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Mental suffering as a struggle with words: language and emotion

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Summary

Human emotional life is structured and to a certain extent constituted by language, and yet making sense of and communicating how we feel is often a challenge. In this article, I will argue that a person's struggle to make sense of and articulate her suffering plays a major role in the experience of suffering. I unfold this argument in five steps. I will first look at the vexed question of what emotions are. Discussing biological and rational conceptions of emotions, I argue that human emotions are deeply ambiguous phenomena constituted by an opaque combination of biological factors and rational factors. In the second section, I will argue that instead of trying to solve the ontological riddle of emotions we should investigate the actual experience of emotions. I examine the dialectics of the conceptual and the phenomenal aspects of our emotional experience, arguing that we need to adopt a phenomenological approach to emotions in order to explore the ambiguity of emotions. Anxiety is endemic to most mental illnesses, and nowhere does the ambiguity of our

emotions become more manifest than in the experience of anxiety. So in the following two sections, I will look at two influential philosophical accounts of anxiety. Heidegger and Kierkegaard both argue that anxiety is intrinsic to our experience of freedom. I criticise Heidegger's theory for restricting the phenomenology of anxiety by making it a functional tool in his ontological project. I then argue that Kierkegaard's theory, on the other hand, allows us to explore the significance of the phenomenological ambiguity of anxiety. Of particular importance in Kierkegaard's theory is the dialectics of imagination and reality at work in anxiety, and in the concluding section, I will look at how this dialectics can help us understand how both the patient and the psychiatrist are challenged with the problem of finding a language for mental suffering.

Key words

Biology • Rationality • Autonomy • Anxiety • Imagination • Phenomenology • Heidegger • Kierkegaard

What emotions are: biology and rationality

Language is fundamental to human emotional experience. We assess, interpret and communicate our emotions with the help of concepts and words. Language is constitutive of human emotional experience to the extent that it is difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of human emotions entirely devoid of intentional structure and rational features. Concepts such as anger, shame, love, humiliation, and pride orient our existence. Without concepts to help us understand and deal with our emotional life, we would be slaves of our passions. Language enables us to seize the reins of, or at least some aspects of, our emotional experience, and to construct a life with our emotions instead of being at the mercy of our constantly changing, and often seemingly arbitrary, affective landscape. Using language, concepts, and rationality to overcome the passivity involved in emotional experience has, since antiquity, been the primary goal of the work on emotions by philosophers, physicians and theologians. However, in spite of centuries of intellectual endeavours our emotions continue to challenge both the theoretical and practical attempts of domesticating them.

Words seem unable to describe adequately the motley abundance of our feelings, and the conceptual nets that we throw out to capture the significance of our emotional experience only deliver a pale shadow of the sense of intimacy and alienation involved in those experiences. This inability to fathom and make sense of emotions means that passivity continues to be the principal and seemingly inescapable character of human emotional experience. In fact, passivity is constitutive of the basic significance of the concepts "emotion", "passion", "feeling", "sentiment", "mood" that we use to make sense of our emotional life¹⁻³.

Human beings experience themselves as autonomous creatures. We are able to choose between options, make plans, and – if we are fortunate enough to be born under the right circumstances – shape the course of our lives. We do not choose our emotions, however. Emotions are deeply ambiguous phenomena. They are an integral part of our most intimate thoughts, ideas and plans, but they are also disturbing and alienating. Emotional experience thus involves a complex sense of both autonomy and heteronomy. Our emotions can make our words feel wrong or shallow just as much as true and right. They stimulate

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our ideas and incite our thoughts, but they also complicate our choices. We are not in complete control of what we see, smell, hear, touch and think about. A piece of music, a smile, a hurtful word can change the way we feel about a situation. Lack of sleep or a busy day can make us irritable and do or say things that we do not want to. Anger, impatience, love and excitement often overcome us and make our ideas, plans and actions spiral out of cognitive control. Living with our emotions is difficult because our feelings can change in spite of ourselves – sometimes drastically in a second, at other times unnoticeably over the years. Articulating our emotions through language, understanding how and why we feel the way we do, enables us to deal with the passivity at work in our emotions, creating a life that is not under the sway of our unpredictable emotional changes. The problem is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to articulate, describe and make sense of the full scope of our emotional life. Aspects of our emotional life are cognitively impenetrable. Language and rationality cannot always reveal why a particular person irritates us or why we are jealous; nor whether or not our love will last, when our patience will run out, and if we will ever stop being angry. In other words, what emotions reveal is that understanding is never completely stable or entirely transparent. To live with our emotions is to work constantly with the experience of passivity involved in the limits of our understanding of the world, other people and ourselves.

