received wide attention. In contrast to emotions and emotional episodes, existential feelings manifest a different type of intentionality: They are not directed towards anything *specific*; rather, they are background orientations through which everything we perceive, feel, think, and act upon is structured. Existential feelings constitute, to use Ratcliffe's words, "how we find ourselves in the world," in general (2008, p. 36). It is his merit to have made clear the essential, although often hidden, role existential feelings play in our daily affairs, how they change in psychopathologies and what that means for the patients. It is my aim to continue recent work on the preliminary geography of the huge variety of existential feelings, which still resembles mapping a newly discovered continent.[2] Let's start by looking at the phenomena themselves as introduced by Ratcliffe:

> The world as a whole can sometimes appear unfamiliar, unreal, distant or close. It can be something that one feels apart from or at one with. One can feel in control of one's overall situation or overwhelmed by it. One can feel like a participant in the world or like a detached, estranged observer staring at objects that do not feel quite "there." Such relationships structure all experience. (Ratcliffe, 2008, p. 37)

I propose to distinguish two classes of existential feelings—elementary (or basic) existential feelings from nonelementary (or nonbasic) ones—and, as a contrast class, *atmospheric* feelings from both. Elementary existential feelings remain largely unnoticed under normal life circumstances. They are in the background of our affective lives and provide us with a sense of reality: of ourselves, our actions, other persons and objects, and the surrounding world as such. Feelings of this sort, however, can alter. In particular, they are distorted in specific ways in psychopathologies: In Capgras delusions, for example, closest relatives and partners appear as strangely unfamiliar and are taken to be impostors; in Cotard delusions and depersonalization disorder one's own reality is not felt any more in a proper way; in schizophrenia and derealization episodes the reality of the world as a whole is shaken to the core; and in major depression the immediate grip on the world is gone, the feeling of agency fades away. For those who undergo these alterations the whole framework of experience—perceptions, feelings, and agency—changes dramatically.

In contrast, nonelementary existential feelings can alter without involving any severe distortion from normal mental functioning. They comprise feelings that concern one's own vital state (such as feeling healthy and strong, versus feeling exhausted and weak), or that reflect one's position within social environments (such as feeling welcomed and familiar, versus feeling disrespected and rejected), or that manifest one's standing towards the world in general (such as feeling at home or as a participant in the tide of events, versus feeling disconnected, like a stranger or not at home in this world). Most of these feelings, and particularly the more negative ones, can also occur within those very time spans in which elementary existential feelings have shifted to nonnormal conditions. In general, all background feelings can appear in complex blending.

In contrast to both elementary and nonelementary existential feelings, atmospheric feelings relate to specific events and situations. Like existential feelings, they prestructure our interactions with others and the world—often, however, only in the very situation in which they are triggered. As existential feelings, atmospheric feelings also comprise self-related feelings (such as feeling looked at), feelings that concern our social environment (such as feeling an icy atmosphere while being in a job interview), and feelings that relate to the world in general (such as feeling the "holy aura" of an old cathedral or the magnificence of the universe while watching the starry sky in the Andes; for more on such affective atmospheres, see Anderson, 2009).

In each of the three types of background feelings, I pointed to three aspects of relatedness: the world as such, the social environment, and oneself. To get a better understanding of the diversity of existential feelings, it is essential to distinguish these characteristic foci, although they might appear inextricable from a phenomenological perspective.[3] At least in psychopathologies, severe distortions of single aspects of relatedness are reported for elementary existential feelings, and this holds true, even if these alterations may affect other aspects of relatedness in due course. And similar considerations are applicable to nonelementary and atmospheric feelings. Table 1 gives an overview of the essential types of background feelings with illustrative examples.

Table 1. Existential feelings and atmospheric feelings

	Primary relatedness		
	Oneself	Social environment	World as such
Elementary existential feelings (enduring distortions or alterations from "normal" elementary existential feelings are usually due to diverse psychopathologies)	Feeling alive versus dead or unreal. Feeling (vs. not feeling) as a bodily being. Feeling (vs. not feeling) as the agent of one's deeds. Feeling (vs. not feeling) as the center of one's perceptual world.	Feeling the realm of other people as actual interaction partners versus experiencing others as unreal or as impostors (combined with a loss of feeling familiar with closest relatives and friends).	Experiencing the world as real versus experiencing the world as if it were behind a pane of glass. Feeling that one has no grip on the tide of events.
Nonelementary existential feelings	Feeling healthy, fresh, strong, versus feeling ill, tired, weak. Having a basic sense of trust and feeling secure versus feeling some elusive threat, insecurity, and one's own vulnerability.	Feeling welcome, a part of a group, much needed and important versus feeling rejected, isolated, dispensable, uncalled-for.	Feeling homely, in one's place, as part of a whole, as a participant versus feeling like a stranger, not at home, like a small cog in a large impersonal engine.
Atmospheric feelings	Feeling stared at in a particular situation versus feeling comfortable.	Feeling the warmth versus the arrogance and disrespect of a particular audience.	Feeling the magnificence of the whole universe while watching the starry sky.

