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Selves hijacked: affects and personhood in 'self-illness ambiguity'

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates from a phenomenological perspective the origins of self-illness ambiguity. Drawing on phenomenological theories of affectivity and selfhood, I argue that, as a phenomenon which concerns primarily the 'personal self', self-illness ambiguity is dependent on distinct alterations of affective background orientations. I start by illustrating how personhood is anchored in the experience of a specific set of non-intentional affects – i.e. *moods* or *existential feelings* – alterations of which are often present in mental ill-health. Also through the exploration of the phenomenology of acute and long-term anxiety, I suggest that self-illness ambiguity originates in the presence of moods or existential feelings that are in tension with the ones that structure the person's experience prior to the onset of the illness or when its symptoms are not experienced. More specifically, I claim that due to their ability to 'block' or 'suspend' some of the person's affective and cognitive responses, such affective orientations may unsettle one's self-defining evaluative perspective, leading to uncertainty and doubting about one's personal self.

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1. Introduction

This paper seeks to develop a phenomenological investigation of key aspects of 'self-illness ambiguity' (Sadler 2007). In particular, it explores the origins of this phenomenon, suggesting that the experience of significant alterations of 'moods' or 'existential feelings' plays a fundamental role in the generation of self-illness ambiguity.

I start by providing an illustration of the concept of self-illness ambiguity and how this has been characterized in some of the relevant literature, outlining how this phenomenon is best understood as concerning the 'personal self' (Sadler 2007).

I then move to show that self-illness ambiguity is essentially related to affective experience. I do so by drawing on phenomenological theories which establish a fundamental connection between affectivity and personhood (e.g. De Monticelli 2003; Scheler 1973a, 1973b). Building on this, I claim that the values, cares, and preferences that

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define our identity as persons are rooted in particular intentional (i.e. emotions) and non-intentional affects (i.e. moods and existential feelings). As such, disturbances of the personal self may be triggered by specific disruptions of affective experience,¹ and in this study I show that this is where the origins of self-illness ambiguity lie.

More specifically, through the exploration of the phenomenology of acute and long-term anxiety, I suggest that the uncertainty and self-doubting that are constitutive of self-illness ambiguity are rooted in the experience of moods or existential feelings that are in tension with the ones experienced prior to the onset of the illness or when its symptoms are not present.

I specifically draw attention to how these affects have the power to expand or constrain one's emotional and cognitive responses, extending or narrowing dimensions of the personal self. This contributes to explain the emergence, in the psychopathological conditions under consideration, of new self-narratives which are at odds with the ones previously upheld by the person, and which foster ambiguity about the sources of one's experiences, decisions, and actions.

Finally, I conclude by briefly exploring the implications of the account developed in the paper. In addition to contributing to clarify the causes of self-illness ambiguity, the insights developed here are relevant also to the understanding of how self-illness ambiguity can be managed and overcome. In particular, they highlight that the existence of an alignment between the affects that are experienced and the self-narratives that are produced does not guarantee that self-illness ambiguity has been resolved in a way that is reflective of the individual's personal self.

2. Experience and self-understanding in illness ambiguity

Different forms of mental ill-health can be accompanied by the experience of 'self-illness ambiguity' (Sadler 2007). As highlighted by Dings and Glas, the term designates 'the difficulty in distinguishing one's self, or "who one is," from a mental disorder or diagnosis', a difficulty which might transpire from 'statements such as "Is it me or my mental disorder?" and "I don't know who I am anymore"' (2020, 334).

Mental illness can engender significant changes in one's patterns of thought, feeling, and action, leading to radical transformations of the sufferers' experience and perspective on life. Mental illness, in other terms, can profoundly alter the ways in which one relates to oneself, others, and the world and sufferers can be acutely aware of this. Not only various dimensions of one's existence may be disrupted, but one can also be painfully conscious of the altering effects that one's ill-health may have on different aspects of one's experience.

When the impact of a mental disorder is extensive and pervasive, it may thus become difficult for sufferers to disentangle the effects of the disorder from aspects of their life that are not impacted by it. More specifically, sufferers may struggle to distinguish the mental states – for example, emotions, judgments, and desires – that are the 'product' of the illness from those that aren't. They may become uncertain as to whether what they feel, believe, and want is really what *they* feel, believe, and want, or this is rather an integral aspect or a consequence of their illness (Dings and Glas 2020, 334–335).

Such a condition, more broadly, may result in doubts about *who* one really is or has been over time. A key feature of self-illness ambiguity may be a concern for one's 'true self', the questioning of one's identity, and how this relates to one's illness. One, for

example, may wonder whether they have become a different person from the one they were before getting ill, or whether the person brought to light by the illness – and not their ‘usual’ self – was there all along. Such self-related uncertainty and questioning seems to be exemplified in the following passage of Brampton’s (2009) memoir of depression:

I have been getting on and off aeroplanes on my own since I was ten years old. I am fiercely independent. I am fierce. Or so people tell me. Used to tell me. I never used to be so afraid. When I was one of his editors, I used to stand up against Rupert Murdoch, arguing with him. I used to be so brave. I used to be somebody.

I am still somebody.

Aren’t I?

But who?

I am somebody who can’t leave her bedroom, somebody who can’t walk across a road to buy a newspaper. (Brampton 2009, 34–35)

In this passage, the doubt concerning the narrator’s identity is closely connected to a perceived change in what it was possible for her to do and achieve, namely the experiential possibilities that are associated with specific types of life (e.g. travelling by aeroplane as something that facilitates an independent life). What Brampton once perceived as doable or achievable for her, in the moment captured by this passage no longer appeared as such, and this had rather been replaced by a set of possibilities that are expression of a very different type of life.

