The Phenomenology of Existential Feeling

Matthew Ratcliffe

1. Introduction
This chapter sketches a phenomenological account of what I call ‘existential feeling’ (Ratcliffe, 2005, 2008). Since I introduced the term, it has also been adopted by several others (e.g. Slaby and Stephan, 2008; McLaughlin, 2009, Stephan, forthcoming), sometimes in ways that differ slightly from my own usage. Hence one aim of the chapter is to offer an overview of my understanding of ‘existential feeling’, so that it can be distinguished from others. To do so, I start by suggesting that there is a distinctive form of affective experience that cannot be fitted into established categories. Use of the term ‘existential feeling’, I propose, allows us to focus our enquiries on a neglected and phenomenologically unified group of affective phenomena that would otherwise be split up and assigned to familiar categories such as ‘emotion’, ‘feeling’ and ‘mood’. Following this, I sketch a two-part phenomenological analysis of existential feeling. First of all, I suggest that the notion of ‘experienced possibility’ is central. Then I argue that something can be both a bodily feeling and, at the same time, an experience of worldly possibilities. A further aim of the chapter is to complicate my analysis in two respects: I sketch an account of affective ‘depth’ that applies to existential feeling, after which I raise (but do not fully resolve) some issues concerning the relationship between existential feeling and conceptual thought.

2. Existential Feelings
Emotions are generally regarded as intentional states, bodily feelings or a combination of the two, and moods as generalised emotions. Whereas one might be angry about something specific, such as being insulted, a mood is directed at a more encompassing state of affairs, perhaps even the world as a whole.¹ There is a tendency in the philosophical literature to focus on a fairly standard inventory of emotions and

¹ See Ratcliffe (2008, Chapter 1; 2010b) for a more detailed discussion of such views.
moods, including anger, sadness, fear, joy, grief, jealousy, guilt, and so on. Consequently, a range of other emotional states, many of which do not have established names, have been neglected. Although the category of ‘neglected emotional states’ is not itself phenomenologically unitary, many of these neglected phenomena do have something in common. They are not intentional states, directed at however many objects, and they are not feelings of the body or some part of it. Instead, they amount to a felt sense of belonging to the world. Whenever we are happy, sad or angry about something, we already find ourselves in the world. This phenomenological achievement can vary in structure, and its variants shape all our experiences, thoughts and activities. It is also inextricable from our sense of reality; alterations in the sense of belonging are frequently coupled with the complaint that things, people or the world as a whole seem unreal. These alterations are usually but not always described in terms of ‘feeling’:

People sometimes talk of feeling alive, dead, distant, detached, dislodged, estranged, isolated, otherworldly, indifferent to everything, overwhelmed, suffocated, cut off, lost, disconnected, out of sorts, not oneself, out of touch with things, out of it, not quite with it, separate, in harmony with things, at peace with things or part of things. There are references to feelings of unreality, heightened existence, surreality, familiarity, unfamiliarity, strangeness, isolation, emptiness, belonging, being at home in the world, being at one with things, significance, insignificance, and the list goes on. People also sometimes report that ‘things just don’t feel right’, ‘I’m not with it today’, ‘I just feel a bit removed from it all at the moment’, ‘I feel out of it’ or ‘it feels strange’. (Ratcliffe, 2008, p.68)

Some of the above feelings take the form of brief episodes, whereas others are more enduring. I acknowledge that some are referred to in terms of familiar types of emotion, such as ‘guilt’ and ‘hopelessness’. Although we usually feel guilty about something specific or feel that a particular situation is hopeless, guilt and hopelessness can also amount to ways of being in the world, which permeate all experience and thought (Ratcliffe, 2010b). However, although some ways of finding

---

2 For an exception, see Roberts (2003), who addresses many kinds of emotion, including some that seldom feature in philosophical discussion.

3 Some persist for so long that they might be regarded them as character traits; a person can be habitually ‘detached’ or ‘out of touch’.
ourselves in the world are expressed in terms of familiar emotion categories, most are not. Furthermore, it is important to distinguish an intentional state of hopelessness or guilt from a form of guilt or hopelessness that constitutes the shape of one’s world – they are quite different in character. The sense of being there, immersed in a world, is not to be identified with experiences of something in the world. This point applies to intentional emotions more generally. When we see a bull running towards us and feel scared, we do so in the context of an already given situation; we are already there. Hence, if we are to adequately distinguish, categorise and analyse those affective experiences that constitute how we find ourselves in the world, a technical term is appropriate. Because we are dealing with something that is felt and at the same time amounts to a sense of reality and situatedness, I have proposed the term ‘existential feeling’ (Ratcliffe, 2005).

Although philosophical discussion of emotion does not generally address the kinds of affective experience that I call ‘existential feeling’, the intimate association between feeling, how one finds oneself in the world and one’s grasp of reality is frequently conveyed in literature, where there are many detailed and nuanced descriptions of changes in existential feeling. For example:

> Meanwhile, the whole outside world disclosed itself as treacherously subjective. Neither good nor sinister, dull nor fascinating, luminous nor black, the exterior universe possessed no innate qualities, but was nightmarishly reliant on the grind of her interior lens. That the Boat Basin in Riverside Park would not, at least, remain a sublime and halcyon copse atrot with friendly dogs unnerved her, for the same Hudson walkway would transmogrify into a bleak and trashy strip, its dogs ratty and hostile, the vista of New Jersey grim and aggressively overfamiliar. Sweetspot as well could flip-flop overnight from tasteful clapboard haven to slick, elitist preserve for the spoiled rotten. Willy resented having responsibility for the fickle landscape outside her mind as well as in; there was no resort. As the seafarer craves dry land, she yearned for anything ineluctable and true, immutably one way or another. Instead Willy was smitten with the awful discovery that even the color of a lamppost was subject to her own filthy moods. (Shriver, 2006, pp.247-8)

There is a lot going on in this passage, and I do not propose to account for everything in terms of existential feeling. Even so, the passage does serve to illustrate the aspect
of experience that I seek to convey. What we have here is something that is quite clearly ‘felt’. At the same time, it manifests itself as a way of relating to the world. However, to complicate matters, Willy’s relationship with the world is not constituted by a single, consistent feeling. Rather, her experience incorporates a sense of the transient and erratic nature of those feelings that once provided a consistent backdrop to experience and thought. This amounts to an existential feeling of contingency, uncertainty, insecurity, homelessness. When existential feeling remains stable, we might be oblivious to its role. But when it becomes changeable, a sense of changeability can itself amount to an altered sense of belonging. Willy inhabits a world from which stability and habitual trust in things are gone. With this, there is erosion of an ordinarily taken for granted public reality, of the sense that things reside in a world independent of her own experiences.