Existential background feelings are important ingredients of our affective dynamics. In a subtle manner, they influence how we feel and act in specific situations and events. Usually, these feelings are in the background of our experience; they are not directed towards specific events in our lives, rather, they provide the general affective stage on which all more focused emotional attitudes unfold. On the other hand, particular interactions and experiences may contribute to alterations of our overall background affectivity.

The Regulation of Emotions and Existential Feelings

Gross once claimed that one of life's great challenges is successfully regulating emotions (Gross, 2002, p. 281); we may add: and successfully regulating existential feelings, for they prestructure many, if not all of our encounters with the world, particularly the emotional ones. Although, for many persons, it already seems to be a difficult task to regulate (dysfunctional) emotions, the challenge is even more demanding when (harmful) existential feelings are at issue. Reasons for the recalcitrance of existential feelings are their background character, and the special type of intentionality they have, that is, their nonspecificity towards *particular* situations and events.

According to Gross, emotion regulation refers to processes by which we influence *which* emotions we have, *when* we have them, and *how* we experience and express them (Gross, 2002, pp. 281–282). He considers five stages in the process of emotion generation, in which somebody can influence his or her emotions; four of them are antecedent-focused, and one is response-focused. In temporal order, the first four strategies comprise *situation selection*, *situation modification*, *attentional deployment*, and *cognitive change*. The fifth is *response modulation*. He centers on a comparison of the effects of the last two: cognitive change by *reappraisal* versus response modulation by *suppression*. While reappraisal can lead to a modification of the personal meaning that is assigned to a given situation and thereby change the whole emotional response (including experiential, behavioral, and physiological responses), suppression aims first and foremost at a decrease of expressive behavior. Often, it does not affect experiential and physiological responses, which themselves are not accessible to direct voluntary modification. Thus, except for cases where reappraisal is impossible, suppression is not the choice of preference. In general, it has less favorable consequences than reappraisal (for more details, see Gross, 2002, p. 289). But suppression is not an option for the regulation of existential feelings either. Since existential feelings do not involve characteristic expressive responses like those of so-called basic emotions, there is nothing that could be suppressed: There is no particular bodily expression for, say, feeling unfamiliar, distant, close, or unreal. The—possibly harmful—experiential character of existential feelings cannot be suppressed either. It is not up to us to choose not to have any of these feelings in a given moment. Therefore, in what follows, I concentrate on the four types of antecedent-focused emotion regulation strategies to survey what can be learnt for the regulation of existential feelings.

Both *situation selection* and *situation modification* have an influence on the onset of emotions. Thus, it makes a difference whether somebody chooses to meet an old friend instead of his study group the day before the math exam, and it makes a difference for his process of emotion generation whether he chooses to talk about the last movie rather than about the exam.[4] There is no doubt that both strategies also work in the case of atmospheric feelings since they, too, are situation-responsive. Thus, feeling agitated in the middle of a nervous and uproarious city center, one might choose to look for a mosque or cathedral to dive into the atmosphere of tranquility and contemplation they

provide and leave the bustling city behind. It is less obvious, however, how situation selection (or situation modification) might work in the case of elementary or nonelementary existential feelings. If these border on atmospheric feelings, say, if one foresees, for example, that visiting a certain relative will invariably leave one in a state of estrangement from the social world, permeated with feelings of utter despair and dread, one might chose to *avoid* such visits or cut them short—which is, in a way, avoiding one's exposure to an unpleasant contagious atmosphere. In the case of pervasive negative (nonelementary) existential feelings such as feeling like a stranger, insecure, weak, and exhausted, I doubt, however, that a swift change of the situation could help modify them; and even less so in cases of profound and pervasive feelings of unreality or feelings of being cut off from the world of others who act and perform and enjoy. These existential feelings are neither reactions to specific situations nor responses to (or assimilations of) specific affective atmospheres; rather, they *pre*structure our experience of particular situations. Thus, it seems very hard to modulate them by strategies such as situation selection or situation modification. To change severely harmful existential feelings it might be necessary to alter complete lifestyles, or even to search for asylum in a clinical setting, instead of selecting a specific, but transient situation.