Similarly, Elyn Saks’ autobiographical account of schizophrenia depicts experiences which appear to illustrate some of the dynamics associated with self-illness ambiguity, and how these are entangled with transformations in the range of possible experiences that are open to one:

[...] I was Elyn with my family and friends, Professor Saks when I was teaching or writing articles, and the Lady of the Charts when I was ill [...]. There were many days when I believed I was nothing more than the Lady of the Charts—a crazy woman who’d faked her way into a teaching job and would soon be discovered for what she really was and put where she really belonged—in a mental hospital. Other times, I denied that the Lady of the Charts even existed, because my illness wasn’t real. If I could just successfully get off medication, the Lady of the Charts would disappear. Because how could I reconcile the Lady of the Charts coexisting alongside Elyn and Professor Saks? (Saks 2011, 243)

The experience of acute or long-term anxiety can also exemplify different aspects of self-illness ambiguity, and this is the experience on which my analysis will focus in the fourth section of this paper. To do so, I will draw on philosophical and published first-personal accounts of anxiety, but my reflections throughout the text are also informed by my own long-term experience as an anxiety sufferer.

Through anxiety, a range of actual or possible events, people, things, or states of affairs can be perceived as threatening or worrisome to various degrees. In pathological cases, the anxiety is disproportionate or unwarranted by the nature of its objects: what one is anxious about is not as threatening or worrisome as it is experienced to be (cf. APA 2013, 189–190).

Anxiety sufferers are often aware of the distorting power of anxious feelings; they are conscious of the fact that anxiety frequently ‘mis-fires’, so to speak, conveying an unrealistic portrayal of the dangers that one is facing. However, despite this awareness, those who suffer from anxiety may struggle to distinguish between justified and unjustified instances of anxiety, and knowing that this is the case may exacerbate the anxiety itself and the difficulty to determine when it is warranted or not. In other terms, when experiencing pathological anxiety, one may question whether their own evaluations are reflective of reality or are rather the product of anxiety, wondering, for example, if a threat is being faced, or if it is one’s anxiety ‘speaking’. This form of uncertainty can also occur when anxiety sufferers decide to counteract or challenge their worries, for example by facing, rather than avoiding, the circumstances that they are anxious about, taking a stance that is in contrast with what is suggested by the anxiety itself. Those who suffer from anxiety can come to question the origin of such ‘counter-phobic’ behaviours too (Smith 2013, 44ff.), wondering whether they are justified and something that they *really* want to pursue, or whether such behaviours are a mere reaction, potentially unwarranted, to the anxiety itself. As explained by Smith (2013, 46) in his memoir of living with anxiety:

[a]nxious people have to learn to distinguish between their correct and incorrect anxiety impulses. Counter-phobic anxious people have to learn to distinguish between their correct and incorrect anxiety impulses *and* their correct and incorrect counter-phobic impulses. They have double the work.

As it will be illustrated later on, the experience of severe or chronic anxiety can contribute to decisions and actions that have a significant impact on the person’s life, for example withdrawing from activities or projects that one enjoys or considers important. Awareness of these dynamics too may lead sufferers to question the extent to which their choices are the product of an autonomous decision or rather a by-product of the anxiety itself.

As suggested by Sadler’s account (2007), self-illness ambiguity concerns a particular form or dimension of selfhood, namely the ‘personal self’. This is a self who has ‘agency’, a specific ‘identity’, a ‘(life) trajectory’, a ‘history’, and a specific ‘perspective’ on the world (Sadler 2007, 114). Otherwise said, self-illness ambiguity is a phenomenon that is experienced in relation to the self *as a person*, that is, in relation to aspects of oneself that make one the particular individual one is.

Self-illness ambiguity is thus relevant to our understanding of personal identity, where the notion of personal identity here at issue, however, is to be given a specific connotation. As observed by Schechtman, the debate on personal identity in analytic philosophy tended to revolve around issues concerning the ‘reidentification question’, namely the search for the conditions that make it possible to identify someone as the same person over time (1996, 7ff.). However, also another question – the ‘characterization’ one – can be raised with regard to personhood, and this has to do with the features that make someone the person they are (Schechtman 1996, 73ff.). In order for the characterization question to be adequately answered, it is not enough to identify the features and events which are part of the person’s history. Rather, what is fundamental is the determination of which among these characteristics truly belong to the person or, in other words, make her ‘who’ she is.

The predicaments at the core of self-illness ambiguity are profoundly intertwined with personhood, as they involve the experience, expression, and negotiation of uncertainty regarding characteristic features of one's own self. More precisely, this can be described as ambiguity concerning the *sources* of one's beliefs, emotions, desires, or actions, and, in particular, uncertainty as to whether these have originated in 'oneself' or in one's 'illness' (Dings and Glas 2020, 334ff.).

Self-illness ambiguity is thus, to a significant extent, ambiguity about one's *authentic* self, a distressing and disruptive uncertainty about one's personal identity. But how does such a predicament arise?

The origins of self-illness ambiguity can be debated, and, as illustrated by Dings (2020, 173ff.), this is the case also due to the existence of different theories of selfhood.² Broadly speaking, a potential point of contention here concerns whether the roots of self-illness ambiguity are to be identified with reflective or cognitive processes, or with pre-reflective or affective processes. Adopting the perspective of narrative theories of selfhood, for example, it is possible to argue that phenomena associated with self-illness ambiguity originate in disruptions of narrativity, such as sudden shifts of self-narratives (Schechtman 2010; cf. Dings 2020, 174). At the other end of the spectrum, self-illness ambiguity can be seen as essentially bodily or affective in nature: from this perspective, elements such as certainty/uncertainty and authenticity/inauthenticity would be first and foremost felt experiences. As such, self-illness ambiguity could be argued to be grounded in the presence or absence of specific feelings.

Dings and Glas (2020), however, have advanced an account of self-illness ambiguity that integrates some of the aspects of both the alternative approaches outlined above. More specifically, they have claimed that 'we can distinguish between two "levels" of self-ambiguity, related to two main forms of self-experience' (2020, 336). On the one hand, they argue, self-illness ambiguity may arise on an *unreflective* or *phenomenological* level; on the other, it can originate in a *reflective* or *conceptual* level of self-understanding, 'where one deliberates about one's self-concept or self-narrative' (2020, 336). According to this position, ambiguity arisen at either level of self-experience may impact on and potentially enhance ambiguity at the other level.