Mental illness is a major medical, social and personal challenge to our understanding of what it means to be human. Why is the human mind so fragile? What is mental suffering? How can a memory, thoughts or words render a person unable to cope with everyday life? Emotions are important to our attempt to make sense of mental illness due to – among other things – the fact that the experience of passivity is a critical feature of the suffering involved in mental illness. Mental suffering affects our sense of our autonomy by diminishing, and at times completely incapacitating, our ability to make sense of our experiences and control our thoughts and actions. In this sense, mental illness challenges our understanding of human beings as autonomous creatures. Autonomy is not only an experiential fact, but also a demand. We do not only feel that we can choose, we also want to and are expected to make our own choices. The ambiguous character of our emotions brings out this dialectics of autonomy and heteronomy at play in mental illness.

The historian of psychiatry Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen argues that “[t]he problem is that contemporary psychiatry sees double. On the one hand, it views mental illness as a malady of the mind (one no longer dares say “of the soul”) that ought to be treated with talk therapy, empathy and human rapport. On the other hand, it views

it as a disease of the brain comparable to other organic diseases and treatable with medication”⁴ [p. 188]. This double vision is only a problem, however, if we insist to do away with the complexity it entails by reducing one vision of mental illness to the other. Psychiatry sees double because we human beings see, feel and understand ourselves double. We are ambiguous creatures, or more precisely, as formulated by the ancient hermetic saying that gained popularity among natural philosophers in the enlightenment: “A human being is simple by the fact that it is alive, ambiguous by virtue of being human [*Homo simplex in vitalitate duplex in humanitate*]”⁵. We are biological creatures who are aware of the fact that we are shaped and conditioned by a multitude of biological factors that we do not know or understand, and are often not even aware of. Mental illness is a complex conglomerate of rationality and biology, and whether one argues that mental illness is basically a question of biology⁶⁻⁸ or holds that rationality is the key to understand mental illness⁹⁻¹¹, it is hardly in doubt that we need to consider both aspects of mental suffering when exploring mental illness. And nowhere is the interplay of biology and rationality more manifest than in our emotional life.

The question whether emotions are primarily subjective or primarily biological is a heavily debated issue in emotion studies. While the emotions of other animals seem to be biological functions developed to optimise evolutionary survival and reproduction¹²⁻¹³, the multifarious character of human emotions seem to go way beyond such functional goals. Like the human body generally, human emotions seem to be uniquely detached from the biological functions that characterise non-human emotions¹⁴⁻¹⁵. This detached character of human emotions was already noticed more than a millennium ago by the Stoic philosopher Seneca: “Wild animals run from dangers they actually see, and once they have escaped them worry no more. We, however, are tormented alike by what is past and what is to come”¹⁶ [p. 38]. Contemporary philosophers of emotion usually follow Seneca’s lead arguing that human emotions are categorically different from non-human emotions in virtue of being mental phenomena, and as such structured by human intentionality, rationality and cognitive capacities. At the same time, though, it seems difficult to jettison the observable fact that human emotions are nevertheless deeply embodied phenomena informed by biological factors that escape our experiential awareness, our rationality, and often thwart our cognitive control. Accordingly, most contemporary philosophical theories of emotion do, in fact, insist on and even cherish this embodied character of emotions¹⁷⁻²⁰. Few of them, though, are inclined to accept the ontological argument of contemporary neuroscientists and evolutionary psychologists that human

emotions are biological functions, and thus only different in degree from the emotions of other animals²¹⁻²⁵. We seem to be left with an unresolvable debate between philosophers who argue for the cognitive nature of emotions and neuroscientists who insist that emotions are primarily biological. Once again, this ambiguity is only a problem if our goal is to develop an unambiguous theory of emotions that explains (away) the incomprehensible character of our emotional life. There is no escaping the ontological question. The biological and rational aspects of our emotions do affect, and often dramatically so, our thoughts, feelings, and actions. However, instead of being preoccupied with exclusive ontological explanations of what emotions really are, we should rather accept that our emotions are ontologically ambiguous, that is, that emotions are both rational and biological, and that neither of these two basic features of our emotional life can be reduced to the other. Accepting this complexity will allow us to direct our intellectual energy to the concrete challenges that the tension between those two features bring about in our emotional life.

Human emotional life is impregnated with vestigial traces of an evolutionary history that goes back millions of years. The evolution of the human body has shaped our emotional functioning to the extent that many of our emotional dispositions and reactions were developed long before we came into existence. This does not entail – as the advocates of the biological approach to emotions often claim – that human emotional life can be explained by reducing the vast array of human emotions to a limited number of basic emotions or cross-species emotional systems. Besides the obvious fact that this theory of the remote evolutionary significance of our emotional behaviour is not able to account for, let alone explain, the proximate, rational and deeply personal significance of our emotions, the fundamental idea of fully consolidated and fixed emotional systems is constructed upon a simplistic theory of evolution²⁶⁻²⁸. What seems to be an unquestionable point of the biological argument – although many philosophers find it difficult to accept – is that our emotional life cannot be confined to the meaning of our own personal history, or even to that of our hominid ancestors, but extends back through the abysmal phylogenetic development of the mammal organism. So although our feelings of, for example, anger, joy, excitement, desire and disappointment most of the time are directed at persons, objects, or events that are part of our life (in terms of current experiences, memories, expectations, and ideas), they are nevertheless realised, shaped and constantly informed by the impersonal biological functioning of an organism that does not belong to us alone. This coexistence of evolutionary and personal histories explains one of the principal features of our emotional life, namely, the