As a third strategy of emotion regulation, *attentional deployment* can be used to direct one's attention to specific aspects within a given situation: either to distract one from an unpleasant topic or to concentrate on an important one, or even "to get to the bottom of a problem by ruminating about it" (Gross, 2002, p. 283). Although the strategy of attentional deployment is of minor interest to Gross I will get back to it, for it appears to be highly relevant for the regulation even of pervasive and harmful existential feelings. For Gross, however, *cognitive change* is the most important strategy to regulate emotions. It refers to selecting which personal meaning is given to an aspect (of a situation) that has gained one's attention: The meaning is "crucial because it powerfully influences which experiential, behavioral, and physiological response tendencies will be generated in that particular situation" (Gross, 2002, p. 283). Thus, it makes a huge difference whether someone regards a math exam as an evaluation of oneself as a person, rather than a pretty extraneous test.

Given the double reference to both the world and oneself as manifested in the intentionality of emotions and emotional episodes, a closer look reveals that reappraisal can have two primary targets: oneself or the world. Referring to the world, someone can construe a given situation contrary to fact (reappraisal by *pretending*), or she can interpret the situation in a way that is true to fact but still different in emotional meaning (this is the strategy Gross has in mind). In the case of self-focused reappraisal, three options are available: One can deny the significance to oneself of the eliciting situation (so-called *detachment*—for example, when imagining oneself in the role of a distant observer); one can reappraise the significance of something to oneself (when construing a loss as a chance for maturation); or one can reassess one's coping capacities (when discovering the strengths one has in the face of a challenge).[5]

Reappraisal strategies are applicable to atmospheric feelings, too. Thus, one can downgrade the significance of a job interview and thereby detach from, say, the icy atmosphere the interviewers emanate, or, at the other end of the spectrum, while on a date one may decide to distance oneself from an atmosphere one considers to be getting too flowery and romantic. However, none of the reappraisal strategies seems to work in the case of elementary and nonelementary existential feelings. Since these feelings are not bound to specific situations, the reappraisal of any particular situation would not relate to and thereby alter them. Particularly in pervasive harmful existential feelings, patients regularly notice and report the tension between what they feel and what they think they know about themselves, others, and the world. In depersonalization disorder, for example—or analogously in derealization and major depression—when persons feel like strangers to themselves: unreal, lifeless, like automata that have lost deep feelings, they still know that they are alive and that they are the very human being documented on their birth certificate (for more details, see Sierra, 2009, Chapter 2). What they miss are their former existential feelings such as being the center of agency, experiencing an emotional life, or feeling real. But neither knowledge nor desire have an impact on their altered existential feelings. These appear encapsulated with respect to cognitive approaches. (It would almost seem ridiculous if a suffering person, for example, tried out specific detachment strategies when feeling detached from the world is her very problem.) So, it is hard to see how reappraisal could have any effect on affective states that pertinaciously resist evidence to the contrary. To alter such feelings it seems necessary to consider one's whole being in the world instead of focusing on and reappraising any particular situation or event.

A strategy that appears promising in this regard, and particularly with respect to elementary and nonelementary existential feelings, is *attentional deployment*. Within the series of emotion-generating processes, attentional deployment enters the stage between situation selection (and modification) and reappraisal. It may be used to shift attention to those more general aspects of one's life that are at the heart of one's whole situation and feelings of being. If these are accessible to reappraisal processes one's existential feelings might also be altered in the end. Thus, attentional deployment seems to be at work when somebody acknowledges the framework in which particular nonelementary existential feelings occur—by realizing *why* one is feeling exhausted, insecure, or weak. Such cognitive ascent might not help in getting rid of the existential feelings proper, but it may modify the force by which these background feelings structure further experiences and thereby constrain the influence they have on our lives. (This, by the way, seems to be what cognitive–behavioral therapy tries to do in depersonalization; see Sierra, 2009, pp. 128–130.) Another example may be familiar to many of the readers: Long ago, you may have agreed to participate at a conference and to give a talk. Now—pretty late, indeed—you find the time to work on the presentation, and you notice that time is running out. The talk you may be able to present falls short of your own expectancies. You notice disappointment, your work is stalling,

other duties overlap; in short, your existential feelings are characterized by tension, exhaustion, and sense of failure. Refocusing attention, however, may change your feelings of being considerably. By realizing that the conference gives you the chance to meet old friends again, to learn about their latest research projects, and that the program offers enough time to chat with each other, you might look forward joyfully to this event and even become convinced that your talk, too, may have some relevance to the other colleagues and you will gain a rather positive perspective on the work still to be done. This example, however, relates to nonelementary existential feelings. It may be much harder to refocus attention in an analogical way to very harmful elementary existential feelings.

