

Depression as existential feeling or de-situatedness? Distinguishing structure from mode in psychopathology

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Published online: 19 June 2014

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Abstract In this paper I offer an alternative phenomenological account of depression as consisting of a degradation of the degree to which one is situated in and attuned to the world. This account contrasts with recent accounts of depression offered by Matthew Ratcliffe and others. Ratcliffe develops an account in which depression is understood in terms of deep moods, or existential feelings, such as guilt or hopelessness. Such moods are capable of limiting the kinds of significance and meaning that one can come across in the world. I argue that Ratcliffe's account is unnecessarily constrained, making sense of the experience of depression by appealing only to changes in the mode of human existence. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's critique of traditional transcendental phenomenology, I show that many cases of severe psychiatric disorders are best understood as changes in the very structure of human existence, rather than changes in the mode of human existence. Working in this vein, I argue that we can make better sense of many first-person reports of the experience of depression by appealing to a loss or degradation of the degree to which one is situated in and attuned to the world, rather than attempting to make sense of depression as a particular mode of being situated and attuned. Finally, I argue that drawing distinctions between disorders of structure and mode will allow us to improve upon the currently heterogeneous categories of disorder offered in the DSM-5.

Keywords Phenomenology · Psychiatry · Depression · Matthew Ratcliffe · Maurice Merleau-Ponty · Martin Heidegger

Major depressive disorder (MDD) is a remarkably difficult phenomenon to characterize. One reason for this difficulty is the profound heterogeneity of cases found in this ambiguously defined category. Horwitz and Wakefield (2007) argue that one of the reasons for the dramatic rise in the number of patients diagnosed with MDD is the recent pathologizing of what may be normal kinds of sadness. Others argue that MDD is comprised of at least three distinct kinds of disorders—psychotic, melancholic,

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and non-melancholic depression (Parker 2000, 2006; Malhi et al. 2005). Even a cursory examination of the diagnostic criteria required to receive a diagnosis of MDD reveals that it is possible for two people to be diagnosed with MDD without sharing a single symptom.¹ This insight, coupled with the fact that we have little knowledge of the underlying neurobiological causes of MDD, easily leads one to question the legitimacy of such profoundly heterogeneous diagnostic categories. If the categories in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) are distinguished only in terms of symptom clusters (and we do not have evidence of an underlying cause shared among patients who have been diagnosed with MDD) then we hold little evidence for considering MDD to be a homogeneous category of disorder. It is likely, as authors such as Horwitz, Wakefield, and Parker argue, that the category of MDD actually envelopes a number of disordered and non-disordered mental phenomena that have not been adequately distinguished.

In spite of the problems that emerge from such a heterogeneous construct, phenomenological investigations of depression have been able to shed new light on depression, or depressive disorders, offering insights into aspects of depression that are often ignored in contemporary psychiatry, such as embodiment (Fuchs 2005b) and temporality (Fuchs 2013; Ratcliffe 2012). These investigations have made great strides toward answering such questions as, “What is depression?” and, “What is it to be depressed?” In this paper I hope to make yet another contribution to this swiftly growing field of inquiry. In so doing, I will offer new avenues for delineating among kinds of depression, in the hopes that this will prove some small step toward the project of drawing homogeneous categories out of a remarkably heterogeneous construct.

This paper consists of four main sections. First, I review the recent literature on the phenomenology of depression, focusing especially on the Heideggerian account developed by Matthew Ratcliffe. Second, I introduce the distinction between structure and mode in phenomenology, drawing primarily on Heidegger’s distinction between situatedness [*Befindlichkeit*] and mood [*Stimmung*] in *Being and Time*. Illustrating this distinction, I show that Ratcliffe—drawing on Heidegger’s assumption that structures of existence are necessary and unchanging—confines his account of depression to changes in the mode, rather than the structure, of existence. Third, I argue that developments in genetic phenomenology, especially in the work of Merleau-Ponty, cast doubt on the assumption that structures of existence are necessary and universal. I show that the form or structure² of human existence and perception must be understood as contingent, rather than necessary. Acknowledging the contingency of existential

¹ The DSM-5 currently lists nine relevant symptoms for the diagnosis of MDD. In order to qualify for a diagnosis of MDD, a patient must have at least five of the symptoms, with one of the five being either depressed mood or loss of interest or pleasure (APA 2013). Taking into account that five symptoms must be met, and that there are nine total symptoms to select from, it would seem that any two people diagnosed with depression must share at least one symptom. However, many of the symptoms are actually clusters of possible symptoms, in many cases including polar opposites. For example, item three can be met by having either significant weight loss or significant weight gain; item four can be met by having either insomnia or hypersomnia; and item five can be met by having psychomotor agitation or retardation. Taking into account the divergence of symptoms such as weight gain versus weight loss, or insomnia versus hypersomnia, it is in fact possible for two people to be diagnosed with MDD without sharing a single symptom.

² Throughout the paper I will use “structure” and “form” interchangeably. “Structure,” as used in the English translations of the work of Husserl and Heidegger, is a concept that is roughly parallel to “form” as found in the English translations of Merleau-Ponty’s works.

structures opens new avenues for phenomenological investigations into psychiatric and neurological disorders. Fourth, I take up the account of contingency developed in the third section and apply it to depression. I develop a phenomenological account, arguing that some people diagnosed with MDD have actually undergone a change in their basic structure of existence. In this case, rather than understanding their depression as a kind of mood or feeling, it is more accurately understood as an erosion of the degree to which they are situated in and through moods. I show that this account differs from Ratcliffe's in some fundamental respects, but that the two accounts are not mutually exclusive, as an erosion of the structure of situatedness does not exclude the possibility of having particular moods or existential feelings within this eroded or degraded form of existence. In concluding, the issue of the heterogeneity of depression is addressed, and it is argued that sensitivity to changes in the structure of existence can offer us new tools for delineating among categories of psychiatric disorders.