dialectics of intimacy and alienation that we experience with many of our emotions. Our emotions are the most intimate and personal part of our identity. They are the expressions of our dreams, fears, hopes, desires and more pragmatic concerns, and yet often they also reveal the limits of our self-understanding by making us aware of sides of ourselves that we do not recognise, and aspects of our personality that we do not want to acknowledge. Put differently, our emotions destabilise our sense of our autonomy. They can alienate, frighten, embarrass, and even disgust us, but they are still an inescapable part of who we are.

How emotions feel: phenomena and concepts

This dialectic of intimacy and alienation lies at the heart of the limits of language, which is one of the principal, and most concrete, challenges that our emotional life confronts us with. As mentioned above, we often experience that emotions are cognitively impenetrable^{3 17}. This experience can be both a source of frustration and joy. It is a pleasure to experience that we are capable of feeling and doing more than expressed by the language we use. It can, however, also be frustrating to experience that our words are not able to convey or articulate what we actually feel, or that we are not able to ferret out the occluded meanings of our emotions. In the best cases, the ineffable character of our emotions puts into motion our imagination producing other forms of communication in terms of gestures, movements, unexpected actions, and the innumerable forms of artistic production. Often, though, the struggle with language is a cause of suffering. Articulating, interpreting and communicating our emotions is not simply an option. It is, as philosophers argue and poets show, an inescapable part of the emotional experience itself. We feel the need to articulate and make sense of our emotions through language just as strongly as we feel how emotions transcend our conceptual, rational, and linguistic capacities. Humans are not only rational and social animals. They are also, as the philosopher Charles Taylor once aptly put it, self-interpreting animals³⁰. We want – and other people expect us – to make sense of our emotions, to provide a rational explanation for them, and to communicate (at least some of) them to other people. For this we need language, or more precisely, concepts, words and metaphors.

The problem with emotional experience, contrary to more unambiguously cognitive phenomena, is that language often does not coincide with or is able to accurately capture the felt meaning of an emotion. Emotions such as shame, love and forgiveness are dense concepts that provide central points of orientation in our existence, and as such their significance have been explored

throughout millennia by philosophers, poets, politicians, musicians and painters. And most of us have a more or less articulated understanding of the significance of those emotions informed by our upbringing, culture, and everyday amassment of experiences. Still, our feeling of those emotions rarely coincides with the understanding that we have of them. Our feeling is often opaque, and this opacity puts our understanding to work. In other words, often there exists a tension, sometimes even a conflict, between the felt significance of an emotion and the articulated, conceptual meaning of that emotion. It is this tension between conceptual meaning and non-conceptual significance that is at the centre of the debate between the biological and philosophical theories of emotion. The problem with this debate is that these two different approaches begin with preconceived ontological conceptions of what emotions are, and that such preconceptions are unable to articulate, let alone make sense of, the ambiguity of human emotional experience. Another approach to the problem of language and emotions is to begin with the phenomenology of emotion, that is, to look more closely at how we experience emotions and to try to articulate the felt meaning of our emotions.

A phenomenological approach has the advantage over other theories of emotion that it begins with the experience of emotions rather than with conceptions of what emotions are. The strength of phenomenology lies in the systematic investigation of the first-person perspective. While both the cognitive and biological approaches construct theories about *what* emotions are, phenomenology explores *how* emotions feel. In other words, a phenomenological approach takes more seriously than most other approaches the (often) opaque and inexpressible experience of emotions. It is, of course, obvious that phenomenology makes use of conceptual preconceptions just as much as other philosophical theories. In that sense, the phenomenological conception of experience is itself a theoretical construct³¹. Nevertheless, making the subjective experience of emotions the primary object of investigation allows phenomenology to articulate and give a systematic account of the experiential dimension of emotions that escapes both the biological approach and many of the philosophical approaches. The concepts that phenomenology makes use of are coined on the anvil of pre-reflective experience rather than being excogitated from reflective conceptions of the rational or biological nature of emotions. An important part of the work of phenomenology is exactly the incessant reconsideration of the unstable and problematic dialectical relationship between concepts and phenomena³². Articulating this dialectic helps us to make sense of the conceptual structure of our immediate experience, while allowing the experiential phenomena themselves to challenge those same

conceptual structures. The dialectics of concepts and phenomena is particularly important when it comes to emotional experience due to the explicit tension between conceptual meaning (what an emotion means) and felt significance (how an emotion feels) at work in our feeling of emotions. The concepts that we use to construct a phenomenological account of emotion have to be sensitive to this dialectics in order to respect the immediate, pre-reflective feeling of an emotional experience as well as the conceptual structures and intentional dynamics that allow us to make sense of that experience.

