Emotions and Vulnerability
Phenomenology, Psychopathology, and Psychotherapy

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1 Introduction and Structure of the Volume

In her classic novel *Mrs Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf describes how Clarissa pauses her famous walk to the flower shop and gazes at Piccadilly:

> She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxicabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day.

In these lines, Woolf masterfully weaves together multiple facets of Clarissa's emotional situation. Upon reaching Piccadilly, experiences of herself and the world merge in her feelings and emotions: both the temporal horizon of her embodied existence and her environment that affords possible actions form the backdrop of her perception of concrete objects, such as the taxicabs, which mirror her sense of loneliness and exposure. Underlying this vivid scene is a fundamental affective tonality – a pervasive sense of endangerment – that Woolf describes as the existential background of Clarissa's life: the sensation of being endangered, of being a vulnerable existence internally torn, and being subject to the contingencies and impacts of a world she is part of, while being foreclosed and unsatisfied at the same time. Her experience articulates an ambiguous human condition – of vitality and fragility.

The phenomenology of emotions has long explored the central role of affectivity and emotions in our lives. These approaches emphasise that

* This chapter was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) (project number 513696000), the German Federal and State Governments' Excellence (The ENACTING TRUST Thematic Network, Heidelberg University), and the Fritz Thyssen Foundation's project 'The Nature of Reasonable Abilities'. We are grateful to Miriam Feix, Janis Müller, and Daniel Stil for their editorial assistance with this manuscript.

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emotions are not merely internal states, but reveal how we are situated in the world, who we are, and what the world means to us. Accordingly, phenomenology underlines the multidimensional character of affective life: emotions are not isolated mental states but complex, embodied relations to the world; they comprise bodily, evaluative, epistemic, motivational, agential, and social aspects and span the entire field of conscious life – from the living and the lived body to interbodily and environmental processes.

Having emotions defines a person, and their dynamics shape both the subjects and the world they inhabit. Emotions permeate experience, revealing meaning and value, and through their embodiment, expression, and communication, they connect us with others. They situate us in a field of significance, making us feel close or distant, attracted or repelled. Yet, just as we possess emotions, they also possess us: at times guiding our actions and at others overwhelming or distorting our experiences. In this duality, emotions express the fundamental ambiguity of human life – our capacity for meaning and our susceptibility to rupture. As Woolf poignantly suggests, it can feel 'very, very dangerous to live even one day'.

The phenomenology of emotions offers unique insights into the lived, embodied dynamics and into their relation to what we may call *existential vulnerabilities*.[1] This collection of essays explores how phenomenological analyses illuminate these vulnerabilities – how they are shaped, intensified, or suppressed through affective experience. The chapters thereby connect investigations of everyday emotional life with analyses of its psychopathological transformations and therapeutic possibilities. The volume is structured into three parts.

Part I, 'Emotions and Human Vulnerability: Phenomenological Intertwinings', offers phenomenological investigations into general aspects of emotional life, preparing and enriching the analyses of how vulnerability manifests in emotions. It exemplifies the diversity of ways in which emotion and vulnerability can interrelate and demonstrates the potential of phenomenological analyses for contemporary emotion research. The chapters explore how basic affective experiences such as desire relate to emotion, how selfhood and agency are implicated in affective life, and how emotions can themselves be the medium through which we experience vulnerability – for instance, in emotional numbness, racist encounters, or hatred and embitterment.

Part II, 'Vulnerability and Psychopathology: Emotions and Their Embodiment', examines emotions from the perspective of phenomenological

[1] For a somewhat different, yet more specific and still related use of the term, see Fuchs (2013c).

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psychopathology. It applies phenomenological methods to emotional suffering and the forms of vulnerability that emerge in mental disorders, highlighting the experiential dimensions of embodiment, temporality, and sociality. The analysis provides new perspectives on schizophrenia, autism, and dementia, while phenomena such as changes in bodily control or the temporal flow of affectivity reveal the continuity between pathological and non-pathological emotional life, exposing the vulnerability inherent to the human condition.

Part III, 'Overcoming Vulnerabilities in Psychotherapy: Embodied Emotions and Healing', turns to the therapeutic dimension. It explores emotions not only as expressions of vulnerability but also as sources of resilience and transformation. Phenomenology, in this sense, contributes both conceptually and methodologically to psychotherapy by clarifying how empathy, trust, and embodied resonance underlie therapeutic processes, and how emotional attunement can become a key factor in healing.