Descriptions of altered existential feeling are also commonplace in first- and third-person accounts of the phenomenology of psychiatric illness. Sass (e.g. 1992, 2004, 2007) and Sass and Parnas (e.g. 2007) develop a phenomenological analysis of schizophrenia, which emphasises a change in the sense of reality and belonging. This existential shift, they maintain, is what makes possible the formation of delusional experiences with specific contents. Stanghellini (2004) similarly insists that schizophrenia involves an all-enveloping change in one’s relationship with the world and, more specifically, with other people. The same can be said of depersonalisation disorder, a condition where people complain that things look strangely unreal, that their bodies feel odd or even bereft of feeling and that they are somehow diminished or detached from the world (Simeon and Abugel, 2006; Colombetti and Ratcliffe, forthcoming). Almost all first-person accounts of severe depression likewise convey a phenomenological change that amounts to ‘living in a different world’. It is not simply that one’s experience of however many entities is altered in some way - that what looked enticing now looks unappealing, what once seemed challenging now seems hopeless. Rather, there is a shift in the overall structure of world-experience. Consider this excerpt from a letter, quoted by Whybrow (1997, p.23):

It is like falling into a deep black pit; or being drawn down into a dark vortex led only by a pinpoint of light, which growing smaller and smaller, finally flickers and goes out. With it goes all feeling. […] It is a state of nonbeing; there is no cure, there is no
illness. I was convinced that I was dead, emotionally dead. I have no words to describe this thing that was totally alien to my life experience. [...] the closest I can come is that of a living void; of being condemned to life. And as the ability to live recedes, the most terrifying part of all is that it leaves a certain serenity.

The author of the letter is a woman suffering from melancholic depression. Her account illustrates themes that are common to almost all detailed first-person reports of severe depression. They convey the erosion of something that is ordinarily taken for granted, a sense of reality and belonging (Ratcliffe, 2010b). The world of depression is thus, as the author says, “alien” to everyday experience; she has “no words to describe” what has happened to her. People with depression often complain that communicating their predicament to others is difficult or impossible:

Such feelings are not easy to describe: our vocabulary – when it comes to talking about these things – is surprisingly limited. The exact quality of perception requires the resources of poetry to express. [...] I awoke into a different world. It was as though all had changed while I slept: that I awoke not into normal consciousness but into a nightmare. (Patient quoted by Rowe, 1978, pp.268-70)

Many kinds of existential feeling are similarly difficult to describe. These feelings are not usually explicit objects of experience or thought - we tend to be pre-occupied by what is going on in the world, rather than with the backdrop against which those happenings are intelligible. Hence we only tend to notice existential feelings when they take on a form that is phenomenologically conspicuous and usual. Even then, it is not possible to understand what is going on unless we also appreciate the phenomenological role that existential feeling more usually plays. If we fail to acknowledge that experience incorporates a background sense of belonging to a world, then we will inevitably misinterpret an alteration of that sense of belonging in terms of something else. This is not to suggest that we seldom talk about existential feeling. Although they are – for the most part – inconspicuous, pronounced changes in existential feeling are far from rare, and people do try to communicate them. But everyday discussion of existential feeling is often metaphorical and also vague. For example, one author writes of his experience of depression that “I felt like I’d been found incompetent and fired from my own life” (Steinke, 2001, p.64). Another way of
conveying existential feeling is by referring to a cause that is reliably associated with a feeling of some kind, rather than attempting to describe the feeling itself. Hence we might talk of a bad case of jetlag, a nightmare hangover or a feeling of profound grief, all of which involve the world as a whole looking strangely different.

Existential feelings are not specific to our relationship with the impersonal world; they are also ways of finding ourselves with other people. For instance, someone might complain of a pervasive feeling of disconnectedness from other people or that people only appear to them in the guise of threat (Ratcliffe and Broome, in press). The interpersonal aspect of existential feeling is evident from various descriptions in literature and also from accounts of anomalous experience in psychiatric illness. Consider this passage from a novel about the poet John Clare, who was incarcerated at High Beach Asylum:

Stands in the wilderness of the world, stands alone, [...] surrounded by strangers, trembling, unable, the sun heating him, his will breaking inside him, until he bursts out, ‘what can I do?’ As though it were possible, he searches again the strangers’ faces to find Mary or Patty or one of his own children or anyone, but there is no warm return from them. They are alien, moulded flesh only, and they frighten him. (Foulds, 2009, p.142)

The predicament described here does not just involve however many faces seeming curiously inanimate. It is a form that all the protagonist’s interpersonal experiences take on, an altered way of belonging to the interpersonal world.

In summary, existential feelings have two distinguishing characteristics. First of all, they are ways of finding oneself in the world and with other people, which shape all experience, thought and activity. Second, they are – in some sense – felt. It might be objected that these two criteria do not get us very far. The claim that something is a way of finding oneself in the world might be evocative but it is also rather vague – what exactly is it to ‘find oneself in the world’ in the relevant sense? The ‘felt’ character of existential feeling also requires further characterisation. They are surely not ‘bodily feelings’, as they constitute a background sense of belonging to the world, rather than an awareness of how things are with one’s body. So how, then, are they
‘feelings’? Everyday discourse, along with descriptions of anomalous experience in psychiatric illness, excerpts from novels and the like, might help draw attention to a neglected aspect of our affective lives. And a technical term like ‘existential feeling’ might facilitate more effective reference to it. But reference is not description, and what we do not yet have is an adequate phenomenological account. In the next two sections, I will sketch the bare bones of such an account, by first emphasising the role of experienced possibilities and then arguing that ‘bodily feelings’ can incorporate more than just ‘feelings of the body’.

3. Possibility
Existential feeling is centrally about having a sense of possibility. I did not make this sufficiently clear when I first introduced the term (Ratcliffe, 2005). In my 2008 book, Feelings of Being, I explicitly emphasised experience of possibility. However, I could have further stressed the distinctive role that existential feelings play in determining the kinds of significant possibility we are receptive to. In this section, I will do so. The first step is to acknowledge that we do indeed experience possibilities. To make this point, I find it helpful to draw upon the phenomenological concept of a ‘horizon’, as employed by Husserl (e.g. 1973, 1989, 2001) and later by Merleau-Ponty (1962). Husserl starts with the observation that, when we perceive an entity such as a cup, it seems as though the whole object is somehow present to us, even though only some of its aspects are perceptually available. In order to account for this, he maintains that we do not merely perceive what actually appears to us at any one time. Perception of an entity also incorporates a sense of further possible perceptions and actions involving that entity. Husserl suggests that the various possibilities incorporated into our experience of an entity comprise a structured system, which he refers to as the entity’s ‘horizon’. Visual perception of an entity does not incorporate only possibilities for vision; the horizon of a perceived entity is inter-sensory (Husserl, 1989, p.75). For example, when one sees a cup, one also perceives the tactual possibilities it offers; the cup appears as something that can be reached and grasped with ease, and as something with a tangible texture. The possibilities we perceive are variably

4 This not to suggest that phenomenology is the sole basis for such a view. For example, we could also appeal to complementary empirical findings (e.g. Declerck and Gapenne, 2009). In addition, some recent work in analytic philosophy of perception seems to be converging upon much the same view (O’Callaghan, 2011, p.157)
determinate. An entity might present itself as ‘having another side, the precise character of which is unknown’. Alternatively, something like a monochrome coffee mug might offer the more determinate possibility of being turned around to reveal a circular shape and a uniform colour. It is also important to emphasise the role of interpersonal possibilities. According to Husserl, the ability to experience something as there, as something that exists independent of my perceiving, is partly constituted by a sense of its accessibility to others. Even if it is not currently perceived or acted upon, it continues to incorporate the possibility of being perceptually and practically accessed by others (Husserl, 1960).