One of the most important concepts in psychiatry that brings out the full scope of this dialectics is the concept of anxiety. The experience of anxiety is peculiar in virtue of its marked ambiguity. Most emotional experiences are characterised by a cognitive or intentional structure (e.g. when I love, I love somebody; when I am angry, I am normally angry with someone because of something; when I am afraid, I am at most times afraid of or for something), a typical temporal duration, and a characteristic emotional tonality (e.g. sadness, joy, exhaustion, excitement, boredom). These features help us describe our emotions and inform our attempt to construct a conceptual taxonomy of our emotional experience (for example, emotions, feelings, and moods) that, in turn, allows us to explore our emotional lives. The experience of anxiety is more difficult to describe and capture conceptually than most other kinds of emotional experience. Anxiety does not have an obvious object, a typical duration or a characteristic emotional tonality. Rather than helping us to describe and define a particular emotional experience, the concept of anxiety problematises our conceptual attempts to make sense of our emotions. Anxiety seems to be strangely protean and parasitic in the sense that it can express itself in multifarious ways (e.g., it can be ephemeral as well as deep-seated; hopeful as well as hopeless) and attach itself to contrasting emotions (e.g. both love and hate, joy and fear can be anxious). In this way, anxiety brings out the dialectics of concepts and phenomena by articulating the ambiguities involved in emotional experience.

Two thinkers who in particular have formed our understanding of anxiety are Kierkegaard and Heidegger. They both make use of a phenomenological approach to anxiety³³⁻³⁵. Moreover, both characterise anxiety not only as a fundamental mood of human existence, but consider it inescapably connected with our experience of freedom, and as such one of the basic features that distinguish human beings from other animals. In spite of these similarities (which are not surprising, since Heidegger's theory is heavily inspired by Kierkegaard's), their theories of anxiety are significantly different. In the two following sections, I will present their respective theories, arguing that while Heidegger's phenomenology of anxiety is restricted

by being entangled in a fundamental ontological project, Kierkegaard's theory allows us to explore the significance of the phenomenological ambiguity of anxiety.

Heidegger on the ontological significance of anxiety

Heidegger's influential treatment of the concept of anxiety in his work *Sein und Zeit* is, at one and the same time, seductively simple and staggeringly complex. Even though anxiety vibrates as an affective tone throughout the whole work, the explicit analysis of anxiety is limited to one paragraph of seven pages. Anxiety functions, for Heidegger, as a disclosure of a human being's [*Dasein*] being in-the-world, involving two basic and interrelated features. The first feature is the necessary character of human freedom, that is, human beings can and ought to choose themselves. Freedom is the fundamental being of human beings, and our work with this intrinsic freedom articulates the second feature of anxiety, namely, the disclosure of the necessary and yet constantly evasive foundation that lurks in the depth of human existence and makes possible an authentic life. Heidegger summarises these two functions in his characteristically idiosyncratic way: "Anxiety reveals in *Dasein* its being toward its ownmost potentiality of being, that is, being free for the freedom of choosing and grasping itself. Anxiety brings *Dasein* before its being free for... (*propensio in*), the authenticity of its being as possibility which it always already is. But at the same time, it is this being to which *Dasein* as being-in-the-world is entrusted" ³⁶ [p. 188]. The analysis of anxiety is part of the comprehensive investigation of human facticity, our concrete way of being-in-the-world, through the central concepts attunement (*Befindlichkeit*) and care. Our existence is affective, which means that our existence is never a dispassionate process of understanding, but always characterised by basic moods (*Stimmungen*) which shape our being-in-the world. These moods are not arbitrary or insignificant. They are, on the contrary, intimately connected with our understanding and interpretation of our existence, of which care is revealed as the basic ontological foundation. Anxiety is crucial for Heidegger's analysis of moods, since it is a "fundamental attunement" that articulates "the eminent disclosedness of *Dasein*" ³⁶ [p. 184]. Whereas fear is directed towards something specific that threatens our existence, anxiety is characterised by the lack of such a concrete threat, and therefore the cause of anxiety is in itself indefinable. This indefinable character of anxiety means that it is existence itself which is at stake in anxiety. In anxiety, "the world has the character of complete insignificance", and the meaning of our existence "collapses into itself" ³⁶ [p. 186]. In this anxious experience of meaninglessness,

which Heidegger later in the book famously describes as the essential expression of our being-towards-death ³⁶ [pp. 251, 254, 265-66], we are confronted with ourselves and with the inescapable responsibility for the authenticity of our existence.

