

## WATER, MOOD AND CARE

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### Abstract

The article *Water, Mood and Care* is an excerpt from a book I have recently completed titled: *The Gypsy Blues: Musings on Darkness, Rest and Creativity*. The following section reflects on the ancient pagan correspondence between water and emotion and tries to show that only an existential conception of human emotion can make sense of this correspondence. I establish this by examining Martin Heidegger's conception of mood (Befindlichkeit) as discussed in *Being and Time* and by contrasting it with the understanding and approach to moods implicit in contemporary psychiatric culture. I also contrast the Daseinsanalytic approach to moods with the currently popular, cognitive behavioral therapy, in order to show the limitations of the latter and the richness and depth of the former, both from a philosophical point of view, as well as from the point of view of effective psychotherapy.

**Keywords:** Daseinsanalysis, Mood, Psychiatry, Care, Psychotherapy.

According to ancient pagan correspondences, the element of water is generally associated with human emotion and feeling. I have come to believe that this is because of the similarity between the movement of water and the movement of emotions. By this I mean that as water flows through and around everything, in order to sustain life, so do human emotions flow, in and around our existence, shaping it, like water shapes a stone.

But this primordial connection between water and human emotion could never be made sense of in the context of current psychiatric approaches to mood and emotion. For these approaches have their roots in the western intellectual tradition which has, for the most part, left emotions out of the picture of what makes us distinctly human. One tradition of thought, which has been instrumental in challenging this omission, is that of psychoanalysis. But though psychoanalysis, in all its variations, has been effective in bringing the life of desire and emotion into the foreground and giving it its psychological due, it has not been as successful in philosophically accounting for how our emotions and passions integrate with the rest of human existence.

In my opinion no tradition of thought has done this as effectively as existentialism. There is in fact, a tradition of psychotherapy,

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mainly European, with a small grouping here in Toronto, of which I am a part, which bases its practices on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. What distinguishes Dasiensanalysis from other therapeutic practices is the clarity and consistency of its philosophical foundation. And the reason why such a philosophy is able to consistently account for the meaningful integration of feelings and emotions into our lives is because it describes existence, from the start, as moody. In describing how we are, 'there', in the world, Heidegger outlines the features of a being who is not only given to understand and speak about experiences, but who is, also, always, affected by them. This is why we are always in a mood, (*Befindlichkeit*), of one sort or another. Because what we experience and go through, from birth to death, is never neutral.<sup>1</sup>

Moods are not just irritating appendages to our experiences. Nor are they simply emotional reactions to certain events or situations. They are descriptions of the overall state, which we find ourselves in, at any given time. And we find ourselves in a state of one sort or another, because we are beings who are emotionally affected by living. Moods are an intrinsic component of our experience, their particular color or shade, gloomy or bright, elated or sad, cool or hot, tender or rough, quiet or noisy are always present, as the affective gestalt of being-in-the-world.

According to Heidegger, even when we are engaged in high level cognitive activities, we are still in a mood. It may be a cool mood, without the presence of strong emotion or passion, but a mood nonetheless. As I write, now, for example, even though I am primarily in a cognitive mode of being, I am aware of my mood, which is somewhat somber, due to some news which I received yesterday, about my mother's health. Though it is nothing serious, I am a worrier. And so the news starts to affect my overall sense of being. But at the same time, it is a beautiful, hot sunny day, though it is autumn. And the pleasure of the weather is also playing its part, in my overall mood. But the heat in October is, at the same time, also worrisome. So thoughts of global warming intrude and prevent me from fully enjoying the weather. But it is a friend's birthday, today. And we will be going out to dinner later. This makes me feel excited. The thought of human connection and intimacy on the horizon seems to mitigate the dark shading of my mood by worry about my mother and about the weather. But all these things and many more than I have been able to mention, contribute to my present mood, even as I write. Moods are a constant element of our experiences, reflecting how we find ourselves in being, at any given time. As such, they can actually reveal important truths to us, about our existence and about the world we happen to find ourselves in.