The relationship between different forms of self-experience is thus central to this account, and Dings and Glas indeed suggest that it is through the management of such a relationship that self-illness ambiguity can be resolved. In particular, they claim that, in the first place, one's reflective self-understanding needs to be renegotiated in a process through which one seeks to determine whether the 'ambiguous factor' (2020, 336) is alien to the self or integral to it. In this process, a coherent narrative should emerge, a narrative that needs to be consistent with the unreflective, phenomenological level of self-experience. As they explain:

[...] resolving self-ambiguity, according to the current proposal, entails achieving a form of congruence between one's reflective self-understanding (e.g. one's self-concept) and the bodily and affective feedback one receives while unreflectively acting on the world. (2020, 336)

There are various advantages to the model proposed by Dings and Glas. For example, this account recognizes that the presence of a coherent life narrative is not enough to guarantee that a self is present and persists over time. As observed by Schechtman, 'there can be intelligible stories of how someone loses his or her identity' (2001, 100), so the

continuity of selfhood cannot hinge upon the existence of an autobiographical narrative alone. In addition, the coherence of a life story is not sufficient to ensure that the narrative will be perceived by the narrator as authentic, as there can be perfectly consistent life stories that just do not feel true to oneself.³

Despite the persuasiveness of Dings and Glas' account, however, it seems that there might be more to be said about the dynamics in which self-ambiguity can originate. One may indeed wonder what exactly are the mechanisms in virtue of which, at the unreflective level of experience, we might feel that an action is not ours, and, on the other hand, why, on the conceptual level, one may start harbouring doubts about 'who one is' (2020, 336). This is the aspect that this paper seeks to clarify by drawing on a phenomenological account of affective experience and personhood.

3. The personal self and affectivity

So far, I have outlined how self-illness ambiguity concerns various dimensions of the personal self. As discussed, this is a predicament concerning personal identity as intended by the 'characterization question', and involves a disruption of various dimensions of personhood.

While this provides a framework for the understanding of the manifestations of self-illness ambiguity, what remains to be unearthed, importantly, is the origin of this predicament. How does self-illness ambiguity develop? What kind of alterations of experience can bring about the disturbances of the personal self-described above? In the following, I will aim to at least partially address this question by drawing on a phenomenological account of personhood that conceives of personal identity and its disturbances as fundamentally rooted in affectivity.

3.1. Feelings and values

The investigation of the self *as a person* and of affective experience has been central to the work of both classical and contemporary phenomenologists. From this perspective, a connection between personhood and affectivity has often been established through the acknowledgement that evaluative attitudes are key to both domains. On the one hand, the insights developed by classical phenomenologists like Scheler (1973a) and Stein (2000), and, more recently, authors like De Monticelli (2003, 2006, 2018) and Slaby (2008), suggest that affective states and evaluations are intimately connected. On the other, the work of some of these scholars portrays personhood as intimately linked to the ability to take a stance with regard to what is valuable for one, suggesting that affective experience is part and parcel of the dynamics through which the self as a person is constituted.

A comprehensive reconstruction of these mechanisms in the work of different phenomenologists would exceed the scope of this paper. However, in the following I will provide an outline of some of the insights which have emerged from this tradition, in order to provide a framework through which to understand the relationships between affects and personhood.

As anticipated above, the 'characterization question' would be answered by some phenomenologists by appealing to the existence of an individual evaluative perspective (cf.

Scheler 1973b; De Monticelli 2003, 2006, 2018). From this point of view, what makes me the particular person that I am is the series of values that I endorse: my individuality is tied to what is important to me or matters to me in a range of different ways. This concerns my moral stances – what I believe is morally good or bad – but it also concerns other dimensions: my intellectual interests, my cherished relationships, my professional commitments, and so on and so forth. Importantly, for phenomenologists like Scheler and De Monticelli, personal identity is anchored in the constitution of an order of ‘value preferences’ (De Monticelli 2006, 63; Scheler 1973b), namely in the constitution of an order of priorities, or ranking, concerning what we value.

Within the phenomenological approach I am broadly referring to, the constitution of such an evaluative perspective is an affectively laden process, and this is the case due to the role played by affective states of different kinds.⁴ In the first place, this has to do with the claim that there exists a specific form of ‘affective intentionality’ (Slaby 2008), namely that affective experiences like emotions can have an intentional structure, while at the same time being distinct from cognitive states (e.g. beliefs or judgements). According to this position, a mental state can both be a ‘feeling’ and be ‘about something’ (Slaby 2008), and, more specifically, it has been suggested that the objects of such intentional feelings are ‘value’ or ‘evaluative’ qualities (De Monticelli 2018). From this perspective, emotions can be seen as ‘experiences of significance’ (Slaby 2008, 432–433) through which the events, situations, objects, or persons to which the emotions are directed are felt as valuable (or dis-valuable) in certain ways.⁵ Emotions are thus similar to perceptual states, in so far as through them we have an immediate experience of things as having certain properties – i.e. a positive or negative value – and this is not the result of an inferential process.

Intentional feelings thus make a fundamental contribution to the processes through which an evaluative perspective can be constituted. This is the case because, in line with other contemporary accounts of the relationship between emotions and the experience of values (e.g. De Sousa 2001), phenomenologists tend to attribute a primacy to the affective domain over the cognitive one. More specifically, in this context it is suggested that the apprehension of value properties is both prior to – and irreplaceable by – the cognitive apprehension of such properties (e.g. Scheler 1973a, 255).

This account can be supported by the acknowledgement that evaluative experience tends to have an *immediate* character: for example, we perceive things as being good or bad, beautiful or ugly, interesting or boring, before being able to articulate the experience, or its grounds, explicitly. In addition, a mere cognitive evaluation (i.e. an evaluation that is not accompanied by a consonant affective experience), falls short of the characteristics that we would attribute to a full-fledged evaluative stance. For example, we tend to think that valuing something goes hand in hand with the inclination to respond to what we value in certain ways. However, simply believing – rather than feeling – that something is valuable may not be enough to motivate us to act accordingly.