Perception of possibilities is not a detached, voyeuristic affair. It involves a structured system of non-conceptual bodily expectations (Husserl, 1973, 2001). For the most part, the possibilities offered by things take the form of habitual certainties. As I walk across the street, I take for granted that the texture of the road will remain fairly constant, that I will not fall into a hole or sink into a bog. Such alternative possibilities do not feature as part of the experience. But anticipation can also take the form of uncertainty or doubt regarding what something is or even whether it exists at all. If you walk home on a dark night and see a person-like shape in the woods, your experience of the entity as a person might incorporate a feeling of uncertainty. Then, as you get closer and the shape seems to change and fragment, there is doubt over whether you perceive an entity at all. Hence the horizontal structure of perception is not static; it is a dynamic system of habitual, non-conceptual expectations of various kinds, where expectations may or may not be fulfilled. The relevant possibilities are experienced as integral to the world.

In order to understand existential feeling, we need to draw a distinction between instances of possibility, such as ‘this cup can be touched’ or ‘this cup has the potential to be seen by others’, and kinds of possibility, such as ‘tangibility’ or ‘being perceivable by others’. Experience incorporates various different kinds of possibility, which may or may not feature in the experience of a particular entity. It is important to stress how many kinds of possibility contribute to our experience of the personal and impersonal world. This becomes more apparent once we acknowledge that the

---

5 See Gallagher (2008) for a discussion of Husserl on the role of interpersonal possibilities in constituting our sense of being in an ‘objective’ world.
horizontal structure of experience incorporates not only relations of practical and perceptual accessibility but also ways in which things appear significant to us or even enticing. Husserl (2001, pp.83-98) stresses that various possibilities do not simply present themselves as scenarios that we could actualise. Instead, they say to us, ‘actualise me’; they entice us. He adds that there is a continuum between those possibilities that are merely “open” and those that are “enticing”. However, we can complicate the analysis by observing that the category “enticing” does not identify a single kind of possibility. Things can entice us in various ways, by being fascinating, offering pleasure, being relevant to projects we care about, and so on. And there are further ways in which the world can incorporate a pull towards action; something can appear pressing, urgent or required. In these latter cases, a possibility need not be “enticing” in order to be something that disposes or even seemingly compels us to act in a particular way.

However, we can broaden the account still further. Entities are perceived to matter in a range of different ways, where how something matters is to be understood in terms of the kinds of significant possibility that it offers. Something might appear as relevant or irrelevant to a project, threatening, comforting, and so on. And something can matter without actually “enticing” us to act. Husserl acknowledges that the everyday world is not a realm of “nature-Objects”, but is instead populated by “value-Objects” of various kinds (1989, p.29). Although he does not emphasise the role played by kinds of ‘value’ or ‘mattering’ in the horizontal structure of experience, I think that including them is both consistent with his approach and phenomenologically accurate. The kinds of mattering we are receptive to can be distinguished from more specific ways of finding things significant. A hammer ‘matters’ in the sense that it is ‘practically significant in the context of a project’, and it is practically significant in the context of the project of building a shed because it offers the possibility of ‘hammering’. It is the categories of mattering that I am interested in, rather than the particular projects and properties that determine whether or not a given entity is or is not experienced as mattering in those ways. 6 But, even at this level of generality, there are many kinds of mattering. Various categories, such as

---

6 Hence having a certain existential feeling does not depend upon having specific bodily capacities that determine whether certain entities are significant in certain ways (such as cups being graspable). Bodily difference and bodily impairment do not therefore imply difference in existential feeling.
‘threat’ or ‘practical significance in the context of a project’ can be further broken down into several subcategories. A threat can be experienced as mild or severe, probable or improbable, distant or imminent, avoidable or unavoidable, shared or specific to oneself, and personal or impersonal in nature. When we add the possibilities offered by other people, from communion to humiliation, the kinds of mattering that the world incorporates increase considerably. We can also make further subdivisions between kinds of possibility on the basis of their interpersonal application: things can appear as ‘threatening to me and only me’, ‘threatening to all of us’, ‘threatening to them but not to us’, ‘practically significant for us’, ‘practically significant only to me’, and so on.

Although I have not offered anything approximating a comprehensive taxonomy of experienced possibility types, I hope it is at least clear that many different kinds of possibility can be identified. And I propose that we analyse existential feeling in terms of them: existential feelings constitute a sense of the kinds of possibility that the world offers. For example, there is a difference between a specific entity, such as a cloud, lacking the possibility ‘tangibility’ and the absence of that possibility from experience as a whole. If everything ceased to offer the possibility of being touched or manipulated, if that kind of possibility were altogether removed from experience, then everything would seem curiously distant, cut off, somehow not quite there. Intentional states presuppose existential feelings. In order to experience an entity as threatening, enticing, accessible to others or relevant to a project, one’s world must accommodate possibilities of those kinds. In their absence, the associated kinds of intentional state could not be adopted. Existential feelings thus shape all experience, thought and activity, insofar as they determine what kinds of intentional state are amongst one’s possibilities. Hence we might describe them as “pre-intentional” rather than “intentional” (Ratcliffe, 2010a).\(^7\) My use of the term ‘existential feeling’ thus differs, in one important respect, from that of McLaughlin (2009). Whereas he takes existential feeling to be a distinctive kind of intentional state, I treat it as a space of possibility that our repertoire of intentional states presupposes.

\(^7\) See also Strasser (1977, Chapter 7) for the distinction between intentional and pre-intentional feelings.
A change in existential feeling might affect our sense of possibilities for perceptual and practical accessibility. For instance, first-person accounts of psychiatric illness sometimes involve complaints that everything looks intangible or two-dimensional. However, existential feelings are associated principally with the kinds of mattering that experience incorporates. In this respect, my analysis follows Heidegger’s account of moods [Stimmungen] in *Being and Time*. According to Heidegger, moods are not intentional states that encompass a wide range of objects. Rather, they are modes of Befindlichkeit, ways of finding oneself in the world. Moods, for Heidegger, constitute a changeable sense of being situated in the world. This, he says, is presupposed by the intelligibility of intentionally directed experiences, thoughts and activities: “The mood has already disclosed, in every case, Being-in-the-world as a whole, and makes it possible first of all to direct oneself towards something” (1962, p.176 / p.137). A central characteristic of Befindlichkeit, in its various modes, is that it determines the ways in which things can matter to us and, therefore, the kinds of intentional state we can adopt. For instance, a being whose sense of belonging to the world did not incorporate the possibility of threat would be incapable of an intentional state of fear (Heidegger, 1962, p.176/p.137).