1 Phenomenology and the emotional dimension of depression

The emotional dimension of depressive disorders has taken center stage in recent research in phenomenological psychopathology. However, there is marked disagreement over the kind of changes in feeling and mood that occur for depressed persons. Ratcliffe, for example, has written extensively on the feelings of guilt and hopelessness associated with some depressive episodes (Ratcliffe 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013). Fuchs, on the other hand, discusses a loss of bodily resonance, which is tied to what he considers to be a corporealizing of the body (Fuchs 2003, 2005a, b, c). Aho, following Fuchs' lead, describes depression as involving a loss of affectivity, but also a diminishing of the capacity to transcend this loss through a process of reinterpretation (Aho 2013). Svenaeus takes an alternative route, examining the effects of antidepressants on emotions and the self (Svenaeus 2007). And Stanghellini and Rosfort contrast MDD, which often includes feelings of guilt or a loss of feeling, with the depression experienced by subjects with borderline personality disorder, which often consists of feelings of loneliness and desperation coupled with negative affectivity (Stanghellini and Rosfort 2013a, b).

While each of these authors has developed a phenomenological account of depressive disorders, I will focus on the work of Ratcliffe. In contrast with others working in the area, Ratcliffe has focused the bulk of his attention on depressive disorders, and most of this work, in turn, is developed within the framework of his theory of existential feeling. Grounding his account of depression in Heidegger's conception of ground moods as developed in *Being and Time* (1927/1962) and *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1929–30/2001), Ratcliffe is able to offer insight into the all-encompassing and world-determining nature of depression.³

Heidegger's notion of moods and ground moods emerges from his conception of *Befindlichkeit* and *Stimmung*. *Befindlichkeit* is Heidegger's own coinage, and is

³ The term "ground mood" [*Grundstimmung*] is typically associated with *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, rather than *Being and Time*. However, Heidegger does discuss such moods (specifically anxiety) in *Being and Time*, but refers to them by a different term. In this work, he refers to them as *Grundbefindlichkeit*, which was originally translated as "basic state-of-mind" (Heidegger 1927/1962, 233).

notoriously difficult to translate. It is meant to convey the basic structure of human existence whereby one finds oneself situated in and attuned to the world. This structure, taken together with understanding and discourse, constitutes the world-disclosive character of Dasein. Some popular translations are “situatedness” (Guignon 2003), “sofindingness” (Haugeland 2000), and “affectedness” (Dreyfus 1991). I will use the term “situatedness,” although the alternative translations should be kept in mind, as each translation emphasizes a different aspect of this existential structure, and no translation adequately conveys the full meaning of the term. *Stimmung*, most often translated as “mood” in Heidegger’s works, is another term with a rich meaning, impossible to fully convey with any single English word. Besides “mood,” it can be translated as “atmosphere” or “tune.” While *Befindlichkeit* is the basic structure of being situated in the world, *Stimmung* is the particular mode of attunement in which we find ourselves; our situatedness is always manifest in and through some mood (Heidegger 1927/1962, 179). According to Heidegger (and Ratcliffe), we are always already attuned to the world in a particular manner, and this manner is determined by a mood (or existential feeling).

Rather than taking up Heidegger’s conception of mood directly, Ratcliffe opts for an account of what he terms “existential feeling.” There are a number of reasons for breaking away from Heidegger’s term, but the most important is that “mood” does not adequately differentiate between intentional and pre-intentional affective phenomena.⁴ An intentional feeling is about something in particular, whether this be an object, a person, an event, or even a situation. Pre-intentional moods, on the other hand, disclose the world as a whole. This does not mean that they are intentional moods with a wider scope. Rather, in disclosing the world as a whole, they both open and constrain the range of intentional feelings that can manifest. And as world-disclosive, they are a condition of possibility for intentionality.

This difference is illustrated by Heidegger’s notions of anxiety [*Angst*] and fear. Anxiety, for Heidegger, is not about anything in particular, instead enveloping and disclosing the world as a whole. Fear, on the other hand, is intentionally directed at some entity or event within the world (Heidegger 1927/1962). Anxiety falls into Heidegger’s category of ground moods [*Grundstimmungen*]. These moods are foundational, disclosing the world in such a way that they both open and constrain the possible range of meaning, significance, and feelings that can manifest within the world. This sense of ground mood is much closer to Ratcliffe’s own notion of existential feeling, but they are still not a perfect match.

The central aspect of Heidegger’s notion of moods that Ratcliffe incorporates into his own category of existential feeling is “that experience incorporates a background sense of belonging to the world and that this background is changeable in structure...” (2008, 52). One group of existential feelings that Ratcliffe is interested in are feelings of familiarity and unfamiliarity. While there are a variety of ways in which the world as a whole might reveal itself as unfamiliar or uncanny, one point Ratcliffe wishes to stress is that these kinds of experiences are not constituted by simple lacks in our usual

⁴ Throughout this paper, “intentional” will be used as a technical, phenomenological term. In this sense, it refers to the fact that consciousness is always consciousness of something or other. Consciousness is always about, or directed at, something within the world (or in some cases, the world itself). Certain kinds of emotions are also intentional, which is to say, they are felt as being toward or about something.

familiarity. As he says, there is a distinct “*feeling of unfamiliarity*,” rather than just an “*absence of the feeling of familiarity*” (2008, 54). This is similar to Heidegger’s claim that we are always already in a mood. Even the everyday experience of an “evenly balanced lack of mood” (Heidegger 1927/1962, 173) is, for both Heidegger and Ratcliffe, a mood, or existential feeling. It is a way, and perhaps the most common way, of being situated in the world.