However, affectivity is involved in the constitution of personhood also in a more profound way, as not only the perception of values is affectively-laden, but the range of evaluative properties one is responsive to can also be considered to be a function of a particular type of affects.

3.2. *Moods and existential feelings*

Attention has often been drawn by phenomenologists to the existence of what may generally be referred to as *affective background orientations*. This is a range of experiences which do not typically have an intentional structure but bear a very close relationship to intentionality. Affective background orientations, in other terms, tend not to be directed to specific things, people, events, or states of affairs but exert a significant influence on the way in which we relate to intentional objects.

An example of such view is Heidegger's account of 'moods' (1991). This is a specific range of affects which are the source of our being 'attuned to' or 'disposed' towards the world in a certain way (Elpidorou and Freeman 2015). More specifically, moods enable us to find things significant in certain manners, for example, to find them useful, pleasant, exciting, boring, dangerous, interesting, and so on and so forth (Ratcliffe 2010b, 355ff.; 2013b, 158ff.).

This is premised on the recognition that we ordinarily encounter things as being significant for us in a host of different ways, and that such forms of significance are grounded in broader, experiential structures that modulate our 'Being-in-the-world' (Heidegger 1991) as a whole, and are conditions of possibility for other cognitive, affective, and volitional states. For example, in order to be afraid of a particular object, or to think of it as frightening, I already need to be experiencing the world in a certain manner, and, in particular, as harbouring the possibility for me to be endangered or threatened (cf. Heidegger 1991, 179–182; Ratcliffe 2013b, 163). If, on the contrary, my experience of the world was of a domain in which no danger or threat could ever emerge, the emotion of fear, as well as related judgements and desires, would be precluded to me.

This idea has been further developed by Matthew Ratcliffe in his account of a particular kind of background affective orientations: 'existential feelings' (2005, 2008). Ratcliffe observes that there is a range of affective experiences, that have mostly been overlooked in the literature on emotion, which, however, play a cardinal role in shaping the meaning that things are encountered as having, or the kinds of mattering that we can be receptive to (2008, 36ff.). In his words:

The world 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 situation as a whole 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 experiences. Whenever one has a specific experience of oneself, another person or an inanimate object being a certain way, the experience has, as a background, a more general sense of one's relationship with the world. (Ratcliffe 2005, 45)

In addition to the experiences mentioned in this passage, also affective states that are more frequently talked about in the philosophical literature – for example feelings of guilt or hope – can, according to Ratcliffe, display the structure of existential feelings (see e.g. Ratcliffe 2010a, 2013a). In other terms, affective states that often have an intentional character (namely, affective states that are often referred to as 'emotions') can sometimes have a non-intentional form and play an experience-shaping role analogous to the one described above.

Central to Ratcliffe's account is the idea that existential feelings structure the 'possibility space' (2008) that we inhabit, idea to which there seem to be two related facets.

On the one hand, Ratcliffe emphasizes that existential feelings radically influence what it is possible for us to experience: existential feelings, he argues, have a ‘pre-intentional’ character, namely they determine ‘what kinds of intentional state it is possible to have’ (2010a, 604). This means that the types of mental states that we can entertain – for example, the types of emotions that we can have – is a function of the existential feelings that we are experiencing. For example, I have argued elsewhere that existential feelings of low self-worth (i.e. low self-esteem) make it difficult for the experiencer to entertain mental states integral to which are positive self-evaluations, for instance the emotion of pride (Bortolan 2020). On the contrary, such feelings entail a disposition to interpret and assess one’s circumstances and oneself in ways that are consonant with the feelings of low self-worth, for example through the emotion of shame or embarrassment.

On the other hand, as an integral aspect of their pre-intentionality, existential feelings shape our sense of what it is possible for us to experience or achieve. What we feel ourselves as capable of doing, the range of options that at any given time appear to be available or unavailable to us, is also dependent on which existential feelings we are undergoing (cf. Ratcliffe 2010a, 2013a). Integral to the existential feelings of low self-worth discussed above, for instance, would be a sense of oneself as having little or no capacities for achievement or success, so that the range of possibilities that are perceived as open for one is dramatically restricted.

Due to the fundamental role they play in modulating our experiential field, moods and existential feelings⁶ can also be argued to be key to the processes through which an evaluative perspective, and, relatedly, a personal self can be constituted. Moods and existential feelings determine the ‘kinds of significance’ or ‘mattering’ we are receptive to (Ratcliffe 2013b, 159ff.), and this, I believe, entails that they have an influence on the type of positive or negative value that we can experience things as having. As outlined previously with the example of fear, whether things can be threatening or reassuring for us, for instance, is dependent on the presence of certain moods or existential feelings. In other terms, whether we can be emoted in ways that are consistent with something being a threat or being safe, and whether we can make the corresponding judgements, is contingent upon the experience of, in Ratcliffe’s words, a particular ‘way of finding oneself in the world’ (2008, 2013b).

As highlighted by Slaby and Stephan (2008), a very close relationship thus exists between existential feelings and personhood, as the former are ‘candidates for what makes up our identity as persons’ (2008, 512). By setting the boundaries of our affective and cognitive evaluations, existential feelings thus also set the limits of our evaluative perspective and, consequently, of our personal self (cf. Bortolan 2017a).⁷

Finally, it is important to note that, due to features outlined above, moods and existential feelings can have a significant influence on the contents and form of one’s self-narratives (Bortolan 2017b). These narratives are an expression of one’s self-conception, and the range of self-related affects, judgments, and desires that one can entertain are the building blocks of such conception. For example, which events we include in our narratives (because we perceive them as salient), and the particular way in which they are salient for us (for instance, as a success or a setback, as an opportunity or a challenge), is profoundly influenced by one’s existential feelings. An existential feeling of worthlessness may lead one to experience the world as a place rife with personal defeats and confirmations of one’s inadequacy, and one’s narratives would tend to be shaped accordingly,

revolving around events and interpretations that are consonant with an evaluation of oneself as unworthy. If moods or existential feelings determine the range of intentional states that one can entertain, making certain kinds of state accessible or inaccessible for us, they also influence in significant ways what come to be included in, or excluded from, the stories we tell about ourselves.