However, I refrain from using the term ‘mood’, as it refers to a range of different phenomena, not all of which play the role described by Heidegger. I can be in a bad mood with someone, where mood is clearly an enduring and fairly specifically focused intentional state. Other moods are intentional states with a wider range of objects (for example, feeling grumpy about several things that have happened during a really bad week). Hence not all ‘moods’ determine the kinds of possibility we are receptive to, the kinds of intentional state we are able to adopt. Furthermore, many existential feelings are not referred to as moods. The German term Stimmung does not have quite the same connotations as ‘mood’. Nevertheless, it too fails to capture all of the relevant phenomena and only those phenomena. My departure from Heidegger is not merely terminological though. There are also some problems with his analysis. For instance, he restricts himself to a fairly narrow range of emotional states. In *Being and Time*, we have an emphasis on fear and Angst. In a slightly later text (Heidegger, 1995), there is also a lengthy analysis of boredom [Langeweile]. However, I have argued elsewhere that the range of existential feelings is much wider and, in addition, that ‘moods’ such as Heideggerian Angst may actually subdivide into a range of
subtly different existential feelings. Furthermore, I have stressed that there is a need to account for the bodily dimension of existential feeling, something that Heidegger explicitly declines to comment on in Being and Time (Ratcliffe, 2008, Chapter 2; in press).

In maintaining that existential feelings determine the kinds of mattering we are receptive to, I do not wish to imply a simple addition and subtraction model, where categories of mattering can be added or removed, leaving the rest of experience intact. First of all, it should be emphasised that the possibility space is holistic. The absence, addition, intensification and diminution of one kind of possibility will often, if not always, have wider implications. Suppose one lived in a world where everything appeared threatening, where what used to be a contingent possibility associated with only certain situations became the form of all experience. This would entail loss of other possibilities too, such as those of effortless practical engagement with things and comfortable communication with others. One’s more general sense of being in the world would thus be transformed.

The structure of existential feeling is also diachronic in character. Suppose one belongs to a world where everything seems uncertain, where insecurity pervades everything. This need not be understood in terms of subtraction of a category such as ‘habitual certainty’ or addition of a category such as ‘insecurity’. An existential sense of uncertainty or insecurity manifests itself in the interplay between expectation and fulfilment, an essentially dynamic process. One might lose the sense of fulfilment ordinarily associated with habitual expectation, with the result that every occurrence takes the form ‘unexpected’ or ‘not right’. Alternatively, the form of expectation might change, with habitual certainty being replaced by uncertainty or doubt. In both scenarios, what is lost is the usual dynamic interplay between possibilities that present themselves as certain and their actualisation. In the absence of a certain kind of expectation and/or fulfilment, the whole process changes, and this altered process constitutes an existential feeling of not being quite at home in the world. The process whereby possibilities are presented and actualised could be disrupted in a range of other ways too. The most extreme scenario would be a complete loss of horizontal structure, where possibilities present themselves chaotically. Hence certain existential feelings are not attributable to the simple addition or subtraction of a kind of
possibility. Rather, it is the structured, dynamic interplay between kinds of possibility that changes. The result can often be described more conveniently as the ‘loss’ of something from experience, such as a feeling of homeliness, or the addition of something, such as a pervasive feeling of unease.

A range of sources serve to support the phenomenological account that I have sketched here. Amongst the most compelling, in my view, are the many first-person reports offered in the context of psychopathology and psychiatry. An analysis of existential feelings offers a plausible framework through which to interpret them, and is thus vindicated in the process. Consider, for instance, what Jaspers calls ‘delusional atmosphere’ or ‘delusional mood’, which involves a seemingly paradoxical state of affairs where everything looks the same as before but, at the same time, completely different: “perception is unaltered in itself but there is some change which envelops everything with a subtle, pervasive and strangely uncertain light” (Jaspers, 1962, p.98). It is not at all clear what has changed here and, in this respect, delusional mood is not unusual. All of us have had experiences where things look somehow strange and different, in ways that are difficult to pin down. Once we allow that experience incorporates various kinds of possibility, it becomes possible to explain how something could look exactly the same as it previously did and yet very different. The perceived properties remain intact but the kinds of experienced possibility habitually associated with them have changed. For example, a hammer that appeared utterly bereft of its usual practical significance could still appear black, with a metal head, and about 40 cm long. I suspect that many anomalous experiences take this form. This is not a matter of my simply imposing an analysis of existential feeling upon the relevant phenomena; in numerous cases, people explicitly describe changes in the kinds of mattering or possibility that experience incorporates. Consider the following passage from Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl, where the author, ‘Renee’, describes a short-lived return to reality:

…when we were outside I realized that my perception of things had completely changed. Instead of infinite space, unreal, where everything was cut off, naked and isolated, I saw Reality, marvellous Reality, for the first time. The people whom we encountered were no longer automatons, phantoms, revolving around, gesticulating without meaning; they were men and women with their own individual characteristics,
their own individuality. It was the same with things. They were useful things, having sense, capable of giving me pleasure. Here was an automobile to take me to the hospital, cushions I could rest on. […] for the first time I dared to handle the chairs, to change the arrangement of the furniture. What an unknown joy, to have an influence on things; to do with them what I liked and especially to have the pleasure of wanting the change. (Sechehaye, 1970, pp.105-6)

The passage conveys a radical change in the structure of experience, which involves, amongst other things, a return of practical significance to the world. Things had lost their usual practical possibilities; they had ceased to matter in those ways. As the possibilities return to them, so does a sense of reality, something that was diminished or lost when the world was wholly devoid of practical meaning. What we also see here is an awareness of loss, which is especially salient during the transition between existential feelings. As mattering returns, Renee becomes acutely aware of what was missing from her world. Of course, loss of a kind of possibility from experience need not always incorporate a sense of loss. And perhaps, before these possibilities began to return, Renee had become largely oblivious to their absence. However, there are many cases where altered experience incorporates a conspicuous feeling of lost possibility. This is often reported in depression, where loss of hope, practical significance, pleasure and interpersonal connectedness can itself be painfully felt (Ratcliffe, 2010b, p.610). It is not just that one remembers things being different. The absence is there; part of the experience. What may happen here is that the habitual anticipation of various possibilities being actualised remains intact, whereas the capacity to actualise them does not. Hence experience is permeated by a sense of unfulfilled expectation and/or disappointment. For instance, although one might be incapable of finding things practically significant, one might retain expectations that depend, for their fulfilment, upon things appearing as they would if the world incorporated practical significance. So everything looks odd, somehow lacking. First-person accounts of depression also tend to report a pervasive sense of impossibility. For example:

It became impossible to reach anything. Like, how do I get up and walk to that chair if the essential thing that we mean by chair, something that lets us sit down and rest or upholds us as we read a book, something that shares our life in that way, has lost the
quality of being able to do that? […] You know that you have lost life itself. You’ve lost a habitable earth. You’ve lost the invitation to live that the universe extends to us as every moment. You’ve lost something that people don’t even know is. That’s why it’s so hard to explain. (From an interview quoted by Hornstein, 2009, p.213)