In this Introduction, we aim to discuss the motivations for this volume and introduce key elements of the phenomenological approach to emotions. We first present the motivation and the philosophical context for this volume (Section 2), then we will introduce central methods and concepts for the contemporary phenomenological approach to emotions (Section 3). In Section 4, we discuss the applied perspectives of the phenomenology of emotions with a focus on vulnerability to advance psychopathology and psychotherapy. We also show how both provide significant insights into the existential interrelationship of emotions and vulnerability, and we will end with a conclusion (Section 5).

2 Point of Departure: Motivation and Context

The point of departure for this volume is the re-emergence of emotions as a central topic across the mind and life sciences, as well as in philosophy and the social sciences, in recent decades. The productivity in the interdisciplinary, now sometimes called affective, sciences of the past years has resulted in a plethora of rich and valuable analyses of emotion across diverse contexts. The aim of this volume is to contribute to these complex debates by providing phenomenological analyses of emotions in light of the various ways we are affected by the vulnerabilities of human existence, as well as how we actively cope with the diverse challenges they pose. To this end, we combine phenomenological analyses of emotions with investigations of experiential dynamics in psychopathology and psychotherapy, which constitute paradigmatic fields for the study of vulnerability.

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In this section, we aim to clarify the motivation for this endeavour and to outline the philosophical contexts from which the volume departs and to which it contributes.

Motivations for the Volume

Connecting phenomenological analyses of emotions with investigations of the experiential dynamics in psychopathologies and their practical implications for mental health practice can provide important insights that purely philosophical reflection on emotion is likely to miss. As we hope to illustrate with the chapters in this volume, such analyses are apt to reveal how the various vulnerabilities inherent in our embodied existence are closely intertwined with those that manifest in our emotional life. Bringing these fields into a dialogue clarifies how emotions both shape and are shaped by the forms of suffering, disruption, and recovery that characterise human life.

The motivation to focus on phenomenological approaches stems from the fact that phenomenology provides a detailed terminology for analysing nuanced forms of emotional experience. *Existential vulnerabilities* are intrinsic to emotional life, and phenomenological analyses can elucidate the corresponding experiences of suffering and fragility by drawing not only on classical terminology but also on recent conceptual innovations. Moreover, phenomenology – perhaps more than any other philosophical paradigm – has, since its earliest developments, established a rich tradition of reciprocal exchange between philosophical analysis and clinical insight. This tradition is exemplified in the work of foundational figures such as Karl Jaspers, Ludwig Binswanger, Erwin Straus, Eugène Minkowski, Viktor von Weizsäcker, and Hubertus Tellenbach, whose contributions laid the groundwork for phenomenological psychopathology (cf. Stanghellini et al. 2019). Following this tradition, extended by recent enactive approaches, phenomenology is particularly apt to elucidate the ways in which our being-in-the-world can become disturbed or destabilised in psychopathological conditions. Reflections on psychotherapy complement this perspective by showing how our vulnerabilities can be acknowledged, integrated, mitigated, or overcome through therapeutic treatment.

A central conceptual bridge between emotions and vulnerabilities is *embodiment*. After the long dominance of cognitive and appraisal theories of emotion throughout much of the twentieth century, the body has re-emerged in recent decades as a fundamental dimension of emotional life – both in phenomenology and in phenomenologically inspired enactive

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approaches. Yet embodiment continues to call for deeper, more comprehensive theoretical exploration. By emphasising the multiple dimensions of the lived body – from physical sensation to movement, kinaesthesia, agency, intentionality, and intercorporeality – these approaches open up refined analyses of affective experience.

Because vulnerability is rooted in our bodily and social condition, thematising embodiment in the study of emotion allows for a more comprehensive understanding of human fragility. Doing so also enriches contemporary debates on vulnerability – a notion whose prominence, according to data from the Google Books Ngram Viewer, has risen almost exponentially since the 1990s. Phenomenologically refined notions of embodiment provide the conceptual means to integrate heterogeneous explorations of human vulnerability into a more unified perspective. At the same time, they reveal that the boundaries between non-pathological and pathological emotional experiences are often fluid. Examining these transitions clarifies how ordinary emotional life shades into psychopathological experiences, and how psychotherapy may facilitate movement along this continuum towards restored forms of emotional life.

The motivation behind this collection is therefore to bring together contemporary phenomenological perspectives – from both established and emerging scholars – that clarify the interrelations between emotions, embodiment, and vulnerability while also demonstrating their significance for understanding psychopathology and the transformative possibilities of therapeutic practice.