In order to gain a sense of Ratcliffe’s phenomenological account of depression as primarily constituted by a shift in existential feeling, I will focus on two existential feelings that he argues are found in many cases of depression. The first is deep guilt; the second is a loss of hope. Examining these existential feelings will clarify what it means for them to be pre-intentional, forming the background of the lived, meaningful world.

Deep guilt, according to Ratcliffe, differs from more shallow kinds of guilt by being pre-intentional. We can feel guilty about some particular deed or a series of events, but these kinds of guilt do not encompass our world as a whole. They determine the sense and meaning of particular aspects of ourselves, our lives, and even our relations with others, but they are not so deep and fundamental as to constrain our full range of possible meaning, significance, and feelings. Only pre-intentional existential feelings are capable of this depth. Deep guilt orients our world as a whole, modifying what is possible and the range of ways in which we can be affected (Ratcliffe 2010). As Ratcliffe states, “Whereas object-directed guilt is one of many emotional attitudes that one might adopt towards one’s various deeds, guilt in severe depression envelops all experience. It is pre-intentional; it limits the range of intentional states that one is able to have” (2010, 612).

An alternative mode of being situated in the world is through a loss of hope. Ratcliffe makes an important distinction between “loss of hopes” and “loss of hope.” One can lose all hopes without also losing the existential feeling that acts as the background upon which one is able to hope at all. An event that precipitates the loss of all hopes is typically one in which a central component of one’s life, something that offered a profound sense of direction and meaning, is lost. For example, following the loss of a loved one, or displacement from a homeland, a person may be incapable of finding anything to hope for (Ratcliffe 2011). The primary context within which a person’s life, goals, dreams, and desires made sense is stripped away. A new context must develop before the old hopes can be restored, or new hopes attained.

In contrast to these cases, Ratcliffe argues that many instances of depression actually involve the loss of a more fundamental kind of hope. In depression, the condition of possibility for hope might be lost. As he says, “Many first-person reports of hopelessness in severe depression indicate that it involves more than a lack of specific hopes, however encompassing their content might be. It is the possibility of hoping that is experienced as absent” (2011). And further, this absence is explicit. “It is evident from first person accounts of depression that hope is not simply absent—the absence itself is unpleasantly salient; it is felt” (2011). The reason for this salience, he argues, is that certain situations and contexts, even for the depressed person, carry with them the expectation that one should feel hope.

As discussed above, Ratcliffe’s phenomenological understanding of depression is based primarily in his theory of existential feeling. Many cases of severe

depression are best understood in terms of all encompassing, pre-intentional existential feelings that disclose our world as a whole. Existential feelings are often invisible to us because they do not undergo any sudden or profound shifts. However, in some cases of psychiatric disorders, and depression in particular, the existential feelings through which we are attuned to and situated in the world do undergo sudden or profound shifts. The world seems bereft of significance, offering no possibility of hope or meaningful change.

2 The distinction between structure and mode in phenomenology

While Ratcliffe often refers to changes in depression as existential changes, or changes in the structure of experience and worldhood, his inquiries are actually limited to investigations of mode. This is not made explicit in his phenomenological accounts because he does not adequately distinguish between structure and mode in his work. By examining the use of the terms “structure” and “mode” in the phenomenological canon, especially as developed in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, I will show that Ratcliffe offers a phenomenological account of depression that addresses only changes in the mode of human existence.

The distinction between structure and mode runs through the history of phenomenology. It is used throughout Husserl’s works, from the *Logical Investigations* (1900/2001; 1901/2001) to the *Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936/1970). It also arises in the texts of Dilthey, a philosopher whose work had a profound influence on the development of Heidegger’s early thinking (Guignon 1983).

Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, uses the notion of structure to refer to characteristics (or in some cases the entirety) of the basic framework of human existence. He refers to individual structures as *existentials*, and together they make up the ontological structure of existence. As he says, “The question about [the ontological structure of existence] aims at the analysis of what constitutes existence. The context of such structures we call ‘*existentiality*’. Its analytic has the character of an understanding which is not existentiell, but rather *existential*” (1927/1962, 33).

An existentiell understanding is, according to Heidegger, obtained through an ontical investigation of human existence. It is sought in an investigation of facticity, of the life and world of a concrete human existence. An existential understanding, on the other hand, is obtained through an investigation of the essential structures that must hold in order for our manifold modes of existence to manifest. Heidegger states that the aim of his project is to reveal structures that “are not just any accidental structures, but essential ones which, in every kind of Being that factual Dasein may possess, persist as determinative for the character of its Being” (1962, 38).

The clearest example of this distinction between ontological structures and ontic modes is offered in Heidegger’s treatment of *Befindlichkeit* and *Stimmung*. As discussed above, Heidegger’s notion of *Befindlichkeit* roughly translates to situatedness, while *Stimmung* translates to mood, atmosphere, or tune. The relationship between these two notions is important, but is often passed over in discussions of this aspect of Heidegger’s work. *Befindlichkeit* is, for Heidegger, an essential structure of

human existence. That is to say, being always already situated in the world is a fundamental, categorial⁵ characteristic of human existence. This situatedness, however, is always manifest through some *Stimmung*, some mood or other. Situatedness, then, can be understood as the category (existential) that includes any and all moods, or particular ways of being attuned. The particular mood of fear, or boredom, or joy need not hold in all cases. At one time I may be situated in a mode of fear, while at another time I may be situated in a mode of boredom. Fear, or boredom, or any other kind of mood, does not make up a fundamental feature of human existence; therefore, it is not a structure. All of these moods, however, share something important. Each one, when it is manifest, plays the role of situating us in the world. In light of this, it is situatedness in general that makes up an ontological structure of human existence. Its particular manifestations, on the other hand, are non-essential.