The simple point of this analysis is that anxiety throws us back at ourselves, confronts us with ourselves, showing us that freedom is the necessary and yet evasive foundation of our existence. The staggering complexity of the analysis shows itself in the moment one tries to understand this freedom or this being free to freedom that makes up the foundation of existence. Heidegger sketches an image of human existence as freedom's anxious and often mistaken attempts to express itself in an existence characterised by mechanical chatter and imitative independence. Heidegger's chanting abjuration of the superficial emptiness of everyday-life and his insistence on freedom's anxious attempts to disclose, express and understand the depths of being is marked by a peculiar dichotomy between the superficial meaninglessness of the humdrum of everyday life and a deeper ontological meaning. This dichotomy is problematic. It is part of a philosophical quest for deep meaning that disfigures our attempt to make sense of and relate ourselves to the concrete challenges that anxiety confronts us with. The dichotomy is also the consequence of the ambivalence which characterises Heidegger's radical transformation of Husserl's phenomenology.

On the one hand, Heidegger criticises Husserl's understanding of phenomenology as a "rigorous science" and attempts to deconstruct Husserl's ideal of purity by driving the concept of intentionality out of the philosophical laboratory and returning it to the tumultuous life-world ^{37 38}. We cannot clarify and make sense of our experience and understanding by theoretical reductions of the facticity of a concrete life. We have to investigate human experience and understanding through our affective being-in-the-world, that is, our moods, cares and concerns. He thus develops a hermeneutical phenomenology that articulates our attempts to understand ourselves through a hermeneutics of facticity. On the other hand, though, Heidegger continues and develops certain aspects of Husserl's philosophical laboratory, which stand in stark contrast to his insistence on the attuned facticity of human existence. The most important of these aspects is his insistence on philosophy as a quest for foundational *a priori*, ontological structures that work in the depths of human existence hidden under the chaotic multiplicity of empirical life. He explains this dichotomy between deep ontological meaning and superficial empirical meaning in the following way: "As compared with the ontic interpretation, the existential and ontological interpretation is not only a theoretical and ontic generalization [...] The "generalization" is an *a priori-ontological* one. It does not

mean ontic qualities that constantly keep emerging, but a constitution of being which always already underlies" ³⁶ [p. 199].

Heidegger's philosophy is in many ways an attempt to articulate, problematise and reconsider this distinction between the concrete ontic beings (*Seiende*) and the evasive ontological being (*Sein*). As he explains in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*: "What kind of distinction is this? "Being of Beings"? Being and beings. Let us freely concede that it is obscure and cannot straightforwardly be made like that between black and white, house and garden", and yet, "being is not some being among others" ³⁹ [pp. 517-18]. This investigation of the distinction between the ontic and the ontological has been an important contribution to the reconsideration of traditional philosophical questions concerning the *a priori* and *a posteriori*, *universal* and *particular*, *metaphysica specialis* and *metaphysica generalis*, and more generally to the question of philosophy and metaphysics. However, I would argue that Heidegger's insistence on this distinction also has a problematic effect on Heidegger's phenomenology, and in particular on his approach to and conception of anxiety.

If Heidegger criticises Husserl's transcendental phenomenology for its abstract and expressionless concept of intentionality, one can criticise Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology for its bodiless concept of facticity. In fact, major philosophers have pointed to several problems with the anonymous and bodiless ontology at the heart of Heidegger's philosophy ⁴⁰⁻⁴⁴. Like Husserl, Heidegger was extremely critical of the scientific flowering in the dawn of the twentieth century and sought to construct a watershed between true philosophy and other sciences such as psychology and biology. This insistence on developing a fundamental ontology in isolation from empirical or even psychological investigations of human existence is a severe problem for Heidegger's analysis of anxiety. The phenomenon is reduced to a function in his theoretical attempt to articulate the fundamental being of which the human being is the conscious part. This means that his analysis of anxiety is conditioned by a hermeneutics which, in its philosophical care for the unfathomable meaning of being, is blind to the concrete existential meanings of anxiety. The relation between the conceptual and phenomenological aspects of emotions such as sadness, love, envy, compassion, jealousy, rage, ambition and desire is not explored in Heidegger's analysis of anxiety. Therefore, his analysis does not help us to clarify and examine the complex life of human beings in which a disparate mixture of anonymous biology and personal reflection constantly challenges our understanding of ourselves, the world, and other people. As argued in the previous sections, the marked ambiguity of anxiety

brings out the dialectics of conceptual meaning and felt significance that is a basic feature of emotions in general. Clarifying this dialectics is central to our understanding of mental illness because it can help us to achieve a better understanding of the dialectics of autonomy and heteronomy at work in emotional experience. The suffering involved in mental illness is connected with this dialectics in the sense that not being able to articulate, make sense of, and communicate our mental suffering is part of the suffering itself. It is exactly this complex phenomenological aspect of anxiety that Heidegger's ontological analysis does not pay attention to. The dialectics of autonomy and heteronomy is, however, at the heart of Kierkegaard's analysis.