The Philosophical Contexts of This Collection

The contemporary landscape of the philosophy of emotion is both multifaceted and diverse. Two central explananda that have guided theoretical debates across competing accounts are the *phenomenality* and *intentionality* of emotion (Reisenzein and Schmidt 2022). Regarding phenomenality, it makes a crucial difference whether emotions are considered essentially conscious experiences or whether experiential consciousness is viewed merely as a possible accompaniment to an emotional response. Theories further diverge in how they characterise the phenomenal aspects that are essential to emotional experience. Is there, for instance, a particular group of feelings that constitute the experiential core of an emotion – such as visceral or cardiovascular sensations, somatic tone, nervous tension, arousal, pleasure and pain, or affective pulls?

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Concerning intentionality, questions arise about the nature of the 'formal objects' (Kenny [1963] 2004) towards which emotions are essentially directed, and the specific structure of this intentional relation. Do emotions possess a distinctive kind of intentionality, or can they be reduced to other, more basic forms of intentionality, such as those characteristic of cognitive acts?

Prominent landmarks in the contemporary philosophy of emotion include the following:[2]

- *Cognitive theories*: emotions as judgments, appraisals, or cognitive states (e.g., Arnold 1960; Scherer 1984; Lazarus 1991; Nussbaum 2004; Solomon 1973; 2004; 2007)
- *Perceptual theories*: emotions as structurally comparable or analogues to perception (e.g., Roberts 2003; Prinz 2004; Tappolet 2016)[3]
- *Feeling theories*: emotions as bodily feelings and sensations (James 1884; 1890; also known as the James–Lange theory of emotions, James 1922)
- *Attitudinal theories*: emotions as evaluative attitudes (Deonna and Teroni 2012; 2015)
- *Motivational theories*: emotions as motivational states involving action-tendencies (Frijda 1986; Scarantino 2014)
- *Agential/enactive theories*: emotions as involving, being, being based on, or being analogues to action (e.g., Colombetti 2007; 2010; 2014; Slaby 2012; Slaby and Wüschner 2014; Naar 2024)
- *Position-taking theories*: emotions as a form of taking position towards the world (Müller 2019; Mitchell 2021).[4]

Despite areas of overlap, these theories differ markedly in how they describe what constitutes an emotion and in how they account for its phenomenality and intentionality. Yet the predominant focus on these aspects of emotions risks obscuring the broader significance of *embodiment* – and with it the existential dimension of what it means to be a *lived body* in the world.

The embodiment of emotions is considered in most of the theories mentioned above. Even strong defenders of the cognitive tradition now

[2] For an overview of theories of emotion from a more psychological lens, cf. Moors (2022).

[3] Some have built upon the perceptual model and underlined the epistemic role of emotional experience, but argued, against the perceptual view, that emotions have a different epistemic structure: on their view, the epistemic role is played out by guiding an individual's attention or bringing about a reassessment of available evaluative information (Brady 2013).

[4] A comparable proposal, differently argued, has been made under the label of the *reactive theory* of emotion (Massin 2023).

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concede that the body plays an operative role in emotional judgement (Solomon 2007). However, the role of the body is typically confined to sensation, feelings, or evaluative function. Being a *lived* and *living body*, in contrast, encompasses far more. It is through our bodies that we are exposed to the world and to others, that we encounter both its affordances and its threats. The body renders us vulnerable to the contingencies of life; it is the locus not only of physiological processes but also of emotional and experienced pain, as well as of pleasure, intimacy, and connection.

While embodiment is often only superficially addressed in many theories of emotion, it also provides a conceptual bridge to a broader discourse on human vulnerability. The way in which emotions situate us bodily in the world already entails an exposure to others and to circumstances beyond our control. It is precisely this shared structure of exposure that recent philosophical discussions of vulnerability have sought to explore.

In recent decades, numerous thinkers have emphasised the fundamental – ontological – vulnerability of the human being, and on this basis have developed reflections on a political ethics of care (Tronto 1993), on social justice (Kittay 1999), on the necessity of virtues (MacIntyre 1999), on the illumination of gender-specific needs and related social inequalities (Butler 2004), and on the foundations of human rights (Turner 2006). Fineman (2008) has underscored that universal vulnerability should be seen not as a deficit but as a human constant, serving as the starting point for conceptualising and realising equality and justice; instead of the overly idealised and, to some degree, fictional subject of autonomy, we need to consider equality and justice in light of the fact that being human means being vulnerable.

Against this emphasis on ontological vulnerability, other theorists have argued that such an approach risks obscuring the fact that many vulnerabilities are politically and socially constituted – that is, they are relational and context-sensitive. Puar (2017), for instance, contends that appeals to a general human vulnerability are often politically instrumentalised to position certain groups as weaker and thereby to disempower them. These claims, however, need not conflict. Some vulnerabilities are inherent to the human condition, others depend on social and political power structures, and some can arise simply from the particular environment one finds oneself in.[5] Recognising this plurality of phenomena calls for a conceptual framework capable of mediating between universal and context-sensitive

[5] See the distinction between ontological and ontic vulnerabilities below.