4. Self-illness ambiguity and affective background orientations

If, as illustrated so far, the personal self is, at least to an extent, an affective self, disturbances of affective experience are likely to result in disturbances of selfhood. However, personhood and affectivity can suffer disruptions of different kinds, and it remains to be explained what the specific roots of self-illness ambiguity are.

In this section I suggest that self-illness ambiguity may depend on the presence of specific background affective orientations, which have the power to ‘suspend’ or ‘block’ the affective responses which would typically be associated with the personal self of the sufferer. The ambiguity results from the fact that such responses are only temporarily prevented from occurring, but are not eradicated, and thus they can still intermittently be re-activated. This creates a conflict between different sets of, sometimes incompatible, affective experiences, which drive the person’s self-narratives in different directions, fostering uncertainty about who one really is. I will explain and illustrate this idea through a consideration of the phenomenology of anxiety.

4.1. Anxiety as a mood or existential feeling

Phenomenological research has drawn attention to the centrality of alterations of background affective orientations to various forms of mental ill-health (Ratcliffe 2008; Aho 2019). In his analysis of experiences of depression, for example, Ratcliffe (2010a, 2013a, 2015) illustrates how a range of existential feelings – for instance, feelings of guilt and hopelessness – are involved in the phenomenology of the illness.

Being a predicament that can come to saturate every dimension of one’s life, acute or long-term anxiety too can have a pervasive character, and this is a feature that is often illustrated by first-personal accounts of this experience (e.g. Petersen 2017; Smith 2013). In particular in the case of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) (APA 2013, 222)⁸ there appear to be few limits to the possible targets of anxiety: for those who experience this condition, it seems possible to be anxious about pretty much anything.⁹ Anxiety, however, is not only an intentional feeling: while it is often the case that one is anxious about something, free-floating or object-less anxiety is also common.

That anxiety, at least in some of its forms, can be characterized as a non-intentional feeling is a prominent view within the phenomenological tradition. Heidegger (1991) himself for instance conceived of anxiety as a ‘ground’ or ‘fundamental’ mood, that is as one of the experiences that can more radically shape our way of being in the world without being directed at any particular object within such world (cf. Freeman and Elpidorou 2015; Ratcliffe 2013b). More specifically, according to Heidegger, in anxiety, all the forms of significance that we previously experienced are gone (1991, 228ff.): things no longer matter to us in the way in which they used to. In these circumstances, we are

no longer concerned with what we are usually concerned with, and the world becomes deeply unfamiliar.

Experiencing anxiety as a mood or existential feeling, however, does not entail that one only experiences such an objectless or free-floating form of anxiety. While moods or existential feelings are themselves non-intentional, as outlined above, they do provide the grounds for a range of intentional mental states, and background feelings of anxiety exemplify this dynamic too.

More specifically, a variety of intentional states of worry, concern, and fear typically originate in the experience of anxiety as a mood or an existential feeling. When feeling radically anxious, we find ourselves in the world in a way that inclines us to experience things as threatening, scary, suspicious, or dangerous, engendering a range of specific intentional affective responses. Anxiety as a mood or an existential feeling, in other terms, motivates the experience of various emotions, among which intentional forms of anxiety. From this perspective, feeling anxious about specific things can thus be a manifestation of a more profound experience, one that orientates one's way of being in the world so that what is encountered within this world appears as having anxiety-eliciting features.¹⁰

This, however, does not entail that which things, people, or events come to be experienced as worrisome, threatening, or concerning is determined by the existential feeling of anxiety. Rather, the anxiety structures one's experiential field in such a way that certain forms of significance or mattering are dominant, while others are precluded. More broadly, while existential feelings are taken to shape the kinds of intentional states we entertain, they may not determine which particular objects those states will be directed at. So, whether, at a certain time, one's existential feeling of anxiety materializes in intentional feelings of worry directed at one's health, one's performance at work, or something else likely depends on contextual factors.

These phenomena may play a central role in the phenomenology of generalized anxiety disorder, where there appears to be no specific limit to what anxiety can be about. The objects of anxiety can be numerous and ever-changing because one is already disposed to experience things as mattering in ways that warrant being anxious about them. Due to this, anxiety as a mood or existential feeling can significantly interfere with one's capacity to experience forms of significance that are different from the ones conveyed by the anxiety itself. The possibility, for example, of encountering things as significant in ways that differ from being threatening or worrisome is deeply constrained. For the person who is profoundly anxious, it may be difficult, for instance, to experience people, objects, or situations as exciting, thrilling, promising, or reassuring, as these are forms of 'mattering' that tend to be incompatible with the evaluative perspective that is dominant in anxiety.

When anxiety is so pervasive, it seems that experience as a whole is modulated by it. This is a sign that, not just individual affective responses, but, rather, kinds of emotion might be precluded by pervasive experiences of anxiety. When in the grips of all-encompassing anxiety, it is not just the capacity to be thrilled by a specific unexpected event that may be hindered, but rather, the ability to be thrilled – as opposed to be terrified – by anything whatsoever seems to have been lost.

This exemplifies how the presence of certain moods or existential feelings can block the expression of ways of relating to the world that are in tension with them, or how,

in other terms, certain affective background orientations can suspend the experience of orientations with which they conflict. This means that a host of affects that would normally be experienced by the person are no longer undergone, a situation that has important implications for the individual's evaluative attitudes and, consequently, for their personal self.¹¹

4.2. *Selves hijacked*

I outlined previously how, from a phenomenological perspective, personal identity has been seen as anchored in the formation of an order of priorities concerning one's values, cares, and concerns, and how this process is affectively laden. Intentional and non-intentional affective responses are what enable us to develop and maintain a certain evaluative perspective on the world, and this is what makes us who we are, or, otherwise said, what constitutes the core of personhood. This informs our self-conception, which is also expressed and upheld in the self-narratives with which we identify.