Ratcliffe, in his phenomenological account of depression, does not acknowledge this distinction between structure and mode. This lack of acknowledgment comes to the fore in a number of statements in which he uses the term “structure” when he is clearly referring to “mode.” In describing deep guilt, he says, “It is a profound shift in the overall *structure* of experience, in the kinds of significant possibility that are available” (2010, 616, emphasis mine). And in describing the loss of hope, he says, “It is the whole *structure* of world experience that is affected, rather than experiences that occur within an already given space of experiential possibilities” (2011, emphasis mine). In short, Ratcliffe uses the word “structure” in a broad, non-technical sense.

After recognizing Heidegger’s distinction between structure and mode, it becomes clear that Ratcliffe’s accounts of *existential* changes in depression are in fact accounts of *existentiell* changes in depression; that is to say, ontic changes rather than ontological changes.⁶ In Ratcliffe’s account, the basic structure of existence of those who are depressed has remained the same.⁷ What has occurred is a severe shift in the ground mood, or existential feeling, that discloses the world as a whole. In spite of the profundity of this change, it is still a change in mode, rather than existential structure.

In spite of my criticism of Ratcliffe, he has good philosophical reasons for confining his theory of depression to modal, rather than structural, changes. It is a basic assumption in much of classical phenomenology that everyone must have the same

⁵ In *Being and Time*, Heidegger explicitly differentiates his notion of existential structures from Aristotelian categories. However, this distinction is stressed precisely because the two notions share important similarities. As he explains, existentials pertain only to the entity whose being is being-in-the-world. Categories, on the other hand, pertain only to beings that do not have a world (e.g. present-at-hand or ready-to-hand entities). In some of Heidegger’s early lecture courses, he even refers to existentials as “categories of Dasein” (Heidegger 1920-21/2010; 1923/2008).

⁶ One might wish to argue this point by appealing to Heidegger’s discussion of anxiety as “ontological.” It must be understood that anxiety itself is not ontological (although it is certainly deep, in the sense of being pre-intentional). One might be led to believe that anxiety is itself ontological because it has the power of disclosing the ontological structure of Dasein as Care. For Heidegger, anxiety is ontologically instructive, but only in a methodological sense. In other words, Heidegger finds that the mood of anxiety discloses Being-in-the-world in such a distinctive way that it reveals a previously hidden structure of human existence. However, in spite of this disclosive power, anxiety is still only a mode of human existence, and is therefore ontic, rather than ontological. This follows for the deep existential feelings of guilt and hopelessness as discussed by Ratcliffe.

⁷ In his essay, “The Varieties of Temporal Experience in Depression,” (2012) Ratcliffe may offer phenomenological accounts of *existential* changes in temporality; that is to say, changes in the structure of temporality. However, more work would have to be done before changes in the structure and mode of temporality can be adequately differentiated.

basic structure of human existence. However, as I argue below, this assumption is challenged in the works of Merleau-Ponty, and is shown not only to be unjustified, but also untrue.

3 The contingency of the structures of existence

Heidegger is not the only phenomenologist to claim that there are essential, unchanging structures of human existence. This assumption, while stemming from Kant's first *Critique*, was championed by Husserl during his transcendental turn, coming to fruition in *Ideas I*. Husserl sought a sound foundation for philosophy and the sciences, and he believed he discovered this foundation in the pure, unchanging, and universal structures of the transcendental ego.

However, following his transcendental turn, Husserl began to work towards a genetic, and ultimately generative phenomenology (Steinbock 1995). While a purely transcendental phenomenology was conceived as a static account of consciousness (i.e. as seeking only invariant structures), his genetic phenomenology integrated concerns with genesis and development into the phenomenological research project.⁸

Merleau-Ponty, taking his lead from Husserl's genetic developments (especially in the unfinished *Crisis* and unpublished writings), pushed Husserl's project even further, arguing that ontological structures could themselves change and develop. Through his continuous engagement with the sciences, especially psychology, he was forced to contend with cases of human behavior, motility, and perception (Merleau-Ponty 1942/1983; 1945/2012; 1964a) that could not be made sense of by appealing to the essential structures offered in the works of Husserl and Heidegger. These confrontations spurred the development of a phenomenology that sought to reveal the foundational structures of human existence and worldhood while simultaneously acknowledging the contingency of these structures. While this project was never completed, continuing to occupy his philosophical thought even in his final, unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964b/1969), Merleau-Ponty did offer a preliminary sketch of his *truly genetic* phenomenology in his magnum opus, *Phenomenology of Perception*. What he seeks in this text is a phenomenology that takes seriously "error, illness, and, in short, embodiment" (2945/2012, 126). For Merleau-Ponty, understanding the body is a condition for understanding contingency; a phenomenology that neglects the body has no chance of appreciating this feature of human existence.

The particular occasion that acted as the catalyst for Merleau-Ponty's reconception of phenomenology was the case of Schneider.⁹ Originally a subject of study for

⁸ This project is given a cursory discussion in *Cartesian Meditations* (1931/1960), but is developed in more detail in *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis* (1918-26/2001) and *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (1928/1991), reaching a climax (at least in the published works) in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936/1970). In these works, Husserl developed a phenomenology in which personal-biographical (genetic) and social-historical (generative) circumstances play a role in shaping the structures of the life-world.