It’s almost like I am there but I can’t touch anything or I can’t connect. Everything requires massive effort and I’m not really able to do anything. Like if I notice something needs cleaning or moving, it’s like it’s out of reach, or the act of doing that thing isn’t in my world at that time… like I can see so much detail but I cannot be a part of it. I suppose feeling disconnected is the best way to describe it. (Patient quoted by Horne and Csipke, 2009, p.663)

The world appears as lacking certain kinds of possibility such as tangibility, practical significance and enticement to act. A sense of their absence amounts to a pervasive feeling of disconnectedness that shapes all experience, a radical shift in the sense of reality and belonging. As the description quoted by Hornstein indicates, these changes implicate something that we ordinarily take for granted, a sense of belonging to the world that we “don’t even know is”, thus making them difficult to convey to others.8

By reflecting upon such predicaments, we can make an important distinction between changes in the form and content of experience, where only the former involve altered existential feeling. Consider someone who loses an important life project, such as a job that she cares deeply about. She might complain that the world looks somehow different, and it is easy to see why. Amongst other things, a whole system of practical significance focused around the job has collapsed, and the entities it involves therefore look somehow strange. However, the relevant experience could take two different forms. In one scenario, the person loses many instances of experienced possibility p. She retains the capacity to encounter things as offering p, even though

---

8 Many existential feelings also affect temporal experience. In a case of severe depression, where the world no longer includes significant possibilities, the predicament seems unchangeable, eternal. An experienced situation ordinarily incorporates a sense of its own contingency - the possibility of things being different in ways that matter. In the absence of this possibility, there is a change in one’s usual experience of temporal flow, which no longer involves the actualisation of significant possibilities or the kinds of anticipation associated with things mattering. One’s longer term sense of time is also altered in various ways, as events cease to be ordered around the pursuit of projects or goals. Hence the future lacks the potential to be significantly different from the past; it is just more of the same. For discussions of changes in the structure of temporal experience in psychiatric illness, see, for example, Minkowski (1970), Wyllie (2005) and Fuchs (forthcoming).
many things that used to incorporate \( p \) now lack it. An alternative scenario is where loss of the job somehow precipitates an existential change, where she not only loses token possibilities of type \( p \) but loses type \( p \) altogether; her world no longer includes the possibility of anything offering \( p \). Only the latter is what I would call a change in existential feeling, a change in the form of experience that intentional states presuppose. The former is a change in the contents of experience, which could – in principle at least – leave the form unaffected. Matters are no doubt more complicated in practice, as it seems plausible to maintain that a change in content might somehow trigger a change in form, which could further affect content, and so on. Even so, it is important to draw a distinction between kinds of experience that can be described in similar ways but are in fact structurally very different.\(^9\) One way to do this is to distinguish ‘existential feeling’ from the broader notion of ‘existential orientation’, where the former relates to the kinds of possibility one’s world incorporates, whereas the latter also includes the core projects one is committed to. Hence it is existential feeling that determines whether one is able to find anything practically significant, but it is a concrete existential orientation that determines what one finds significant and in what way.\(^{10}\)

### 4. Feeling

I have proposed that existential feelings play a distinctive phenomenological role. They constitute a changeable sense of reality and belonging, which can be construed as a possibility space. However, I have not said what plays this role. Just what are existential feelings? My claim is that they are bodily feelings. This might seem plain false, given that feelings of bodily states are distinct from a sense of belonging to the world. However, I suggest that bodily feelings in general are not just feelings of bodily states. Goldie (2000) distinguishes ‘bodily feelings’ from ‘feelings towards’, where the latter are feelings that have something other than the body as an intentional object. I agree that not all feelings are directed at the body or parts of it. However, I am inclined to reject a clear distinction between two kinds of feelings. Instead, I argue that most, if not all, bodily feelings are relational – they are seldom, if ever, directed

---

\(^9\) I strongly suspect that current diagnostic categories such as ‘major depressive disorder’ (e.g. DSM IV) include both kinds of experience. Hence quite different predicaments are treated as one and the same.

\(^{10}\) I did not distinguish ‘existential feeling’ from ‘existential orientation’ in my 2008 book. However, I now think that it is important to do so. Otherwise, the term ‘existential feeling’ risks being confused with something broader. Thanks to Jan Slaby for drawing my attention to this issue.
exclusively at the body. Indeed, there are ‘bodily feelings’ that do not involve the body as an object of experience at all. Instead, the body manifests itself as that through which something else is experienced. Goldie (2009) has more recently moved in a similar direction, and acknowledges that many ‘bodily feelings’ are also ‘feelings towards’. If there is a disagreement between us, it concerns which feelings are exclusively ‘bodily’ – Goldie insists that at least some are, whereas I am not convinced that we should concede even this much.

In order to convey the relational phenomenology of bodily feeling, it is helpful to reflect upon the experience of touch. When I run my hand along the surface of my desk, what I perceive is not a feeling in my hand but the texture of the desk. My hand is not wholly absent from the experience, but it is not simply a recessive object of experience either. Rather, it features as that through which I experience something else. The difference is illustrated by the well-known example of two hands touching, offered by Merleau-Ponty (e.g. 1968, p.9). When you actively touch one hand with the other, only the touched hand is experienced as an object of perception. When you try to bring the other hand into focus, there is a kind of ‘gestalt switch’, as the perceiving hand becomes the perceived. It is not that a previously recessive object of perception becomes more conspicuous; the experience of a perceived hand is qualitatively different from that of a perceiving hand. It would be wrong, I think, to maintain that the perceiving hand is not experienced at all. After all, there is a considerable phenomenological difference between a touching hand and a numb hand (Ratcliffe, 2008, Chapter 3). Instead, it should be acknowledged that the body can feature in our experience as that through which we perceive something else. The term ‘bodily feeling’ is thus insensitive to a distinction between two kinds of bodily experience: the feeling body needs to be distinguished from the felt body.

One might object that touch differs from other kinds of bodily feeling, insofar as it depends upon physical contact between perceiver and perceived. Hence what applies to tactual feeling does not apply to feelings that are internal to the body. However, examples of distance touch, such as using a pencil to write or a cane to navigate, count against this. If you write on a rough surface with a pencil, you perceive the

---

11 Merleau-Ponty draws on Husserl’s discussion of touch in Ideas II.
surface through the pencil, rather than the boundary between pencil and hand. What is perceived through touch need not be an entity in physical contact with the body. So it could be that other kinds of bodily feeling similarly contribute to the perception of entities external to the body. And I maintain that many of them do. Consider Sartre’s example of reading when you have tired, sore eyes:

…this pain can itself be indicated by objects of the world; i.e., by the book which I read. It is with more difficulty that the words are detached from the undifferentiated ground which they constitute; they may tremble, quiver; their meaning can be derived only with effort… (1989, p.332)

Before you reflect upon the pain, the sore eyes are not an object of experience - the pain manifests itself as how the words on the page appear. When the painful eyes become an object of perception, the experience is altogether different. We can thus distinguish between ‘noematic feelings’, where the body is a central or peripheral object of experience, and ‘noetic feelings’, where the body is that through which something else is experienced (Colombetti and Ratcliffe, in press). However, I suggest that there are also other kinds of bodily feeling, which play neither a noetic nor a noematic role. They constitute a sense of belonging to the world, in the context of which we have intentional states with noetic and noematic aspects. In other words, they are existential feelings.