If, due to the presence of certain moods or existential feelings, the relevant affective responses cannot occur, the building blocks of one's evaluations, and, relatedly, of one's personal self, may start to shake. If this occurs extensively over time, the confidence we have in the fact that our evaluative outlook is really our own may be tainted, and uncertainty about our own self may seep in. When this dynamic is particularly intense or persistent, alternative self-narratives may also develop.

It is arguable that an important part in these processes is played also by alterations of epistemic emotions or epistemic feelings (cf. e.g. Arango-Muñoz and Michaelian 2014), namely affects like the experience of certainty or uncertainty. Such affects have been claimed to have a central role in the acquisition and development of knowledge, because of the impact they have on epistemic evaluation and motivation (cf. Hookway 2008; Morton 2010). Due to the proliferation, in self-illness ambiguity, of uncertainty about one's identity, and the often intense, felt dimension of these dynamics, it seems that alterations of epistemic affects – for example, a heightening of feelings of doubt – is an integral component of this phenomenon.

This too may be connected to the experience of certain existential feelings, as epistemic affects can be constrained by background affective orientations like any other intentional state. For example, an existential feeling of low self-worth would radically impact on the capacity to feel confident in one's judgments (Bortolan [Manuscript](#)). A similar role may be played by feelings of anxiety, which, as illustrated in the previous section, may lead to the proliferation of worry and concern. When these experiences are extensive and encompass the beliefs that one hold about themselves, ambiguity about who one really is may arise or be exacerbated.

More broadly, first-person accounts often illustrate how the experience of anxiety can become an obstacle to one's ability to carry out self-defining life projects, to the point that the personal significance of those projects and one's commitment to them may come to be doubted.

In his memoir, Daniel Smith (2013) recounts a key life episode which is relevant to understanding this dynamic. The episode took place after the author left college, during his employment as a staff editor at *The Atlantic*. Smith describes how this position was of great appeal to him, due to his interest in writing, but he also emphasizes how the

role was extremely challenging, because of the nature of the main duties associated with it. In this position, Smith indeed held fact-checking responsibilities, an activity which, as he highlights, may benefit from the cautious attitudes fostered by a degree of anxiety (2013, 160), but in his circumstances also exacerbated anxious feelings and behaviours. As he explains:

A painful pattern to my existence emerged. Every night I would go home to rejuvenate myself with drink and sleep, and every morning I would return to confront a series of forces that substantiated and anatomized the very anxiety I was desperate to escape: the galley pages color-coded like the old federal terror alert system; clippings, reference material, and transcripts testifying to the delusion that, with the correct titration of effort, solid ground could be found [...]. (2013, 167)

Smith describes the distressing physical and psychological consequences of being constantly exposed to what were for him significant sources of anxiety. Being already drenched in sweat early in the morning, and thus having to undertake frequent trips to the bathroom while trying not to wonder what colleagues might think of him (2013, 168–169), Smith portrays his professional life as becoming deeply disrupted by the experience of anxiety, and very different from what he was aspiring it to be.

This section of Smith's memoir provides a vivid depiction of how the realization of an important life project, rooted in personal values, cares, and concerns, can be made significantly more difficult by the experience of anxiety. This is the case because, anxiety can interfere with the achievement of one's goals in a very concrete way, by diminishing, for example, the speed and effectiveness with which we can perform certain tasks. However, anxiety can also impact more profoundly on us, due to its capacity to alter our affective and evaluative perspective on the world.

When anxiety is pervasive, experiences through which objects present themselves as consistent with the evaluation that is at the core of anxiety proliferate, while other forms of significance are eroded. In other terms, when in the grips of anxiety as a mood or existential feeling, we are more receptive towards ways of 'mattering' that are consonant with the experience of being threatened, while being less able to be affected by events and encounters in ways that are at odds with the sense of threat. This is further exemplified, for instance, by the following observations in Smith's memoir:

There is going to come a point at which you are so alert to your freedom and the responsibilities thereof that you lose the ability to distinguish between those choices that are vital to human existence and those in which the likelihood that they will mean anything to anyone is so infinitesimal, so statistically remote, that even to consider the possibility is going to be a total waste of your time. And when that happens, when you reach that point, then whatever greatness you can lay claim to because of the atypical sensitivity of your consciousness will start to eat away itself. (Smith 2013, 92)

The multiplication of anxiety responses may occur at the expense of other affective reactions, leading to a temporary impoverishment of one's affective repertoire, and being accompanied by over-generalized thinking (e.g. Weems et al. 2001). The ability of anxiety as a mood or existential feeling to constrain our emotions and other intentional states makes it the case that a range of experiences that are in tension with anxiety become very difficult to undergo, and distinguishing between what warrants concern and what doesn't becomes very hard. For example, one may no longer be able to feel

peaceful, secure, or content when devoting attention to projects and activities that one used to enjoy, and such projects and activities may rather become riddled with worries and distress, a dynamic that in the long run may conflict with the very capacity to pursue the projects that one used to define themselves by.

Some of these processes are depicted in Petersen's (2017) autobiographical account of her long-term struggle with anxiety. Here, the capacity of anxiety to come into conflict with what one loves is visible, for example, in the challenges that Petersen experiences in relation to travelling, an activity that she profoundly values and that also played an important role in her professional and personal life. As she observes:

It is no surprise that wanderlust and anxiety do not mix well. Unfortunately, I have both. [...] So some of my headiest travel experiences—visceral, beautiful moments of strangeness—have been muted, dulled by a steady drumbeat of anxious thoughts. Still, a tenacious desire for these moments propels me on to new spots on the globe. (Petersen 2017, 183–184)

Petersen recounts a few examples in which the anxiety made her travelling significantly more difficult, or 'derailed' her plans (2017, 184ff.). Smith's memoir too provides an example of this dynamic through the discussion of an episode which resulted in the decision to leave his cherished and valued professional position. Smith recounts how the publication of his first authored article at *The Atlantic* was followed by a wave of strong critical reactions leading to what he defines as a 'panic-stricken, half-crazed self-removal from the staff' of the magazine, and to 'an extended period of psychic bottom-dwelling' (2013, 170). Smith recognizes that the backlash he received was not uncommon in the world of journalism and that this was not likely to have significant implications for his career. However, at the time, he felt unable to put the event into perspective, and his perception of the circumstances became rife with fear and expectations of catastrophic events to unfold, culminating in this decision to resign from his position.