That we are emotionally affected by being seems so obvious, it is hard to imagine why it has taken so long to philosophically integrate this fact into a description of human existence. But even now that some traditions of thought have managed to do so, still, the dominant trend in contemporary, psychiatric culture is to ignore the actual significance of moods and to mute them through medication. Everyone and their dog seem to be on some sort of anti-depressant. To have strong emotions, feelings or moods

of any sort, in our culture, is viewed as an aberration. I am reminded of a CBC documentary, which I recently saw on depression. Numerous individuals who had suffered life long depression were profiled. The depression was referred to as some mysterious ailment, which had afflicted these individuals and ruined their lives, until they admitted their illness and were saved by medication. Yet, based on the autobiographical information provided about the individuals profiled, it seemed totally obvious why they would have become depressed. In most cases, horrendous things had happened to the individuals in question. To not have fallen into depression under some of the circumstances described, would have required an automaton. Yet the program made no connection between the life events of the individuals in question and the ensuing mood of depression. The mood of pervasive melancholy was viewed, instead, as a mysterious illness, which some have the misfortune of being afflicted with.

Besides medication, one of the most popular methods of dealing with moods, in our time, is through cognitive behavioral therapy. This is a method of therapy which seeks to change or eliminate certain 'bad' moods like anxiety, guilt, anger or depression, for example, by changing the thought patterns associated or attached to them. In one of the most popular books on the topic, *Mind over Mood*, the authors, Dennis Greenberger and Christine Padesky, provide exercises to identify the thoughts attached to certain moods and strategies for changing the thought patterns which give rise to them.<sup>2</sup> In the short term, this will, of course, be somewhat effective, since moods are always intertwined with the rest of existence. And so, certain moods will be attached to certain thought patterns, and therefore, affected by the changing of these patterns.

From an existential point of view, though, the moods, feelings and emotions, which shape our being, are an integral part of it. They are the roots of our 'thrown existence' and in many cases, appropriate responses to its contingencies.<sup>3</sup> They are not simply habits of thought, though they may, certainly, become habitual over time. But if and when they become debilitating modes of being which prevent us from living fully, then, they must be explored and delved into, on their own terms. Such moods are composed of the emotional sediment of our lives and therefore cannot be truly understood or changed without delving deeply into our lived experience in order to find the roots of their tenacity. For as Freud so clearly realized, it is not remembrance, alone, which cures, but remembrance with affect. A person's emotional life can, potentially, be reshaped by the therapeutic relationship. But this involves much more than a mere changing of thought patterns. The patterns of our thinking are rooted in a whole body of lived experiences, which precede them. The changing of thought patterns, while certainly being an element of the therapeutic process, usually occurs near its end, after the appropriate emotional responses to one's life circumstances have had the opportunity to be explored, expressed and understood.

The cognitive behavioral approach to disturbances of mood, actually, echoes the age-old dichotomy of western thought, where the mind is viewed as separate and superior to our emotions. And mastery of our

unruly moods and passions is seen as the goal. But from an existential point of view, our moods are revelatory and can tell us important truths about our lives and about human existence in general. The automatic muting of certain moods through medications or through the alteration of thought patterns, then, actually wipes away an important source of self-understanding and for the possibility of coming to terms with our thrown existence. It also implies and communicates a conception of existence, which denies us the affective sensibility of being human. Everything that happens to us affects us, whether we like it or not, even before we have any say in the matter, and also after. To approach the moods, which afflict us as if they were simply emotional aberrations that we need to be free of, suggests that there is something wrong with us for having them. Whereas, in many cases, they are simply appropriate emotional responses to given circumstances, responses, which we were, for one reason or another, never able to fully have.

In my own case, what I remember most about my childhood are its moods. Though never spoken about or acknowledged, they pervaded my early family life like a constant gloom. My parents were illiterate peasants from the south of Italy, who immigrated to Canada in the 1950's. Our lives were therefore fraught with a never ending struggle for economic survival, the general anxiety which my parents experienced about their ignorance and illiteracy, and their inability to speak the language of the world we lived in. So even though we were just children, my brother and I had to learn how the world worked, long before we should have, in order to help our parents navigate their existence in the new land of 'opportunity'. In this process, not only did we internalize our parents' fear, anxiety and despair, but had to find our own way to maturity, without any of the security or sense of safety of being able to rely on them to protect us and guide us in the process.

From the present vantage point, I can now see, that my devotion to the life of the mind was, in part, a means of escaping the dark tribulations of my childhood life. For had I not turned out to be such an intellectually oriented person, I might also have ended up in some psychiatric ward, desperately trying to mute my never melancholy, through one drug trial or another. But in addition to the solace and security I was able to derive from my philosophical studies I was also lucky enough to meet, at the right time, a group of people who believed in the power of the 'talking cure'.