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forms of vulnerabilities (MacKenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2014; Rogers, Mackenzie, and Dodds 2012; Hurst 2008).

Correspondingly, vulnerability is discussed in different contexts with respect to different aspects of life. Beyond vulnerability as exposure to physical risks or injury, the concept plays a central role in relation to the tendency to develop psychological or psychiatric disorders (Ingram and Luxton 2005; Fuchs 2013c; Stanghellini and Rosfort 2013a). The widely discussed thesis that trust is a form of 'accepted vulnerability' (Baier 1986; Baghramian, Petherbridge, and Stout 2020) likewise attests to the multi-faceted nature of human fragility on all levels of psychic and social life, not merely the strictly corporeal one. Another example would be emotional vulnerability, through which a wide range of life conditions – not only those that threaten bodily existence directly – decisively contribute to the experience of being vulnerable.

The emotional–affective and embodied dimension may, in fact, play a central role in integrating these various phenomena of vulnerability, since exposure and wounding often manifest on the affective level – where they are also negotiated and, to some degree, healed. The chapters in this collection aim to articulate this nexus of emotion, embodiment, and vulnerability from a phenomenological standpoint, demonstrating how these dimensions converge in psychopathology and therapeutic practice.

3 The Phenomenology of Emotions: A Methodological Framework

The previous section outlined the main theoretical currents in contemporary philosophy of emotion and situated them within broader reflections on embodiment and vulnerability. Building on this foundation, the present section turns to the methodological and conceptual frameworks that guide the phenomenological study of emotions. These frameworks share a commitment to describing emotions as lived, embodied, and situated phenomena, inseparable from the contexts in which they arise. Phenomenology and enactivism, in particular, provide complementary perspectives for understanding affectivity as an integral aspect of life, cognition, and existence – dynamic, embodied, and expressive of our relations to others and to the environment.

The following subsections outline the methodological foundations of this perspective and introduce the principal concepts that have emerged from the dialogue between phenomenology and the enactive approach.

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Phenomenological Approaches to Emotions: Main Principles and Insights

Phenomenology, in its various strands, emphasises the lived experience of emotions and insists that the first-person perspective is indispensable for understanding affectivity. Yet phenomenological contributions go beyond the analysis of subjective feelings: emotions are understood as lived, embodied, and contextually situated experiences of persons embedded within natural, cultural, and historical horizons. These experiences do not merely occur in such contexts but also disclose them – they reveal structures of meaning, significance, and value that shape the lifeworld. Consequently, phenomenological analyses attend to the bodily, relational, and intentional dimensions of emotional life, thereby highlighting its inherent vulnerability.

Rather than modelling emotions as static states within a person–environment system, phenomenologists investigate their temporal unfolding and spatial extension – how emotions emerge, intensify, transform, and extend through bodily movements, social arrangements, and intercorporeal or atmospheric spaces (Merleau-Ponty [1959] 1964; Schmitz 1989; 2011; Meyer, Streeck, and Jordan 2017; Slaby, Mühlhoff, and Wüschner 2019). Phenomenology thereby supplements the above-mentioned emotion theories by offering a more comprehensive analysis of affective life: some emotions are fleeting and insignificant; others are existentially constitutive, shaping identity and self-understanding – such as in the transformative powers of love and desire (Heinämaa 2025, and Chapter 3 in this volume) or their opposite, hate, which Thomas Fuchs (Chapter 6 in this volume) analyses as altering an individual's mode of existence.

Contemporary phenomenology not only draws on scientific findings but also engages in interdisciplinary collaboration across the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences. Phenomenological psychopathology, as we will argue below, exemplifies this integrative approach within psychiatry. It would therefore be misleading to regard phenomenology merely as a reflective or theoretical enterprise. Rather, it has generated conceptual innovations that have proven both empirically fruitful and theoretically groundbreaking in the study of emotions. Although phenomenological analyses of emotion vary, they typically share several assumptions. Szanto and Landweh (2020, pp. 10–13) summarise thirteen recurrent characteristics of phenomenological approaches to emotions. Not every phenomenologist endorses all of them, yet together they delineate the methodological orientation of the field:

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1. Emotions are irreducible to other mental or cognitive states.
2. The first-person perspective is essential for studying emotions.
3. Emotions are inherently social in important ways.
4. Others' emotions and mental states are experienced in the intentional mode of empathy, which includes an affective dimension. However, empathy is distinct from sympathy or emotional sharing.
5. Emotions are intimately related to values and meanings and play an important role in value perception ('Wertwahrnehmung'; Scheler 1921).
6. Emotions are normative in two ways: they can be appropriate to the object or situation, and they can be authentic relative to the subject.
7. The body is central – not only as a physical organism (*living body*) but as a *lived body* through which emotions are enacted and experienced.
8. Phenomenology rejects the Jamesian conception of embodied emotions, differentiating among various bodily dimensions of emotions, such as bodily sensations, bodily feelings, and sensations of bodily changes.
9. Emotions aren't passive happenings; the subject is active, motivated in emotions, and enacts, regulates, and maintains them. Spontaneity is part of emotions.
10. Emotions have a self-disclosive dimension, revealing the person as a whole and varying in their existential depth.
11. Emotions are intentional and present the objects in a distinctive, meaningful, or evaluative manner; this intentionality is sui generis.
12. Emotions are holistically embedded in subjective, interpersonal, and worldly contexts.
13. Phenomenology regards the notion of 'unfelt emotions' as problematic; such may instead be understood as dispositions or as peripheral tendencies.

Phenomenological analyses of emotions have traditionally been situated within broader investigations of affectivity. These encompass not only discrete emotional episodes in response to particular events in the world, but also a wide range of affective phenomena that differ in their phenomenal character and function within our psychic life. Two key ideas are especially central to phenomenological accounts of affectivity.

Affective Self- and World-Disclosure

Among the central ideas of phenomenology is the notion that affective experience – understood broadly as feeling (*Gefühl*), mood, attunement, or

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what has been termed *Stimmung* in German – is fundamental in opening up a world for us in the first place. According to phenomenological thinkers, we do not first perceive a ready-made, fully constituted world and only subsequently adopt affective stances towards it. Rather, affective and valenced experience pervades our being-in-the-world from the outset, shaping how the world appears to us and how we relate to others.

While phenomenologists – such as Edith Stein (1917), Martin Heidegger ([1927] 2001), Jean-Paul Sartre ([1939] 2014; 1943), Maurice Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 1962), Michel Henry (1963), or Edmund Husserl (2020), as well as less-known Otto Friedrich Bollnow (1956) and Stephan Strasser (1956) – differ in how they articulate the constitutive role of affectivity in our experience of the shared world, it remains a staple of phenomenological thought that how we feel or find ourselves in the world (*Befindlichkeit*) serves as a central anchor for our concrete situatedness within the environments we inhabit and navigate.

Value-ception, Axiology, and the Relevance of Affective Experience in Ethics

According to several phenomenological thinkers – most notably Max Scheler ([1912/1913] 2021), Edmund Husserl (2020), and Dietrich von Hildebrand (1982) – affective experiences also play a crucial role in the perception of values and their validity. This has sometimes been referred to as 'value-ception' (*Wertnehmung*), by analogy to sense perception (*Wahrnehmung*) (cf. Staiti 2025).

With the motivation to offer an alternative to Kantian *formal* ethics, already the early phenomenological approaches by Husserl and Scheler emphasise a *material* account to ethics and argue, from their perspective in contrast to Kant, that affective experience is indispensable – not only for identifying and recognising what is objectively valuable, but also for taking a position towards such values and realising them through action. For phenomenologists, our experience and cognition of value is always, in a necessary way, affectively constituted (Fuchs 2019; de Monticelli 2020; Vendrell Ferran 2022; Schmidt 2023b; Melichar 2024b).

Enactivism and Phenomenology: Integrating Scientific Perspectives

The critique of scientism and various forms of scientific reductionism advanced by phenomenological thinkers has sometimes given rise to the impression that phenomenological research may be opposed to scientific perspectives. By contrast, phenomenology, and especially contemporary phenomenology, seeks to integrate scientific approaches within a broader

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understanding of experience and life (e.g., Mishara et al. 2024; Tewes 2026). This integrative orientation has become particularly evident in certain forms of convergence between phenomenology and the cognitive sciences, exemplified by the turn towards embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended cognition (4E-cognition) as well as by questioning, for instance, the representational and neurocentric internalism of classical cognitivism (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991; Newen, De Bruin, and Gallagher 2018). Recognising the affective dimension of this framework has led to the notion of 4EA- (including 'affective') or 5E-cognition (adding 'emotional') (Troncoso et al. 2023). This convergence marks a productive dialogue between phenomenology and enactive cognition, reshaping how emotions and the living, embodied mind as a whole are understood.