Kierkegaard on the psychological significance of anxiety

For Kierkegaard, anxiety expresses the concrete ambiguity that characterises human experience of freedom, and he describes anxiety as "the dizziness of freedom" that occurs when freedom "looks down into its own possibility" ⁴⁶ [p. 61]. Anxiety is indefinable, and yet it has decisive phenomenological effects on our attempts to make sense of our existence. It is the unruly phenomenological character of anxiety that destabilises our understanding of what it means to be human. It instils a disturbing insecurity into our attempt to define a phenomenon and make sense of it through language and by means of concepts and rationality. It functions as an "intermediary term" between sensibility and understanding, and as such "it possesses the ambiguity which saves thought" ⁴⁶ [p. 379]. That which in Kierkegaard's analysis saves thought is the phenomenological dialectics of concepts and phenomena. It is exactly with respect to the question of phenomenology that the difference between Heidegger and Kierkegaard becomes most obvious. While phenomenology for "the anti-dialectician Heidegger", as Michael Theunissen calls him ⁴⁷ [p. 28], is a tool to descriptively destruct the superficial level of facticity in order to disclose the ontological way in which being manifests itself in *Dasein*, Kierkegaard's phenomenology does not, as Heidegger himself points out ³⁶ [pp. 235n, 338n], operate with a distinction between the ontic humdrum of everyday life and the deep ontological meaning. More generally, his analysis does not aim at a fundamental ontology. Phenomenology for Kierkegaard is inescapably connected with subjectivity and with the indescribable ways in which a person experiences the world, other people, and herself. Phenomenology does not stand in the service of ontology in the sense that phenomenological descriptions of superficial phenomena are meant to reveal a deeper and more fundamental being. Rather,

phenomenology and ontology stand in a mutual relationship. Phenomenological descriptions articulate and constantly put into question ontological preconceptions at work in our pre-reflective, immediate experience as well as our conceptual understanding of the world. In Kierkegaard's work, phenomenology is used to describe and analyse the constant, and often failing, attempts of a human being to understand the innumerable ways in which she relates herself to herself through her relation to the world⁴⁸. And it is in this phenomenological work that anxiety plays a crucial role in virtue of the ontological ambiguity that it articulates.

For Kierkegaard, the work of freedom that we become aware of in anxiety is intimately connected with the peculiar experience of activity and passivity that characterises human existence. Just as Heidegger points to in his analysis, it is in the lack of explicit and definable phenomena that anxiety poses its concrete challenge to our existence. Rather than pointing to new phenomena, anxiety changes the phenomena that we know or thought we knew by introducing a "sympathetic antipathy and antipathetic sympathy"⁴⁶ [p. 42] into our experience of those phenomena. This emotional tonality or atmosphere complicates our feeling and thinking and challenges our understanding by throwing us back upon ourselves, often in the form of questions such as: Why am I anxious? Did I really mean what I said? Was this the right choice? Why do I feel an attraction to her, when I despise her? Why do I find pleasure in my own humiliation? What is at stake in my painful fight for recognition? It is questions such as these that put our freedom to work, and saturate the affective history of our freedom⁴⁹. Kierkegaard's writings in many ways constitute an exploration and clarification of the ways and impasses of freedom through the affective constellations that characterise human existence. The ambiguity of anxiety is, for Kierkegaard, the clearest expression of freedom as an experience, which is, at one and the same time, an affective expression of a need for autonomy and a cognitive challenge to articulate, make sense of, and realise this autonomy.

Now, my argument is that in order to face the challenge involved in anxiety we have to take seriously the psychological experience of ambiguity. It is in this psychological ambiguity that we can explore the existential significance of anxiety. Kierkegaard's treatment of anxiety is, I would argue, more psychologically concrete than Heidegger's. And while both their analyses of the phenomena are intrinsically complex, it is the psychologically concrete aspect of Kierkegaard's exploration that makes his treatment of anxiety less simplistic than Heidegger's. While Heidegger's analysis is marked by an idiosyncratic terminology and functional determination of the phenomena of anxiety in terms of a fundamental ontological project,

Kierkegaard develops his understanding of the concept through an examination of the concrete problems that come with our anxious existence. For Kierkegaard, one of the most ambiguous challenges that are revealed in our experience of anxiety is how to deal with the imaginative character of our existence. That is, how to make sense of and deal with the fact that we live our lives just as much in our minds as through our concrete bodies. One of the principal problems about human emotions is, as argued earlier, that although they are related to both the biological functioning of our bodies and the rational capacities of our minds, the felt meaning(s) of our emotional life seems to transcend or be detached from biological and rational explanations. For Kierkegaard, it is exactly this transcendence or detachment that makes possible human freedom and, consequently, awakens anxiety. How we relate ourselves to our freedom and to the anxious existence that our freedom makes possible depends on how we understand and make sense of our imaginative capacities.