I think it is plausible to maintain that some forms of pain contribute to existential feeling. Even when a feeling of pain is at the forefront of awareness, it need not be exhausted by its bodily phenomenology. Some pains are, at the same time, integral to a sense of belonging to the world. To quote Minkowski (1958, p.134):

…pain evidently opposes the expansive tendency of our personal impetus; we can no longer turn ourselves outward, nor do we try to leave our personal stamp on the external world. Instead we let the world, in all its impetuousness, come to us, making us suffer. Thus, pain is also an attitude toward the environment.

The world thus ceases to appear as a realm of significant possibilities that entices us to act and instead becomes something before which we are passive. Scarry (1985,
p.35) goes so far as to say that pain can be “world-destroying”. Inextricable from the bodily phenomenology of pain, in its more extreme forms, is a loss of the ordinarily taken-for-granted world:

[Pain] destroys a person’s self and world, a destruction that is experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe.

I also maintain that certain kinds of tactual feeling contribute to existential feeling. There is a diffuse, changeable, background sense of touch, which ordinarily incorporates a partial lack of differentiation between body and world. This, I have suggested, contributes to a general sense of being situated in the world (Ratcliffe, 2008, Chapter 3). It is likely that many other kinds of bodily feeling contribute to existential feeling. Candidates include a range of feelings that do not have specific felt locations and are thus characterised by “diffuse localisation” (Slaby, 2008). Amongst these, I would include feelings of balance and orientation, which can contribute to a more encompassing sense of being rooted in a world or dislodged. It is also important to emphasise the dynamics of feeling, as Sheets-Johnstone (2009) and Stern (2010) do, rather than regarding feelings as synchronic episodes that occur independent of our activities. Feelings emerge and develop in the context of our ongoing activity. Consider how a feeling of strangeness might develop as you wander around a place - patterns of anticipation are not met with fulfilment, amounting to feelings of unfamiliarity that serve to shape further activities, and so on.

Absolutely central to existential feelings, I suggest, are diffuse feelings that are closely associated with or sometimes identical with action dispositions and action readiness. We also find this emphasis in Husserl, who argues that perceived worldly possibilities are, in many cases at least, inextricable from bodily dispositions. He talks of the “affective pull of enticing possibilities”, where a bodily pull and a sense of something as enticing are inseparable (2001, p.98). Husserl also emphasises “kinaestheses” in his account of the horizontal structure of experience, unthinking

---

12 See also Cole (2004, p. 8) for a first-person account that emphasises the same point. In his words, “my immersion in the pain was so consuming that the world, as an external place to calibrate myself in, and from, no longer presented itself to me”.
13 These feelings are also discussed by Colombetti (in press).
movements that contribute to perceptual activity: “We call these movements, which belong to the essence of perception and serve to bring the object of perception to givenness from all sides insofar as possible, kinaestheses” (1973, pp.83-4). Various kinds of kinaesthetic disposition are, for Husserl, integral to the perception of possibility. Hence a structured framework of bodily dispositions and bodily anticipation is also that through which the world is experienced. The body is a “medium” or “organ” of perception more so than an object of perception (Husserl, 1989, p.61). We find the same emphasis on the inextricability of worldly possibilities and bodily feeling in the work of other phenomenologists, such as Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. For instance, it is central to Sartre’s account of how we experience others (Sartre, 1989, Part Three, Chapter 1), where a distinctive kind of bodily feeling amounts at the same time to an experienced loss of one’s possibilities, a loss that is one’s sense of being perceived by someone else.

Drawing on Husserl and others, I suggest that changes in existential feeling involve changes in a diffuse, background sense of bodily dispositions, which are at the same time changes in the kinds of possibility that the world accommodates. I use the term ‘background’ to emphasise that existential feelings are presupposed by the possibility of intentional states, there in advance. However, this should not be taken to imply that they are always inconspicuous or tacit. An existential feeling can at the same time be an object of experience. Consider a feeling of extreme anxiety, where the whole world presents itself under the guise of threat and incorporates no sense of alternatives to that threat. The threat is the form of one’s world, rather than something attached to one of its contents, but the feeling is at the same time conspicuous and disturbing. The fact that one’s world takes this form can itself be something that is attended to and reflected upon, as can the bodily aspects of anxiety.  

An existential feeling might affect one’s various behavioural dispositions differently in different contexts, even though the feeling can be said to persist across all these

---

14 The inextricability of bodily feeling from the structure of world-experience is further illustrated when we turn to the phenomenology of schizophrenia and depression. For example, Sass (e.g. 2004) proposes that an overall change in bodily affect that occurs in schizophrenia is inseparable from a transformation of the experienced world, which is stripped of practically significant possibilities and appears oddly distant. First-person reports of depression similarly emphasise, time and time again, how altered experience of the body is bound up with a changed world (Ratcliffe, 2009).
contexts. Thus it would be wrong to tie all the relevant bodily feelings too closely to current dispositions to act. It might be better to say that existential feelings dispose one to have certain kinds of behavioural disposition in certain contexts. Weakening the link between existential feeling and behavioural disposition in this way opens up the possibility of a very wide range of bodily feelings contributing to existential feeling. I am inclined to accept this – existential feelings may have many different ingredients, which interact in various ways, and some of these are more closely tied to specific forms of activity than others. Furthermore, it is important not to place too much emphasis on experienced possibilities for activity. There are also potential happenings – the world appears as a place in which events over which one has no control can happen, events that matter in a range of different ways. And there are possibilities that appear as available to others but not oneself - depression can involve a pervasive sense that ‘I can’t act’, rather than that everyone can’t. However, it is both coherent and – I think – plausible to maintain that bodily dispositions are equally implicated in feelings of passivity. Consider, for example, the experienced inclination to curl up and hide in the face of a physical threat that appears imminent and unavoidable, before which one feels helpless.

Hence I maintain that (a) not all bodily feelings are simply feelings of the body and (b) several kinds of bodily feeling together constitute existential feeling. My case is primarily phenomenological (as is my interest in existential feeling) and does not require any firm commitment with regard to the neurobiological correlates of existential feeling. I am quite happy to leave others to piece the neurobiological details together.

5. Depths of Feeling
Existential feelings involve experience of the body, the impersonal world and other people. So the same feeling could be described in a number of ways. Take a pervasive feeling of unfamiliarity and strangeness - a sense of being slightly dislodged from everything and everyone. Someone with this experience might say, ‘my body feels strange’, the world seems strange’, ‘everyone looks strange’ or just ‘it feels strange’. When attempting to convey anomalous bodily feelings, she might say ‘I feel strange’ instead of ‘my body feels strange’. However, she could also use ‘I feel strange’ to refer to something different – an altered experience of self. Again though, it is likely
that certain changes in the phenomenology of ‘self’ are inextricable from the other changes I have mentioned. For instance, it is arguable that a phenomenology of ‘core’ or ‘minimal’ selfhood is partly constituted by a sense of having various capacities and potentialities, which are at the same time reflected in the experienced world (Slaby, forthcoming).