The portrayal Smith offers of the experiences of anxiety that came to shroud his work at the magazine, and in particular, the difficulties which followed the publication of his first article, highlight how such experiences can impact on one's aspirations and, arguably, the affective-evaluative perspective that supports them. As detailed by Smith:

[...] every day I was reassured by my superiors that all was well—this was journalism, this was how it sometimes went—and every day I became less able to hear a positive or logical word anyone said. The sensation was like when your ears fill with fluid and you can't get them to drain: a cocoon of the self. I stumbled viscously through. I began to dream of being mad and institutionalized [...]. The absence of choice. (Smith 2013, 178)

In circumstances like the ones that are described here, anxiety may come to cloud all other experiences and voices, making it difficult for one to draw on affective and interpersonal resources that could foster more realistic assessments.

When in the throes of anxiety, one's perspective is radically shifted: what were previously self-defining life plans may be put into question, as the emotions and feelings which ground and support one's order of priorities are disrupted or suspended. Does this mean, however, that those affects and the related cares, concerns, and values are no longer at the core of one's personal self?

From a phenomenological point of view, this does not seem to be very often the case. Even when anxiety is deep and pervasive, affective experiences that are in contrast with it

can still, intermittently or occasionally, be undergone. One's interest for travelling, the aspiration for a specific career, or the commitment to a dear one can still shine through: one, for example, may still at times feel excited at the prospect of a journey, feel satisfied for a professional achievement, or feel energized by time spent with a good friend. The existential feelings and emotions that support one's evaluative attitudes towards self, others, and the world, can still be undergone, however, it is the continuity of these experiences, their persistence over time, that is hindered. The architecture of one's affective life, so to speak, is unstable, and one rather shifts between different configurations of affects, and the evaluative stances that these entail.

When this occurs for a long time, one's evaluative perspective can become clouded, and feel weakened. As argued before, the set of cares, concerns, and values with which we identify is nurtured by a range of affective experiences, and if these are no longer being entertained one might start doubting whether the commitment to those cares, concerns, and values was ever there in the first place. Such doubting may also be exacerbated by the awareness of the importance of what is at stake, especially in the context of life defining choices. As a result of this, new self-narratives can also emerge (Bortolan 2017b) – narratives that are in contrast with how the person conceived of herself prior to the illness, or when the illness is not in its acute phases – and these may also further exacerbate the experience of self-illness ambiguity.

5. Affectivity, narrativity, and self-illness ambiguity

The account I have presented has implications for the way in which we conceive of the relationship between affective experience and narrative self-understanding in the experience and management of self-illness ambiguity.

The idea that self-illness ambiguity is a disturbance of personal selfhood is in line with some of the insights developed by narrative theorists of the self (e.g. Schechtman 1996; 2010). Self-illness ambiguity involves uncertainty about the stories that define who we are, and, relatedly, the experience of a conflict between different versions of one's narrative self.

This paper, however, has corroborated the idea that, in order to provide an adequate account of self-illness ambiguity, it is not sufficient to appeal to narrativity, and considering how alterations of affective experience are involved in this predicament is of fundamental importance.

More specifically, this account is consistent with the claims put forward by Dings and Glas (2020), according to whom self-illness ambiguity can take place at both the unreflective or phenomenological level, and at the reflective or conceptual level. Dings and Glas acknowledge that disruptions of the way we feel may lead to disruptions of narrative self-understanding, and the dynamics outlined in this paper contribute to our comprehension of how the former can lead to the latter.

Dings and Glas' account aims also to illuminate how self-illness ambiguity can be managed, and, in this context, it is suggested that the ambiguity can be diminished or overcome by re-establishing a degree of alignment between the phenomenological and the conceptual level. As they explain, 'to reduce or even resolve self-ambiguity, the dynamic interplay of these two levels is crucial: the aim is to achieve congruence

between one's reflective self-narrative and one's unreflective bodily and affective experiences' (Dings and Glas 2020, 344).

The idea that the management of self-illness ambiguity requires the constitution or re-constitution of a degree of coherence between one's affective experience and narrative self-understanding bodes well with the account I have fleshed out. Experiences of doubt concerning the authenticity of one's life stories can depend on the fact that these stories are not consistently accompanied by congruent background affects (Bortolan 2017b). On the contrary, a significant level of alignment between one's self-narratives and one's feelings would likely go hand in hand with experiences of certainty or confidence concerning various dimensions of the personal self.

However, it is also important to note that congruence between the phenomenological and conceptual level is not enough to guarantee that self-illness ambiguity has been overcome in a way that is fully reflective of one's personal self. This is the case because there can be a form of consistency between one's affects and narratives that is achieved through the exclusion, rather than integration, of affects that are key to one's identity.

I previously illustrated how the presence of certain moods or existential feelings could temporarily block or suspend the experience of certain types of cognitive and emotional states. Anxiety, for example, can prevent us from experiencing the forms of interest, passion, care, or commitment that we would ordinarily undergo in relation to what we value, potentially leading to the formation of alternative self-narratives which downplay or deny the role of those values in defining who we are. This, as I argued, tends to happen intermittently, with us remaining able to access the affects and stories with which we tend to identify outside of the anxiety episodes.

Nevertheless, it is also possible for anxiety to more extensively and permanently take hold of our experience. Anxiety can become a long-lasting and deeply pervasive orientation which, over time, may almost completely obscure the background affects and narratives which are in conflict with it. If this is the case, the affective configurations driven by anxiety and the ways of conceptualizing oneself that are rooted in it would no longer be contrasted or offset by conflicting feelings and narratives and would become the predominant ways in which one personal self is expressed. In effect, in these circumstances, coherence between the conceptual and phenomenological level would be restored, but this would be one of the effects of the anxiety itself, rather than the product of autonomous personal deliberation.