⁹ Another excellent example of changes in the structure of existence is the case of Ian Waterman, especially as interpreted by Shaun Gallagher in *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (2005). I have chosen to focus on Merleau-Ponty's investigation of Schneider's case, rather than Gallagher's investigation of Waterman's, because Merleau-Ponty remains more closely aligned to philosophical, or transcendental phenomenology, which is the primary framework within which this paper is written.

Adhemar Gelb and Kurt Goldstein, Schneider was a World War I veteran who suffered a profound change in his perception and motility after being struck in the occipital lobe by a piece of shrapnel. Gelb and Goldstein, a psychologist and neurologist, respectively, compiled an extensive case study of Schneider's remarkable condition. In so doing, they offered neurological and psychological interpretations of his condition. Merleau-Ponty, in turn, took up these interpretations and critiqued them from the phenomenological perspective, offering new insights into the structure of Schneider's world.

Merleau-Ponty begins this study by recalling a particular difficulty Schneider exhibited in performing certain kinds of tasks. As he says, Schneider "is incapable of performing 'abstract' movements with his eyes closed, namely, movements that are not directed at any actual situation, such as moving his arms and legs upon command, or extending and flexing a finger" (1945/2012, 105). Further, he "cannot describe the position of his body," and, "cannot say at which point his body is touched" (1945/2012, 105). However, he is capable of performing all of these functions with his eyes open, although his movements are still stiff and unnatural.

What is remarkable, though, is that he is able to perform "concrete" movements with little to no difficulty, even when his eyes are closed. As Merleau-Ponty says, "Even with his eyes closed, the patient executes the movements that are necessary for life with extraordinary speed and confidence, provided they are habitual movements: he takes his handkerchief from his pocket and blows his nose, or takes a match from a matchbox and lights a lamp" (1945/2012, 105).

Merleau-Ponty is faced with the challenge of offering an account that does justice to the complexity of the phenomena at hand. Searching for a way to frame the project appropriately, Merleau-Ponty asks, "If I know where my nose is when it is a matter of grasping it, how could I not know where my nose is when it is a matter of pointing to it?" (1945/2012, 106). In examining Schneider's case, Merleau-Ponty realizes that grasping movements are in a sense complete from the very start. They have a proper end that is anticipated in advance. As soon as Schneider is told that he cannot end his movement by grasping or touching, but must instead point at some object or part of his body, he cannot even begin the movement. From this, Merleau-Ponty tentatively concludes that "the knowledge of location can be understood in several senses" (1945/2012, 106).

Two of these senses of location are the space of habitual action, and the space of an objective milieu. Schneider retains space as the realm of habitual action, evidenced by the ease with which he performs concrete movements. In contrast, he lacks the world as an objective milieu (or as a uniform, homogeneous space), evidenced by his inability to move his body for its own sake, or without a lived, habitual goal.

However, the appeal to Schneider's loss of his objective milieu still leaves other aspects of his disorder unaccounted for. For example, when asked to perform a military salute, Schneider has to become fully absorbed in the activity. He cannot simply raise his hand and salute. As Merleau-Ponty says, "along with the military salute come other external marks of respect" (1945/2012, 107). In short, Schneider can only perform actions within a concrete or real milieu. When asked to perform an action outside of its proper context, he first needs to make the context real. Only then can he perform the action successfully.

As Merleau-Ponty explains, most of us are capable of performing actions even when they are abstracted out of a concrete milieu, existing only in a kind of fictional milieu.

That is to say, most of us are capable of performing actions *as* fictional, *as* existing outside of a larger context, or *as* having no proper end. We are able to project a virtual situation around us within which we can move and act. As he says, “The function of ‘projection’ or ‘conjuring up’ (in the sense in which the medium conjures up and makes the dead person appear) is also what makes abstract movement possible” (1945/2012, 115).

Schneider has lost this ability to project, or conjure up, virtual milieus, or milieus *as* virtual (whether these be objective, fictional, or what have you). He can only act in a space that is real for him. The only way he can bring himself to salute is to make the context within which saluting makes sense real and concrete. As Merleau-Ponty says,

Within the busy world in which concrete movement unfolds, abstract movement hollows out a zone of reflection and subjectivity, it superimposes a virtual or human space over physical space. Concrete movement is thus centripetal, whereas abstract movement is centrifugal; the first takes place within being or within the actual, the second takes place within the possible or within non-being; the first adheres to a given background, the second itself sets up its own background. The normal function that makes abstract movement possible is a function of “projection” by which the subject of movement organizes before himself a free space in which things that do not exist naturally can take on a semblance of existence. (1945/2012, 114).

What Schneider has lost is the function of projection in its entirety. He has not lost the ability to conjure up this or that virtual milieu. This is to say, his disorder does not stem from a loss of certain modes of projection, nor can it be accounted for in terms of one mode of projection limiting the range of others. The issues Schneider presents are not important in their particularity. He does not suffer from a psychological block that prevents him from pointing with his eyes closed or performing a salute. Rather, he has lost the function that allowed him to conjure up virtual milieus at all. In this sense, it is not a *mode* of projection that he lacks; it is the *structure* of projection. The virtual, and all that belongs to it, is no longer an aspect of his existence.

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological interpretation of the concrete case of Schneider, while offering a plethora of new insights into the world of people living with neurological and psychiatric disorders, offers at least one major contribution to the field of phenomenology. It provides strong evidence for the claim that some (if not all) existential structures are contingent, rather than necessary. In the case of Schneider, a basic structure of his existence was lost. Schneider completely lacks the capacity to conjure up virtual milieus. As I argue below, some cases of people diagnosed with depression also involve changes in structure. However, these changes do not involve a total absence of a structure, such as we see in Schneider’s case.