Because the same existential feeling can be described in different ways, with reference to the body, self, self-world relation, impersonal world or social world, it is important not to double- or triple-count them. Here, I part company with Stephan and Slaby, who sketch a taxonomy of existential feeling that appeals to different “levels of growing situational specificity and increasing conceptual impregnation” (2008, p.510). There is the most basic level, which includes feelings such as that of being alive. Then we have feelings such as unfamiliarity, followed by vulnerability, power and control. At the most specific level, there are feelings of being watched, overwhelmed and the like (2008, p.510). I worry that categorisations like this reflect different descriptions of existential feelings, more so than different feelings. For instance, a world that appears strangely unfamiliar may do so because it is bereft of all practical significance. Hence it will also be bereft of enticing possibilities and thus amount to a loss of drive or vitality. This drive, one might argue, is integral to a sense of being alive. Furthermore, a feeling of passivity before the world could incorporate a feeling of vulnerability. This altered way of being in the world will also shape relations with others, which might seem overwhelming or uncontrollable. Thus what might look like isolable feelings are, in many cases, aspects of a unitary existential change – the levels are levels of description. I do not deny that some feelings of being vulnerable or overwhelmed are indeed more focused states. But, for me, these would be intentional states, rather than existential feelings that determine the range of intentional states one is able to adopt.

So how should we categorise existential feelings? My suggestion is that we focus upon possibility. In order to offer a comprehensive account, we need (1) an analysis of the kinds of possibility that experience incorporates and then (2) a further analysis of ways in which that space could in principle change and does is in practice change. (1) is a very substantial undertaking, which would generate difficult questions regarding the criteria and methods we employ to distinguish different kinds of
possibility, how we might distinguish a good account of the phenomenological possibility space from a bad one, and whether there is a uniquely appropriate or correct account. However, we do not need to refrain from interpreting changes in existential feeling (2) until all the issues have been resolved and all the work of (1) has been done. Instead, we can explore altered existential feeling, in the context of psychiatry and elsewhere, in order to cast light upon the structure of the possibility space. Our understanding of that space can then inform further phenomenological enquiry. Hence I see the distinguishing and categorising of existential feelings as an ongoing task – we do the phenomenological work of charting the possibility space by engaging with ways in which that space is transformed. And we tackle various philosophical and methodological questions as we proceed.

I do not subscribe to the view that there are ‘levels of existential feeling’. An existential feeling is a configuration of the possibility space that shapes all experience, thought and activity, and no configuration is ‘deeper’ or ‘shallower’ than another. Even so, I am not wholly opposed to a strata theory of the kind that Stephan and Slaby propose. Existential feelings do not differ from each other in depth. However, changes in existential feeling do. In order to understand how, it is important to make clear the relevant conception of affective ‘depth’. David Pugmire (2005) offers an account of emotional depth, which emphasises, amongst other things, the significance and breadth of an emotion’s content. So, for example, dismay that all one’s life projects are irrevocably futile is more profound than dismay that “one’s stamp collection cannot be completed” (Pugmire, 2005, p.31). According to Pugmire, some types of emotion are deeper than others and some tokens of a type or emotion are deeper than others. In all cases, depth involves the extent to which an emotion impacts upon one’s concerns: “depth depends at least on how much of a person’s life is affected by what evokes the emotion” (2005, p.43). However, an account emphasising the centrality of an emotion’s content to life concerns is inappropriate in the case of existential feeling. Changes in existential feelings are not content-specific; they alter the range of intentional states that one is capable of in a way that is insensitive to content. An existential change that involved loss of any sense of threat from the world would not remove fear of x, y and z; it would remove the possibility of fear full stop.
Hence, although I do not seek to challenge Pugmire’s analysis of the profundity of intentional emotions, what is needed for existential feelings is something different. My proposal is that one change in existential feeling is deeper than another if it has a more substantial effect upon the possibility space, on the range of intentional states that one is able to adopt. In many cases, it is difficult to assess the comparative degree of change. In others, however, it is fairly easy. Consider a loss of practical significance. This could take a number of different forms. For example, (a) the world might appear bereft of significant possibilities for oneself, whilst retaining such possibilities for others; (b) the world might appear as bereft of practical possibilities for anyone; or (c) one might even lose a sense of the world’s lacking something - the category ‘practically significant’ is completely lost, along with any sense that the world ever included that category. It seems clear to me that (b) is deeper than (a) and (c) is deeper than (b), as progression from (a) to (c) involves an increasingly profound transformation of the possibility space. I have argued elsewhere that we can develop depth analyses along such lines for other kinds of existential feeling, such as existential guilt and also hopelessness (Ratcliffe, 2010b; unpublished). However, when it comes to comparing the depth of very different kinds of existential feeling, matters become more difficult. Is a feeling of all-encompassing and warming familiarity a more or less profound shift in how we find ourselves in the world than a feeling of all-encompassing dread? In some cases, we may find that one feeling entails the other, but not vice versa, thus facilitating a priority claim. In others, it may simply be clear that the effect of one feeling upon the possibility space is far greater than that of another. The world described by Renee (Sechhaye, 1970) is a place altogether bereft of practical familiarity and of the usual sense of reality, where people no longer appear as people but as mechanisms. This is quite clearly further removed from ‘everyday’ existential feeling than the world of, say, moderate depression. Even so, I acknowledge that many other shifts in existential feeling will be much harder to classify in terms of relative depth or profundity.

6. Existential Feeling and Thought
Something else that deserves further consideration is the relationship between existential feeling and conceptual thought. I have proposed that existential feeling determines the parameters of intelligible experience, thought and activity for a person. However, might one equally maintain that conceptual thought shapes existential
feeling and that the relationship between the two is therefore one of mutual
dependence? Take the case of first-person depression narratives. It seems plausible to
suggest that the narrative a person constructs shapes how she interprets her depression
or even how it is experienced, and therefore has at least some potential to influence
the course of depression. Perhaps it also shapes the relevant existential feelings? Even
if it does, existential feeling retains a distinctive kind of priority over conceptual and,
more specifically, narrative thought. Existential feelings constrain not just the content
but the form of the narratives one is able to adopt. For example, Good (1994) notes
that most narratives, including illness narratives, oscillate between various points of
view; they are open to diverse self-interpretations and alive with possibilities. As he
puts it, “stories of illness and healing experience which represent quite distinct and
often competing forms of composing the illness are present in narratives precisely
because they maintain the quality of subjunctivity and openness to change”. However,
he adds that this form is absent in “tragic and hopeless cases” (1994, p.155). The loss
of possibilities from experience is thus reflected in the space of possible narratives.
Granted, a narrative constructed against the backdrop of some existential feeling
could, conceivably, act upon the feeling and reshape it. However, the narrative does
not determine which kinds of feeling are currently intelligible possibilities for a
person in the way that feeling determines the form of thought and, more specifically,
autobiographical, narrative thought. Hence the dependence is not symmetrical.