Imagination is one of the principal features that distinguish human beings from other animals, making us the strange "intermediate creatures" that we are, that is, beings that are neither animals nor angels⁴⁶ [p. 155]⁵⁰ [p. 329]. Humans are not seamlessly integrated in the finite movements of the world or in the infinite stability of heaven. In this sense, they are imperfect creatures that do not fit into a pre-structured realm of life, but who are creating their existence while living. This creative aspect of human existence is basic in Kierkegaard's understanding of what it means to be human. To be human is to become human, and in this sense of becoming, imagination is critical. It is our imaginative capacities that allow us to become who we are, namely, individual selves who are neither mere bodily functions nor rational minds. This synthetic character of being a self is possible because of imagination, in the sense that without imagination the self would not be able to relate itself to the complex being that it is. This relation is made possible through the process of innumerable imaginary possibilities that destabilise the concrete being that we are. This is why Kierkegaard accentuates imagination as the most important of human capacities: "As a rule, imagination is the medium for the process of infinitising; it is not a capacity, as are the others – if one wishes to speak in those terms, it is the capacity *instar omnium*. When all is said and done, whatever of feeling, knowing, and willing a human being has depends upon what imagination he has, upon how a human being reflects himself – that is, upon imagination"⁵¹ [pp. 30-31]. The imaginative variations that populate and animate Kierkegaard's thinking are not to be considered as a colourful garment covering deeper philosophical and theological thoughts, nor are they there simply for our aestheti-

cal pleasure. The imaginative intensity of Kierkegaard's thinking is the enactment of the peculiar synthetic character of his understanding of human beings as concrete particular individuals who exist through abstract thinking and conceptual language. The concrete, almost sensible, poetics of his writing works with ways of expressing the general and uniform character of language and thinking through concrete particulars. This emphasis on the complexity of the concrete and the abstract is also what brings out the problems involved in our imaginative capacities. The seemingly infinite possibilities that are made real by imagination can also make us lose our sense of reality. This reality is first and foremost characterised by being concrete, that is, a process that has grown together (*con-crescere*) in a way that our imaginative capacities cannot imitate, produce, or mirror. It is, in other words, a reality that transcends the power of imagination; a reality against whose concreteness our imaginative variations fracture. Kierkegaard describes the difference between concrete reality and imagination in terms of suffering: "[C]ould a human being by means of his imagination experience exactly the same as in reality, live through it in the same way as if he lived through it in reality, learn to know himself as accurately and profoundly as in the experience of reality – then there would be no meaning in life. In that case, Governance would have structured life wrongly, for to what purpose, then, reality if by means of the imagination one could in advance absorb it in a completely real way; to what purpose, then, the seventy years if in the twenty-second year one could have experienced everything! But such is not the case either, and therefore in turn the image produced by the imagination is not that of true perfection; it lacks something – the suffering of reality or the reality of suffering" ⁵² [p. 188].

With the question of real and imagined suffering we return to the question of emotion and language, and consequently to the problem of autonomy and heteronomy in emotional experience. The experience of passivity involved in suffering challenges our sense of autonomy, and it is exactly this challenge of articulating and understanding suffering that is crucial to our approach to both diagnosis and therapy of mental illness.

Feeling, imagining and understanding suffering

The ambiguity of anxiety brings out the dialectics of phenomena and concepts that I have argued is constitutive of human emotional life. I also have argued that this dialectics of felt significance and conceptual meaning is caused by the interplay of biological and rational features of our emotions, and that this dialectics, in turn, is responsible for the ambiguous role of language in our

emotional life. Language is both a necessary part of and a challenge in our emotional life. Language is constitutive of human emotions, and yet it is in and through our emotions that we most intimately experience the limits of language. We use language to articulate and deal with the passivity of our emotions, but language also becomes a problem through the experience of the persistence of passivity, that is, through the experience that we are not able to understand and control all aspects of how we feel. I argued that the challenge of language consists in the fact that we want to and are expected to understand and deal with this passivity. This challenge plays a critical role in mental suffering in the sense that our failed attempts to articulate, make sense of, and communicate our suffering exacerbates our suffering. In this concluding section, I want to argue that this challenge becomes even more demanding when we are confronted with the suffering of another person. Trying to deal with the suffering of another, we are faced with the problem of imagining and understanding that person's suffering.

Suffering affects a person's sense of autonomy, of being herself, and to help a person recover her sense of autonomy we need to understand how she suffers. Imagination is a fundamental aspect of both our understanding of another person's suffering and of our endeavour to help the suffering person through communication. But, as Kierkegaard argues and most psychiatrists and psychologists know from experience, the problem is that the reality of suffering cannot be imagined. This means that our articulation and understanding of suffering has to respect the ineffable, and often incomprehensible, reality of suffering. As we have seen, for Kierkegaard, imagination is a critical, but highly ambiguous feature of being human. We are and become human only through our imaginative capacity, and yet this very capacity is also a problem. The human world is experienced as concrete, that is, particular, finite and sensible, and yet this concrete world is teeming with innumerable forms, expressions and possibilities of life that are beyond our imagination. It is a reality saturated with a concreteness animating the expressions of human suffering that we try to make sense of through language. It seems an impossible task, but it is exactly the ambiguity of imagination that keeps alive our attempt to make sense of another person's suffering. The experience of the other person's suffering is the concrete example of the unimaginable complexity at work in human emotional life. We cannot find epistemic rest in either a biological or a rational explanation of the suffering we are confronted with in another person. I see, feel and think about the other person. The concreteness of that person is unmistakable. She is there in front of me, and as such unimaginably concrete. Her expressions, words, and