To a certain extent, however, attentional deployment might also work in the case of elementary existential feelings, particularly when applying a technique that has been successfully used in a slightly different therapeutic context—the regulation of severely aggressive behavior—namely, the method of *nonviolent communication* (see Rosenberg, 2003). One of the core principles of this method is to redirect one's attention to the basic needs that are not met when experiencing strong negative emotions, for example, anger or rage. Being able to become aware of these needs can be aimed, in a second step, at informing others involved in the situation in an open-minded manner. Often, strong emotions diminish by refocusing, say, from an accused offender who is the genuine target of one's anger (i.e., its world reference) to the deepest unfulfilled needs at the bottom of one's emotion (e.g., the need to be respected and recognized). During this process self-reference does not remain bound to such surface emotions as feeling anger and rage, but also relates to basic needs that are not fulfilled in that situation.

Analogously, attention shifts might also work in the case of harmful existential feelings. If the attention of patients can be redirected from their derailed existential feelings to those fundamental desires and needs that have been chronically unfulfilled in their past, one might succeed in bringing them back into touch with their most vital concerns from which they may be persistently alienated. This, in the end, might enable them to regain a feeling of themselves. In consequence, the harmful existential feelings themselves will in all likelihood change. The case studies by Simeon and Abugel (2006) suggest that, for instance, many depersonalization patients hardly received empathy from their caretakers and that their desire for understanding and care was probably unfulfilled for many years.

The proposed way of bringing to awareness unfulfilled desires, however, will hardly be available to patients in acute phases of major depression, let alone in psychotic states. In such cases, opening up to feeling self-reference would have to first be prepared, amongst other things, by a sustained change of life circumstances, possibly in a clinical setting. So the strategy of situation selection, of course taking effect in a *sustained* manner, would have to precede the strategy of attentional deployment. What would prima facie seem to speak against bringing to awareness unfulfilled desires is that, in view of a situation that is possibly experienced as hopeless and in which important desires seem unrealizable, strong emotions (such as anger, sadness, or despair) might take the place of the burdensome existential feelings. This is even to be expected. I would, however, see such a change as an improvement, since in strong emotions action tendencies which are virtually absent in stages of low affectivity, become manifest, as is commonly the case in depression.[6]

If it is already hard to study the various strategies of emotion regulation comparatively and under lab conditions, the challenge is much greater to clinically test the possibilities of regulating elementary existential feelings by attentional deployment. But this will be a task for future research.

Notes

1 This account of emotions raises, however, some serious metaphysical issues. In particular, it is not settled yet what makes different emotional episodes manifestations of one and the same emotion; or in other words: what makes an emotion that lasts over weeks, months, or even years one and the same emotion. The emotion might even change: A former hate might grow or diminish, love might wax and wane. There is currently no account of identity criteria for emotions that shift forward and backward into conscious focus. Prima facie the constancy of the object the emotion is directed towards is essential, but even this feature may allow exceptions.

2 A first attempt to categorize existential feelings stems from Slaby and Stephan (2008); here I mainly follow modifications as outlined in Stephan and Slaby (2011). Paskaleva (2011) has mapped typical changes of existential feelings in the course of major depression.

3 Ratcliffe comments on the Google list he obtained by typing in "the feeling of being" that "some of these seem to be ways of experiencing the self, the world, and also the self–world relation, the three aspects being inextricable" (2008, p. 37).

4 Such strategies to regulate emotions work only to a certain extent within situations of no escape as, for example, one's being on a train that—due to signal problems—comes to a halt of 3 hours in the middle of nowhere with the result of missing one's return flight to Germany. The best one can do is have a cool draft of beer in the dining car and chat with other travelers about binational experiences while using trains.

5 These distinctions were developed within the *animal emotionale* project (see http://www.animal-emotionale.de/en/animalemotionale). Recent studies show that self-focused reappraisal with detachment strategies leads to rebound effects in neuronal structures involved in emotional processing (Walter et al., 2009).

6 That depression and anger can indeed be closely linked has been shown in recent studies by Thomas Csordas, who discovered how the affective states of depressed adolescents can shift from depression to aggression. Here I am referring to his talk "Inferring Immediacy in Adolescent Accounts of Depression" delivered in the context of the German Research Foundation (DFG) and Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) conference The Phenomenology of Depression on the 26th of March, 2011.

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