Existential feelings can similarly constrain the belief contents that a person is able to
entertain. People with depression frequently report being unable to believe that they
could ever recover, that it seemed utterly impossible. I have argued that this is
because depression involves the removal of significant possibilities from experience.
Hence one is no longer able to entertain the possibility of things ever being
significantly different from how they are now. Recovery, involving just such a
difference, thus seems impossible – one cannot even think it (Ratcliffe, 2010b). But
existential feelings not only affect which beliefs we are able to form; they also affect
the structure of all one’s beliefs. In order to believe that \( p \) or believe that not \( p \), one
must have a sense of what it is for \( p \) to be or not be the case. However, a change in the
sense of reality is a change in one’s sense of what it is to be or not be the case. With
the loss of various kinds of possibility from experience, nothing seems to be the case
in the way that it once did; the whole world is characterised by a lack of something
integral to the real. So the modalities of belief are altered (Ratcliffe, 2008, Chapters 2 and 7).

This is not to suggest that existential feelings are impervious to the influence of conceptual thought. As already noted, the form and content of thoughts might be constrained by existential feeling, but this does not prohibit their subsequently affecting existential feeling. And phenomenological reflection suggests that this often happens (although some forms of existential feeling – such as those involved in very severe depression – may well be impregnable to conceptual influence). Take the case of distressing news “sinking in”. This might involve loss of various intentional state contents, such as believing that $p$, hoping for $q$, expecting $r$, and so on. However, one gradually forms new hopes, new expectations and new projects, thus adjusting to a changed situation. However, profound disappointment or sorrow sometimes develops into something else. A series of disappointments can lead to gradual erosion of confidence, which affects how one meets further disappointments. Eventually, one can reach a state where something is lost from the world - a sense of the future as alive with significant and enticing possibilities, a sense that some things are worth striving for. What is gone is not just however many intentional states, but an existential feeling that cannot be summoned back at will.

Although I have distinguished existential feeling from conceptual thought, I do not wish to imply that the two are extricable phenomenological components. I have already indicated that existential feeling is presupposed by the intelligibility of thought. However, this is not to suggest that one could strip away all thought, leaving behind an intact framework of existential feeling. The underlying form of experience manifests itself through our various experiences and thoughts. Hence I prefer to think of existential feeling as an inextricable aspect of our phenomenology, as opposed to an isolable component. However, it is a well-defined aspect. By analogy, we can attend to and describe one side of a coin, despite the absence of one-sided coins. That said, there are cases where the line between existential feeling and thought is blurred. It has been argued that, sometimes at least, the individuation of an emotion depends partly upon its linguistic interpretation (Campbell, 1997; Colombetti, 2009). I do not

---

15 I am grateful to Peter Hobson for pointing out to me the useful distinction between components and aspects of affective states.
rule out the possibility that the same applies to existential feelings, that certain fine-grained distinctions made between existential feelings might be partly or wholly attributable to how they are interpreted. So the line between different existential feelings and different interpretations of the same feeling may, on occasion, be a very difficult one to draw. It becomes even more difficult once we acknowledge that existential feelings have a dynamic structure and that different interpretations have the potential to feed back into and reshape the relevant feelings.\(^{16}\)

There are also cases where existential feeling and thought content are so closely related that what appears to be the latter is little more than an expression of the former. For example, this is evident in *A Confession*, Tolstoy’s autobiographical account of an existential crisis that would, these days, be diagnosed as severe depression. His despair is focused around the gradually emerging revelation that all life is irrevocably meaningless. It creeps up on him until the point where: “I felt that what I had been standing on had collapsed, and that I had nothing left under my feet. What I had lived on no longer existed; and there was nothing left to live on” (2005, p.14). What Tolstoy describes is a felt transformation in his sense of belonging to the world, which at the same time takes the form of (what seems to be) a revelation. We might say that an existential feeling crystallises into an articulate thought:

I could not even wish to know the truth, for I guessed on what it consisted. The truth was that life is meaningless. I had, as it were, lived […] till I had come to a precipice and saw clearly that there was nothing ahead of me but destruction. (Tolstoy, 2005, p.15)

His revelation that “life is meaningless” is not something that can be separated from how he finds himself in the world. Rather, it is the expression of an existential feeling, a sense of the world being irrevocably bereft of the kinds of possibility that one needs in order to go on living.\(^{17}\) We find similar themes in the work of William James, who claims that felt ways of belonging to the world not only dispose us towards certain

---

\(^{16}\) See Stephan (forthcoming) for an account of how existential feelings can be regulated. Stephan regards existential feeling regulation as more problematic than I do. He would, I think, reject the view that conceptual thought can causally influence existential feeling.

\(^{17}\) See also Wynn (forthcoming) for the view that certain ‘beliefs’, including – for many – a belief in God, are actually expressions of existential feeling.
beliefs. In fact, our most fundamental religious and metaphysical convictions are only intelligible through those feelings:

….in the metaphysical and religious sphere, articulate reasons are cogent for us only when our inarticulate feelings of reality have already been impressed in favor of the same conclusion. (James, 1902, p.74)

Hence, without the required feelings, we can fail to grasp a philosophical position; feeling contributes not only to a sense of conviction but also to our appreciation of the content of a view (Ratcliffe, 2008, Chapter 9). The articulate position coalesces out of feeling and is, in part, an expression of feeling.

7. Conclusions
In this chapter, I have sketched a phenomenological analysis of existential feeling. In the process, I have also outlined a conception of affective depth that applies to changes in existential feeling, and offered some brief reflections on the relationship between existential feeling and conceptual thought. I will conclude by mentioning three avenues for further enquiry. First of all, there is the formidable task of charting the kinds of possibility that experience incorporates, exploring variations in the structure of that possibility space and further clarifying its relationship to the feeling body. Second, there is the question of how existential feelings are regulated. I have indicated that some existential feelings can be affected by some conceptual thoughts and by specifically focused emotions, such as disappointment. But there is a great deal more to be said about the ways in which various existential feelings might be susceptible to forms of regulation (such as interpersonal interaction, pharmaceutical intervention, thinking in a certain way, or changing one’s situation).18 Third, further clarification is required of the relationships between existential feelings and conceptual thought. Are certain ‘beliefs’ in fact existential feelings? And in order to really wonder whether life has meaning or why there is something rather than nothing, does one have to feel the meaning of the question? Indeed, could such questions be expressions of felt ways of belonging to the world?

18 There is a further issue that I have not touched upon here, which is closely related to that of regulation; the issue of whether, when and why an existential feeling is appropriate or inappropriate, where appropriateness could be understood in epistemic or medical terms. See Stephan (forthcoming) for a discussion. See also Ratcliffe (2008, Chapters 9 and 10).
Acknowledgements: This chapter was written as part of the project ‘Emotional Experience in Depression: A Philosophical Study’. I am grateful to the AHRC and DFG for funding the project, and also to my collaborators on the project for many helpful discussions.

References