actions confront me with a reality that I cannot comprehend imaginatively. I, of course, always imagine the feelings, thoughts, memories and ideas that make her into the concrete person in front of me. But I cannot, or rather I am not allowed to, let my imagination overshadow the concreteness of her presence. Her presence manifests an autonomy that is unimaginably concrete, and thus impossible to domesticate conceptually. She is herself an imaginative being whose concrete, sensible manifestation is saturated with ideas, thoughts, desires, memories that I cannot comprehend. This autonomy of the other person marks the ambiguity with which I live myself, and as such it brings out the dialectics of autonomy and heteronomy involved in mental illness. Our imagination makes us an active, constitutive part of a reality that goes beyond our imaginative. And this limit to our imagining discloses a passivity at the heart of our autonomy that challenges us to reconsider the concrete suffering that we are witness to. Otherwise, we risk imposing our imaginative idea of another person's suffering on that person, thus further impairing the person's struggle to regain control of his or her suffering. Or put differently, we have to be aware that the words we use to communicate our imaginative understanding of the other person's suffering are heteronomous with respect to the concrete suffering of that person.

Karl Jaspers' psychopathology is built around an enduring concern with this fragile dialectics of autonomy and heteronomy at work in our attempt to understand and deal with mental suffering. He was also an avid reader of Kierkegaard, and one of his first serious interpreters. As he writes in one of the chapters most evidently inspired by Kierkegaard, Chapter 7 entitled "The Patient's Attitude to His Illness" [*Stellungnahme des Kranken zur Krankheit*; 2nd Part, Chapter 3 in the German original], which he inserted during the fourth and final rewriting of the book: "The crude categories, with which we classify and comprehend psychopathologically, do not penetrate into the core of a human being. Therein is a source by means of which he seems to be able to detach himself from everything, from what occurs, from what happens to him, and from what he is not in so far as he distances himself [...] For the psychopathologist there always remain the limits of knowledge [*Grenzwissen*]"⁵³ [pp. 426, 427].

It does not suffice, as Jaspers was well aware of, merely to point to the limits of knowledge in the experience of suffering. The main aim of psychiatry is, of course, to make sense of a person's suffering, and to help that person regain his autonomy by making sense of the illness that makes him suffer. As we saw earlier, our emotional life is certainly permeated with rationality, concept and language; still, part of the reason why we suffer is that we cannot find words for our emotions. So although our

imaginative psychopathological categories are crude and never able to penetrate into the heart of concrete suffering, imaginative work with language, concepts and rationality is nevertheless necessary in the psychiatrist's attempt to understand suffering. One of the most challenging aspects of this work is exactly to be aware of the dialectics of autonomy and heteronomy involved in the question of imagined and concrete suffering. Wolfgang Blankenburg was keenly aware of the problem of neglecting this dialectics: "Who is actually this human being that stands in front of me?', 'How do I do him justice?', 'How are we to understand and approach that which we perceive to be psychopathologically distinctive about him?'. The future of psychiatry depends significantly on the extent to which we succeed in answering such questions – not on the basis of preconceptions derived from an (implicit or explicit) worldview, but by means of a new form of empiricism"⁵⁴ [p. 184]. Contrary to the fossilised image of suffering at work in (some) ideals of psychiatric objectivity, Blankenburg argues for a conception of psychiatry that works with an entanglement of subjectivity and objectivity in which "understanding rests on a process of reciprocal self-disclosure and world-disclosure that by stimulating and increasing itself challenges and thereby indirectly enhances itself"⁵⁴ [p. 192]. The question of emotion and language, of phenomena and concepts, is at the core of the "new form of empiricism" that Blankenburg argues for. Instead of trying to make sense of the suffering of the patient in terms of unambiguous explanatory models of the "what" and "why" of a conception of mental illness, articulating the "how" of the suffering allows us to understand the autonomous and unimaginable character of the individual person's suffering. Every person suffers in his or her particular way. This is not to say that diagnostic and statistical criteria are vacuous or that the subjectivity of suffering precludes the use of objective categories of disorders to make sense of suffering. Rather, the phenomenology of suffering makes us aware of an autonomy that constantly destabilises our objective (pre)conceptions (the "what" and the "why") of the reality of suffering. We need both language and objective measures in order to make sense of the particular ways a person struggles with his or her suffering. How we are to construct the language of suffering, however, remains an open question that requires both passion and imagination.

Conflict of interests

None.

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