Therefore, the existence of a degree of coherence between the reflective and unreflective level of self-experience cannot be the main factor in determining whether self-illness ambiguity has been resolved. Other criteria need to be devised in order to make sure that such coherence is reflective of the sufferer's evaluative perspective, whose expression may have been suspended by the illness.¹²

While the exploration of these alternative criteria needs to be the object of a separate study, it seems that a promising approach in this regard may be one that does not draw only on a first-personal or a third-personal perspective on the subject's experience, but is rather rooted in second-person interaction. In other terms, whether an experience is reflective of one's personal self is something that neither the experiencer nor an external observer alone may determine, but rather a feature to be unearthed through the relationship with others in relevant contexts (e.g. through therapy, but not only) (cf. De Haan 2020).

Notes

1. I use the term 'affects'/'affective' to refer to a range of mental states that have a felt character, or, in other terms, that are associated with specific feelings. Some of these states have an intentional structure and I use the term 'emotion' to refer to them. Others are non-intentional, and in this paper I discuss in particular a variety of them, namely 'moods' and 'existential feelings'. Here, I do not take a position as to whether feelings are the only constituents of the relevant affects, or whether all feelings are bodily feelings. However, in line with the phenomenological tradition I am drawing upon, I take feelings to be an essential aspect of affective phenomena, and I assume that at least some feelings are bodily experiences. For a discussion of various aspects of the phenomenology of affectivity see e.g. Szanto and Landweer (2020).
2. Dings (2020, 173ff.) discusses in particular different accounts of the experiences of ambiguity associated with the effects of Deep Brain Stimulation (DBS) treatment.
3. See also Bortolan (2017b) for an illustration of how this may be the case in the experience of depression.
4. It is worth highlighting that, from this perspective, both affective states and evaluations can be diverse and fine-grained.
5. In the phenomenological tradition there are different views concerning whether the intentional feelings through which values are experienced are integral to emotions or precede them (cf. Vendrell Ferran 2017). In this paper, I do not take a position with regard to this, but I rather draw on the more general idea that affective experience and the experience of values are essentially intertwined.
6. From now on, the notion of 'mood' and that of 'existential feeling' will be used interchangeably to designate a range of affective background orientations that possess an experience-shaping role. This is not to suggest, however, that there are not important differences between Heidegger's and Ratcliffe's accounts. For example, the role of bodily experience in the phenomenology of affective background orientations is emphasized by the latter, but not the former (cf. Ratcliffe 2013b). However, for the purpose of the exploration of the topic of this paper, it should suffice to focus on the aspects that are shared by the two theories.
7. Affective phenomena which have similarities to the ones discussed by Heidegger and Ratcliffe have been explored also by other authors within the phenomenological tradition. For example, in addition to moods, both Stein's (1989; cf. Vendrell Ferran 2017) and De Monticelli's (2003, 2006) affective taxonomies include the categories of 'sentiments' which, similarly to Scheler's 'spiritual feelings' (1973a; cf. Schloßberger 2020) seem to have a pervasive and structuring role in our experience, and are indeed considered to be uniquely connected to the personal self. De Monticelli (2003, 89ff.), for instance, suggests that sentiments are deeper than moods, and, that in virtue of their distinctive structure, they are the main building blocks, so to speak, of personhood. In this paper I have chosen to focus on Heidegger's and Ratcliffe's positions because of their immediate relevance to the exploration of mental ill-health, and as I also think that the notion of existential feelings can, at least in principle, accommodate some of the key features of what De Monticelli calls 'sentiments'. A comparative analysis of phenomenological accounts of affective background orientations exceeds the scope of this paper; however, such an analysis could also shed further light on our understanding of disturbances of the self.
8. While in this section I focus on experiences that can be associated with GAD, other forms of anxiety may entail the presence of similar dynamics to the ones outlined here.
9. The DSM-5 (APA 2013, 222) mentions a wide range of possible objects of anxiety in GAD: 'Adults with generalized anxiety disorder often worry about everyday, routine life circumstances, such as possible job responsibilities, health and finances, the health of family members, misfortune to their children, or minor matters (e.g. doing household chores or being late for appointments). Children with generalized anxiety disorder tend to worry excessively about their competence or the quality of their performance. During the course of the disorder, the focus of worry may shift from one concern to another.'

10. In conceiving of anxiety as narrowing the forms of significance we have access to, and in emphasising the existence of intentional forms of anxiety, my account here deviates from some of the ideas at the core of Heidegger's perspective. Within such perspective, anxiety is indeed seen primarily as an experience that can reveal important features about our condition, while I draw attention to how anxiety can obfuscate self-understanding by constraining the forms of 'mattering' that we are receptive to. I also stress how anxiety can morph itself into a plurality of intentional feelings, while in Heidegger's account some of these experiences – for example fear – can rather be seen as ways of evading anxiety itself (cf. Elpidorou and Freeman 2015, 667).
11. De Monticelli (2003, 2006) provides an account of how certain affects, that is 'sentiments', can have a 'founding' or 'structuring' character in our experience, in so far as they 'activate' or 'de-activate' our receptivity towards certain values, and hence specific dimensions of the self (cf. also Bortolan 2017a). De Monticelli is not concerned primarily with psychopathological experience, and sentiments are not the same as moods or existential feelings. However, the idea that certain affects can modulate various dimensions of our experience, and, in so doing, have an impact on the self, is consonant with some of the key intuitions about the role of background affective orientations that have been drawn upon in this paper.
12. It is helpful to note that overcoming self-illness ambiguity in a way that is consonant with one's personal self does not necessarily entail reverting back to the narratives that were endorsed prior to the onset of the episodes of ambiguity. In some cases, the overcoming of self-illness ambiguity may indeed involve the experience of new existential feelings and/or the creation of new self-narratives.

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