Many proponents of 4E (or 5E) draw explicitly from the phenomenological tradition, referring to Merleau-Ponty's conception of embodiment (Thompson 2007; Gallagher 2017), Heidegger's being-in-the-world, or Husserl's analyses of time-consciousness. In particular, enactivists such as Varela (1996), Gallagher (2007; 2010; 2017), Thompson (2007, pp. 13–15), and Fuchs (2018) have argued that phenomenology is not only compatible with cognitive science but provides a necessary methodological complement and foundation to it. On the one hand, phenomenology as a study of human experiences can offer conceptual and structural insights for empirical research on consciousness (Zahavi 2009). On the other hand, it broadens the epistemic perspective, generating new questions and revealing the holistic and embodied nature of the human mind (Gallagher and Zahavi 2021; Gallagher 2024). The question, however, of whether this approach suggests a naturalisation of phenomenology or requires a different ontological interpretation is still a matter of debate (Tewes 2015; Kee 2021).

Given the close relationship between enactive cognitive science and phenomenology, it is useful to briefly outline the core ideas of enactivism, since these recur throughout several contributions to this volume. Enactivism conceptualises cognition as fundamentally active and world-involving. Cognition is not a set of internal representations of the world but an organism's ongoing engagement with its environment. Hence, cognition is grounded not merely in neural or functional properties but in the biological organisation of living systems – a view expressed by the life–mind continuity thesis (Jonas [1966] 2001; Thompson 2007). Living beings are autopoietic, adaptive, and precarious systems operating far from thermodynamic equilibrium (Weber and Varela 2002; Di Paolo 2005;

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Beer and Di Paolo 2023). To maintain their identity, they must continuously exchange matter and energy with their surroundings. The environment, therefore, is not a neutral space but a field of meaning, opportunities, and threats for the organism.[6] As long as the organism navigates this field, adapts to circumstances, and even anticipates the trajectories of processes, it demonstrates agential properties and sense-making: it actively assesses and explores its surroundings and takes care of maintaining its identity.[7]

Enactivism conceives emotions as central to this sense-making activity, shaped by the bodily constitution and interactions with its environment (Maiese 2006; 2011; Colombetti 2007; 2014; Colombetti and Thompson 2008; Hutto 2012). Sense-making as an embodied evaluation integrates aspects of evaluative and motivational theories (Slaby, Mühlhoff, and Wüschner 2019; Hufendiek 2017). However, unlike appraisal theory, enactivism situates emotions within the entire brain–body–environment system, rather than isolating them as discrete mental or neural functions (Colombetti 2010, pp. 151–53). Emotions are not pre-programmed evolutionary responses but adaptive, autopoietic processes unfolding through the organism's history of interactions. In this sense, enactivism rejects representationalism: emotions do not stand for external objects but disclose values and meanings through embodied activity.

Some enactivists hold that representational features enter cognition only with the development of linguistic abilities (Hutto 2012; Hutto and Myin 2013). However, other enactivists primarily rely on phenomenological analysis, which suggests that mental content is often a *presentation* of an object, as in perception, while only specific types of mental activity, like memory, are genuinely representative (Thompson 2007, p. 25). Thus, emotions are modes of value- and meaning-disclosure rooted in bodily interaction. Therefore, the body in enactivism aligns closely with the phenomenological concept of the body as a medium of experience (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1962; Husserl 1973a–c; 1991). Yet this holistic

[6] Already, Jakob von Uexküll (1928) has coined the term 'Umwelt' (environment) that consists of objects with 'Merk-' and 'Wirkmalen' (receptor and effector signs) that are relative to the organism's bodily constitution and life form.

[7] Hans Jonas ([1966] 2001; [1979] 2003) has in a sense broadened the application of Heidegger's concept of 'Sorge' (care) to the living system's self-relationship. Some enactivists follow Jonas, like Thompson (2007, p. 153) or Colombetti (2010, p. 148). The phenomenological interpretation of organisms, though, is controversial in enactivism (De Jesus 2016; 2018; Villalobos and Ward 2016; Kee 2021; Bogotá 2024). However, in all brevity, we want to note that enactivism without is not only threatened to reduce to a form of bio-functionalism; it also loses the strong foundations in transcendental phenomenology.

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and non-representative stance also raises challenges for enactivism – particularly regarding how to account for the normative dimension of emotions, such as their appropriateness and authenticity.

It is crucial to recognise that the holistic conception of the living being is itself rooted in phenomenological insights. As Hans Jonas argued, understanding organisms as self-maintaining, sense-making wholes presupposes the self-awareness of the lived body. Phenomenological reflection thus plays a constitutive, not merely heuristic, role in elucidating the interdependence of life, mind, and embodiment (Zahavi 2013).