4 A New phenomenology of depression

Following the above discussion, changes in existential structures should be seen as comprising a legitimate realm of phenomenological investigation. As explained above, Ratcliffe’s phenomenological account of depression is artificially, and unnecessarily, constrained to discussions of mode. Once we examine reports of depression in light of

the possibility of a change in structure, it becomes clear that some cases of people diagnosed with MDD consist primarily in a degradation of the existential structure of situatedness. In these cases, the core of the disorder is not to be found in despair, guilt, or hopelessness. Rather, the disorder is an erosion of the degree to which one is situated in the world at all.

The idea of a degraded mood already carries with it a sense of severity and pathology. However, if we join with Heidegger (and Ratcliffe) in believing that certain ground moods (or existential feelings) are in fact world-disclosive, both revealing the world through a context of significance and situating us within this significance, the profundity associated with the loss or degradation of this structure of existence becomes immense.

Many reports of depression, including a number of those cited by Ratcliffe and other phenomenological psychopathologists (Aho 2013; Fuchs 2005b), refer to a loss of meaning and significance. Tools do not call out to us to be taken up in our everyday projects and concerns. The world is still there, but not as forcefully as it once was. Nothing within the world solicits the engagement of the depressed person. This does not apply only to “things.” Cultural practices, personal, professional, and family roles all lose significance. The sense of the future bringing anything meaningful, either positive or negative, is either absent or severely eroded. The past, too, offers little to stand on. If you are still capable of reflecting upon your situation, who you were and who you are ceases to offer a space of possibilities.

According to Heidegger, moods throw one into a situation (1927/1962, 174). They disclose one’s world in such a way as to both open and constrain one’s range of future possibilities. In this sense, they disclose and give sense to the ground of lived meaning in which we find ourselves situated. They disclose the world such that we can desire, act, and even will. But many people diagnosed with depression are incapable of finding themselves on such solid foundations. Their particular situation is not disclosed as forcefully as it once was. Their world does not reveal itself as a space within which and against which to carve out the story of their life. Many people diagnosed with depression are, in a sense, de-situated.

There are numerous first-person reports of depression that illustrate this erosion of the structure of being situated and attuned through moods. A few of them read as follows:

Depression steals away whoever you were, prevents you from seeing who you might someday be, and replaces your life with a black hole [...] Nothing human beings value matters any more—music, laughter, love, sex, children, toasted bagels and the *Sunday New York Times*—because nothing and no one can reach the person trapped in the void (Karp 1996, 24).

You can’t... even remember what it’s like to go and do something and feel pleasure from it. You look at the world, the array of things that you could do, and they’re completely meaningless to you (Karp 1996, 32).

The first thing that goes is happiness. You cannot gain pleasure from anything. That’s famously the cardinal symptom of major depression. But soon other emotions follow happiness into oblivion: sadness as you know it, the sadness that seemed to have led you here; your sense of humor; your belief in and

capacity for love. Your mind is leached until you seem dim-witted even to yourself [...] You lose the ability to trust anyone, to be touched, to grieve. Eventually, you are simply absent from yourself (Solomon 2001, 19).

Reports such as these, where the world itself is devoid of significance and meaning, are the most unsettling, and also the most difficult to convey. We have few words, if any, that are capable of accurately conveying the profound lack that is the central phenomenon of so many experiences of depression. One's children no longer show up as beings that must be cared for and nurtured. The image of one's spouse evokes no feeling of love. There is an all-pervasive meaninglessness, coupled with an inability to feel. This loss of feeling even penetrates the perceptual field. Many report that the world as a whole seems dimmer, the sense of touch is markedly diminished, and all food tastes bland.

Heidegger, in discussing the fundamentality of moods, says,

Under the strongest pressure and resistance, nothing like an affect would come about, and the resistance itself would remain essentially undiscovered, if Being-in-the-world, with its situatedness, had not already submitted itself to having entities within-the-world "matter" to it in a way which its moods have outlined in advance. *Existentially, situatedness implies a disclosive submission to the world, out of which we can encounter something that matters to us.* (1927/1962, 177, translation modified).

This passage seems to be an admission of what one's world would be like in the absence of moods and situatedness. For Heidegger, however, the absence or even erosion of moods is not a real possibility. The above quotation is meant to stress the essential role moods play in human existence; it is not meant to bring this essential role into question. Nonetheless, it is clear from the above quotation that if this existential structure did, in fact, suffer degradation, the ability to have things matter would be greatly eroded.

For many people with depression, there is a wholesale leveling-down of sense and meaning. The world as a whole (along with the things within it) does not seem to press upon one as forcefully. There is a general inability to be affected. And further, the world is not just meaningless *for me*; it seems meaningless for everyone, or in general. This kind of depression is not experienced as a loss of a particular human capacity, but as a degradation of the world itself, making the fundamental lack all the more profound.

The phenomenological account of depression I am developing here differs from Ratcliffe's account in one important respect. For Ratcliffe, depression is understood as consisting primarily of *ways of being attuned to and situated in a world*. My account, in contrast, offers an understanding of depression whereby *the degree to which one is attuned to and situated in a world through moods can itself undergo change*.

Depression, for Ratcliffe, is a mode of finding oneself. He appeals to existential feelings, or ground moods, capable of disclosing the world as a whole. These existential feelings may close off the possibility for having certain kinds of emotions and feelings, and perhaps even certain thoughts and desires. But they also open up the world in a certain way. The existential feeling of deep guilt, for example, discloses the world through an all-pervasive sense of guiltiness. The person in a mood of deep guilt

experiences herself as guilty, but not about anything in particular. Instead, she is guilty as such, and only feelings and emotions that conform to this mode of world-disclosure are capable of manifesting in her world (Ratcliffe 2010).