In the therapeutic context, I was able to release the dark waves of my sorrow, seemingly, back into the sea. In doing so I was able to clear myself of its oppressive force, and cultivate compassion for myself and for my family, which I had never been able to feel before. This is partly because the long sorrowing had also been preceded by many years of raging, at my parents, at the world, at God. I raged for all my misfortunes, for the lack of stability, security and love, for feeling alone and abandoned in an alien world, for the loss of my father to alcoholism and the loss of my brother to madness, the loss of my mother tongue and for the loss of the hills and seas of the Mediterranean. Until recently, it seemed as if

I was always losing, or at least always fixated on loss. But by entering the dark underworld of my 'broken self' in a therapeutic context and by releasing the rage and sorrow which I felt entitled to feel as a sensitive being, caught in circumstances beyond my control, I was able to get to the healing base what I was, surprisingly simple, a being who feels, who cares about existence, her own as well as that of others.

Now, interestingly enough, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes the structure of existence, as Care (*Sorge*)<sup>4</sup>. This had always been quite perplexing to me, especially in my early days of reading philosophy. For Heidegger gives no real explanation for his choice of the term Care to describe the unitary structure of our being-in-the-world. But now, it is starting to become self evident to me. For if our being is structured by the constant flow of time, as existentialists believe, then, in every moment or present situation we are always pulled by the past at the same time as being ahead of ourselves, projecting forward and leaning towards the future. For Heidegger, our capacity for mood and also for understanding correlates with this temporal structure. We experience moods for example, because we are pulled by the past. And we are able to come to an understanding of our experiences because we are simultaneously projected towards the future. Moods arise as a result of our having been affected by living. But once we are in a mood, what has affected us has already passed. And so, when we try to understand our experiences we are, somehow, already ahead, looking back. In other words, understanding needs what has already happened as its basis. This is not unlike what Maurice Merleau-Ponty means when he claims that lived experience precedes our cognitive understanding of things<sup>5</sup>. When we reflect, we are always reflecting back on things, from the point of view of already being ahead. That is how we arrive at an understanding of our experiences.

For Heidegger, as well as for Merleau-Ponty, this dynamic back and forth movement of time constitutes the deepest structure of our existence. Its wave-like movement describes the constant dynamic of a being who is given over to time. The sentient consciousness, which corresponds to this structure, is therefore, a consciousness, which is aware of its incompleteness and finitude, and thus always a question to itself. At the beginning of *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes *Dasein* as that being who is an issue to itself.<sup>6</sup> While we share sentience and consciousness with other creatures and life forms, only humans seem to be an issue to themselves. We are an issue to ourselves, precisely, because we are affected by being, because living matters to us, because we care. Care is the basic description of a being who is thrown into a world, not of its own choosing, but who is nevertheless affected by that world, and freely given to project its existence, in the context of that world. It seems to me, now, that Heidegger calls this structure Care, because it is not possible to imagine human existence, as we know it, without the back and forth movement of time and the care of our sentient openness for the question and meaning of our own existence. According to Heidegger, moods are one of the ways through which this fundamental fact is revealed to us.

My past experience of delving into my emotional states in a therapeutic context, as well as my own-going experience of my clients confirms this. Through the reliable and constant care of the therapeutic situation and the ability to process, in that context, the unexpressed emotions which accumulate in response to ones thrown circumstances, one is able to develop a sense of care for oneself and for others for others, which might previously have been unavailable. For how can one reach an understanding of this primordial sensitivity without allowing oneself to feel and honor the emotions that are within us? For they are within us, because of this sensitivity, because humans are, fundamentally, beings who care and need to be cared for. No amount of perceptual or intellectual understanding could ever make meaning out of our lives, if things did not matter to us, if we did not care about living, about ourselves, about others and about the world. We are emotionally responsive to our experiences, because it cannot be otherwise. Without this emotional responsiveness our lives would not cohere, they would have no direction or meaning. We would be automatons, passing through meaningless time.

The structure of Care shapes the emotional flow of our lives, like water shapes a stone.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Heidegger M. *Being and Time* / Trans. by Joan Stambaugh. New York: Harper and Row, 1972, p. 172–182.
- <sup>2</sup> Greenberg D., Padesky C. A. *Mind over Mood*. New York: Guilford Press, 1995.
- <sup>3</sup> The concept of ‘thrownness’ is a concept used by Heidegger to refer to that aspect of existence which is not chosen by us, the time and place we are thrown into at birth, the general givens of circumstance as well as physical attributes and gender.
- <sup>4</sup> *Being and Time*, p. 225–382.
- <sup>5</sup> Merleau-Ponty M. *The Phenomenology of Perception* / Trans. by Colin Wilson. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962, p. vii–xxi.
- <sup>6</sup> *Being and Time*, p. 67.