Phenomenological Innovations: Key Concepts and Developments

Phenomenological research continues to exert an inspiring and productive influence on the philosophy of emotion, particularly in illuminating the existential dimension of emotions and human vulnerability. In the following, we highlight several recent conceptual innovations that exemplify how phenomenology refines and extends our understanding of emotional life.

Emotions as circular, embodied interactions with the environment: Phenomenologically, emotions can be understood as circular or feedback-driven interactions between a centripetal-affective component and a centrifugal-emotive component (Fuchs and Koch 2014; Fuchs, 2024). Being impacted by the affective qualities of a situation triggers a specific bodily resonance ('affection'), which, in turn, influences the emotional perception of the situation and includes a corresponding expressive readiness for action ('emotion' from Latin *emovere*, to move out). For instance, anger affects an individual personally, disrupts their practical concerns and draws attention away from other processes, and then motivates and propels certain actions, including yelling, fighting, or vengeful action. In light of these interactions, emotions are considered as embodied, embedded, and enacted. They are also ascribed an evaluative aspect (Lahno 2001, p. 175; 2020, p. 154; Fuchs 2024, p. 75), but without understanding them as mere cognitive appraisals or judgments; rather, they are felt in bodily resonance (cf. Schmitz 1989; Fuchs 2024), and, as such, they guide attention, participate in forming beliefs, and shape our thoughts.

Bodily resonance: Bodily resonance refers to the mode in which emotions and affective experiences – such as moods, atmospheres, and feelings – manifest themselves in the lived body. These phenomena do not merely occur as internal or unconscious states but are *felt* in and through the body as concrete modifications of our bodily existence. Affective experiences

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solicit us by inducing kinetic tendencies (e.g., sensations of being uplifted or weighed down, drawn towards or repelled by something) or by altering the general tonality of bodily experience.

Such modifications may include sensations of constriction, openness, agitation, or release, and are often accompanied by somatic markers and states of the nervous system felt as trembling, warmth, coldness, or a visceral impulse to laugh or cry. In this sense, the body functions as a resonance medium for the affective field – a dynamic structure through which emotions and atmospheres reverberate and become experientially salient. The main idea is that the body – metaphorically speaking, just like a soundboard in music – moves or vibrates depending on the kind of environments it finds itself in (Fuchs 2000; Fuchs and Koch 2014).

Affective affordances: Phenomenology conceives of most emotions as intentionally directed towards meaningful or evaluative aspects of the world. They present the object in relation to the subject's concerns; therefore, emotions disclose what is significant and valuable for the subject. Yet emotions not only present objects in relation to the subject's concerns; they also invite and motivate actions. In this respect, emotive objects resemble what Gibson ([1979] 2015) termed *affordances* in his ecological psychology, that is, environmental opportunities for actions, extending and generalising Heidegger's famous emphasis on practical concerns as underlying our perception of things beyond the human case. A tree, for instance, affords climbing, hiding, or resting beneath, given the suitable bodily constitution of the organism.[8] As emotions also reveal what concerns us and are integrated into our interaction with the environment, Fuchs and Koch (2014) introduce the concept of *affective affordances* (see also Krueger and Colombetti 2018). These refer to evaluative interactions with the environment that do not depend on complex propositional attitudes or cognitive judgements but are accessible to animals and infants alike. Affective affordances also possess a reflective dimension as they reveal the subject's own state and concern (Slaby and Stephan 2008). They relate more broadly or holistically to the living being or person as a whole.

Variety of non-intentional affective experiences: Phenomenological analyses have developed nuanced taxonomies of affective experiences that distinguish between non-intentional background feelings constituting

[8] Affordances are relational facts, similar to Uexküll's (1928) circle of receptor and effector signs. However, there is an important distinction between affordances that inhere in the object and those that are perceived. With this distinction, we can say that the switch affords usage, but Peter doesn't see it because he doesn't know what a switch is.