Ratcliffe offers what might be called a positive account of depression. There is no possibility of the erosion of the possibility of finding oneself situated in the world. The loss of any mood is necessarily the emergence of a new mood. This idea finds its roots in Heidegger's account of mood, where he states, "The fact that moods can deteriorate and change over means simply that in every case Dasein always has some mood" (1927/1962, 173).

In contrast to Ratcliffe's positive account, I am offering what might be termed a negative account of depression. Some cases of people diagnosed with depression are best understood not as an erosion of a particular mood, or as the emergence of a new mood, but instead as an erosion of the category of moods as a whole; that is to say, as an erosion of the structure of situatedness. This incorporates a degree of negativity, or negation, that occurs at the ontological level, not merely the ontic. While Ratcliffe's account forces us to interpret every self-report of a loss of feeling as a "*feeling* of not feeling" (i.e. as itself a positive feeling), my account allows us to take such self-reports at face value, allowing for the possibility of an erosion or degradation of one's capacity to be affected.

Merleau-Ponty's study of Schneider can also be understood as a negative account. However, while Merleau-Ponty offers an example of the total absence of a structure of human existence (i.e. the category of virtual milieus is absent from Schneider's world), my account of depression illustrates the possibility of a structure eroding, rather than disappearing. And just as the structure of situatedness is subject to the possibility of erosion, it is also subject to the possibility of re-sedimentation. This is evidenced by cases of recovery in which depressed people are eventually able to feel again. The range and intensity of moods increases, and the possibility of finding oneself situated in a world by which one can be affected is gradually reestablished.

This understanding of depression as a structural rather than a modal shift is further supported by phenomenological accounts of depression developed by Kevin Aho and Fredrik Svenaeus (Aho 2013; Svenaeus 2007). While neither of their accounts explicitly engage with the possibility of depression as a structural disorder, both offer phenomenological accounts of depression as an inability to feel (despite the fact that their accounts are still founded on a conception of depression as a kind of ground mood). Further, both Aho and Svenaeus discuss the function of antidepressants not as bringing about a shift in mood (e.g. from sadness to happiness), but as restoring the possibility of being able to be affected and feel in general. As Aho quotes from a report of recovery following antidepressant treatment, "I [now] marvel at my ability to move in and out of ordinary feelings like sadness and disappointment and worry. I continue to be stunned by the purity of these feelings, by the beauty of their rightful proportions to actual life events" (Aho 2013; Dorman 2001, 241). Reports such as this one bring to light a loss of feeling, rather than a kind of feeling, at the core of the depressed existence.

Aho's further reflections on transcendence (or the lack of transcendence) in depression also aligns with the account of depression I have offered here. He argues that while we are typically capable of reinterpreting our circumstances in such a way as to make them our own, to make them something we can incorporate into our lives and use as a foundation for future goals and projects, depression seems to negate this capacity (Aho

2013). In the time between depressive episodes, a person is capable of integrating her identity as a person with MDD into her larger life narrative, perhaps even interpreting her previous depressive episodes as important events, changing the course of her life for the better. But in the midst of a depressive episode this is an impossibility. As Aho says, “In the fog of depression, the significance and poignancy of the past no longer resonates, and the future offers no hope for recovery, for anticipated projects or possible ways of living to look forward to. All that exists is the disordered paralysis of the present moment” (2013).

While Aho does not distinguish between structural and modal changes in his discussions of affectivity and transcendence, it seems that his account of affectivity and situatedness in depression is cashed out in modal terms, while his account of transcendence is developed as a structural disorder. In describing the loss of affectivity in depression, Aho refers to Heidegger’s discussion of profound boredom in *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1929-30/2001). While he does not claim that depression is analogous to Heidegger’s account of profound boredom, he clearly takes up Heidegger’s discussion as a model, thereby predetermining his discussion of depression as a kind of ground mood. In his discussion of transcendence, on the other hand, he conceives of depression not as a mode of transcendence that blocks off the possibility for other modes, but as a loss of possibilities in general.

My account of the erosion of the structure of situatedness can be understood as analogous to Aho’s account of the erosion of transcendence. For Aho, depression is not a way, or mode, of transcending one’s current predicament and projecting into the future. Rather, it is a degradation of one’s capacity to transcend at all. In much the same way, my account of depression is not one in which depressed people are merely situated in and attuned to the world in a distinct way, or mode. Rather, depression involves a degradation of the degree to which one is situated and attuned at all. It is, in Heidegger’s terms, an ontological change, rather than an ontic one.

Once depression is understood in this sense (i.e. as a degradation of the degree to which one is situated), important issues arise within the context of temporality. While Ratcliffe is primarily concerned with the way in which depression takes away one’s future, I am more concerned (at least in the present context) with the way in which depression takes away one’s past.

In Ratcliffe’s account of depression, shifts in existential feelings cause us to dwell in our past, rather than projecting towards our future. He argues that the impossibility of any future becoming, or change, is coupled with a reification of the past. As he says, “The future is no longer a dimension of possibilities for activity, and there is no hope of relief from this predicament. Experience therefore dwells in the past, in a domain of deeds that are fixed, where no acts can be compensated for” (2010, 612).

The structure of situatedness plays a fundamental role in disclosing my past. In situating me with respect to my past, my moods disclose my facticity, or the personal-biographical details of my life that have shaped my identity. As Heidegger would put it, situatedness, manifest through some particular mood, throws me into my past. He says, “The expression ‘thrownness’ is meant to suggest the *facticity of its being delivered over*” (Heidegger 1927/1962, 174). In other words, the structure of situatedness discloses (and thereby throws me into) my past in such a way that it determines the

scope of my future possibilities. My past actions and roles have placed certain burdens upon me, and my moods disclose these burdens.

If we understand depression in terms of deep, all-pervasive moods, dwelling in the past seems the most reasonable correlate to a loss of future possibilities. If, however, some cases of depression are understood as erosions of the structure of situatedness, the depressed person must be understood as losing her past, just as she should be understood as losing her future. An erosion of situatedness—far from making one dwell in the past—does not offer one a past to dwell in. Not only is the world one in which there is no one to become; it is a world in which there is no one to have been. Rather than a past identity reifying into who one will always have to be, who one is, has been, and will be are lost.

This account of the erosion of situatedness further explains why nothing within the world holds any value. Objects, events, people, and even identities all gain their meaning from a context or situation. In suffering an erosion of situatedness, as well as all the modes by which one could be situated, this contextual background degrades. The inability to find anything meaningful, or even to be affected by anything, necessarily follows from the loss of the context within which things gain their meaning.

While I have argued above that depression is not, at its core, a disorder of mode, but is instead a disorder of structure, this need not imply that all modal changes are irrelevant to the disorder. As Ratcliffe illustrates, feelings of guilt and hopelessness characterize many cases of depression, and this aspect of the disorder cannot be ignored. As I have stressed, the kind of depression I am discussing should be understood as an *erosion* of the structure of situatedness, rather than a complete *absence* of this structure. In this eroded form of existence, we may be attuned and situated through dulled or blunted moods. This leaves open the possibility of being guilty, hopeless, or even anxious (e.g. in agitated depression) while nonetheless suffering a degradation of meaning and significance, coupled with muted affectivity. Without the proper distinction between structural and modal changes, cases such as these would be inherently paradoxical.¹⁰

In sum, I have offered a phenomenological account in which some cases of MDD are characterized not by a change in the kind of mood one is situated in, but by a degradation of the degree to which one is situated in and through moods. This degradation ultimately amounts to a kind of de-situatedness, in which the world is not disclosed as a realm of meaning or significance. The depressed person has a degraded structure of finding herself in the world, and is therefore incapable of being embedded in a realm of meaningful action. In spite of this degradation or erosion of the structure of situatedness, depression is also often characterized by all-pervasive, yet muted, ground moods or existential feelings. In this way we can understand cases in which a depressed person reports that her world is devoid of meaning, yet also permeated by feelings of guilt or anxiety.

¹⁰ The kind of phenomenological account of depression I am developing here is not without precedent. The double aspect of depression as a degradation of feeling, coupled with feelings of guilt, was explored by some of the phenomenological psychiatrists of the 20th century, such as Ludwig Binswanger, Hubertus Tellenbach, and Erwin Straus. They considered this double aspect to be central to the diagnostic category of *melancholia*. I am grateful to Giovanni Stanghellini for bringing this historical link to my attention.

5 Conclusion

In the above sections I argued for an alternative phenomenology of depression in which some cases of depression are, at their most fundamental level, disorders of the structure, rather than the mode, of existence. This was contrasted with Ratcliffe's phenomenology of depression, in which depression is primarily constituted by a change in existential feeling, which is understood as a profound shift in the mode of human existence. As I argued, Ratcliffe's account does not do justice to a large portion of reports of depression and depressed experience. Specifically, it does not adequately account for the diminished affectivity and situatedness of people diagnosed with depression. Further, my account of depression does not necessarily exclude his account. His accounts of depression in terms of existential feelings are convincing, and they certainly have some explanatory power. However, his account assumes a stable structure of existence, within which there can be a variety of different modes. This kind of phenomenological account unnecessarily limits the range of possible phenomenological explanations. We should be open to the possibility—especially in cases of severe psychiatric and neurological disorders—that the existential structures of existence can change. In developing our phenomenological investigations in this way, we will find that accounts such as Ratcliffe's can often be embedded in these more foundational accounts, in many cases with fruitful results.¹¹ The final point of discussion is the issue of heterogeneity in major depressive disorder and other psychiatric disorders. This heterogeneity, as mentioned above, brings with it a host of problems, not the least of which is the severely diminished utility of the current diagnostic categories in the DSM-5. In the case of MDD, the phenomena included in this category are so diverse that it is no longer acceptable to believe that we are dealing with a single disorder that happens to manifest in a variety of ways. Rather, it is likely, as Horwitz and Wakefield (2007) have argued, that a number of non-pathological cases are included in the diagnostic category; it is also likely that the group of patients who do have disorders are not all suffering from the same disorder.

How exactly to engage in the project of dividing these heterogeneous categories into homogeneous groups is an issue that requires a high degree of sensitivity and creativity. I believe phenomenology can offer us some useful tools for such an undertaking. As illustrated in this paper, phenomenology can at least make the important distinction between changes in the structure of human existence and changes in the mode. Those who have undergone a change in their structure of existence should be understood as having a disorder that is different in kind from those who have only undergone a change in their mode of existence. It is my hope that such distinctions will offer tools for increasing the accuracy of targeted clinical interventions, and assisting in the project of creating diagnostic categories with greater utility than those currently available.

¹¹ I do not mean to suggest that phenomenological accounts of persons diagnosed with depression are necessarily illegitimate if they appeal only to changes in the mode of existence. Due to the heterogeneity and ambiguity of the diagnostic criteria for MDD, it is likely that many people with this diagnosis have not suffered any change in their basic existential structure, and for them, Ratcliffe's account is likely to be accurate.

Acknowledgments I would like to thank James Goetsch and Nathan Andersen for their support of the original project that led to the writing of this paper. I would also like to thank Charles Guignon, Alex Levine, Giovanni Stanghellini, Steven Crowell, Christine Wieseler, Sarah Wieten, Brad Warfield, and Zac Purdue for their support of this project and comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Finally, I would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their extensive and helpful comments.

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