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affective horizons and object-directed, intentional emotional episodes. Contemporary phenomenology has especially refined the study of long-term and diffuse affective states that have no particular objects. The concept of *existential feelings* (Ratcliffe 2005; 2008) captures the subtle background orientation of our conscious relationship with the world, which shapes our personal lives. Ratcliffe (2016, p. 169) writes: 'By "existential feeling", I mean a felt sense of being rooted in a shared world, which shapes all experience and thought.' These feelings fluctuate and may alter in psychiatric conditions, such as derealisation or bodily alienation, revealing their link to deep forms of human vulnerability. The concept of existential feelings broadens the traditional view of emotions, as they are not linked to a specific object or situation but are enduring feelings that serve as affective orientations. Others, employing terms such as *feeling of being alive*, have emphasised a concept of background feelings that is concerned with how an organism fares in terms of its vitality (Fuchs 2012; Slaby and Stephan 2008). Fuchs (2013b) distinguishes vital feelings from existential feelings, moods and attunements, atmospheres, and emotions. In recent years, phenomenological approaches have been increasingly employed to conceptualise the significance of feeling and affect in shaping the various ways we experience ourselves (e.g., Slaby and Stephan 2008; Kreuch 2019; Schmidt 2021a, 2021b; 2023b).

Social, shared, and extended emotions: Another key area of recent phenomenological research concerns the social and intersubjective dimension of affectivity. From early on, phenomenologists emphasised that emotions are not merely individual, inner events but play a foundational role in shaping interpersonal relationships, constituting collectives, and finding shared perspectives on the world. Recent scholarship has explored how affectivity operates within shared practices, showing that emotions are deeply embedded in embodied interactions, social roles, and cultural frameworks. Emotions not only reflect social realities; they *constitute* them, through shared moods, collective rituals, and group-based emotional norms. Thus, phenomenology uncovers how our affective life is not only shaped by the social world, but also constitutive of it (Krueger 2015; León, Szanto, and Zahavi 2019; León 2026; Vendrell Ferran 2025; Zahavi 2025).

Moreover, phenomenological work has challenged the notion that emotional objects are mere causes or stimuli processed within the nervous system; instead, objects themselves play a constitutive part in the emotional experience. Slaby (2014, p. 34) argues that emotions are 'intentional-phenomenal hybrids', that is, ways in which subjects are affectively engaged with the world. The object is therefore an essential component of

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emotion, enabling the dynamic unfolding of emotional episodes – such as how sympathy develops and transforms during a conversation.

Emotions are also *scaffolded* by environmental and social arrangements (Colombetti and Krueger 2015). Music, for instance, forms and supports emotional connection when socialising with friends (Krueger 2019). Scaffolding describes how material and social environments support, amplify, or modulate (as well as suppress) emotional processes. The feeling of hilarity can be scaffolded by confetti and party hats, while the feeling of sacredness can be supported by the architecture and design of chapels. Slaby (2018; Slaby et al. 2019) also utilises the concept of *affective arrangements*, describing how emotions are distributed across the environment and social niches, which are often actively and technologically designed. In such contexts, emotions become *shared phenomena*. Sometimes we share a common emotion (Samela 2012; Krueger 2015) that would not be the same if it were not joined – for instance, the anticipation with one's partner of one's wedding. Fuchs (2017) elaborates on this intersubjective dimension through the notion of *interaffectivity*, emphasising how affects emerge from reciprocal bodily exchanges between individuals and are thus distributed across intercorporeal relations. Emotions as interpersonally distributed phenomena are thus understood in terms of the above-mentioned concept of bodily resonance.

As this overview of recent phenomenological contributions demonstrates, the phenomenology of emotions is not a narrowly defined inquiry into discrete affective states but part of a broader investigation of emotions as a constitutive dimension of human existence. Phenomenologists have shown that affective life spans a wide continuum – from fleeting bodily sensations to enduring moods and existential orientations – and is deeply interwoven with self-awareness, temporality, embodiment, and intersubjectivity. Affectivity permeates perception, imagination, cognition, and volition; it colours and modulates how the world appears to us, structures our practical engagements, and anchors us within social and ethical contexts. Hence, phenomenology does not isolate emotion as a self-contained domain but reveals its constitutive role in the very fabric of conscious life and embeds it in broader affective horizons, against which it arises as prominent and specific affective experience.

Embodiment, Vulnerability, and the Existential Dimension

If emotions – and affectivity more broadly conceived – are indeed constitutive of human existence in the various ways outlined, it is worth noting

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that, despite their essential role in conscious life, they are often far from easy to understand reflectively, let alone to control. Emotions in their full meaning often exceed our conscious awareness at a given time, and it can be fairly difficult to regulate them. It is this lack of absolute control over our affective experience that also discloses the existential condition of vulnerability accompanying emotional life (see also Chapter 10 in this volume). Emotions expose us to the world – they move and affect us beyond our command – and in doing so, they reveal the precarious character of human existence.

Hans Jonas' ([1966] 2001) theory of emotions provides a profound articulation of this interconnectedness between emotion and vulnerability. In brief, Jonas conceives of life as characterised by a 'needful freedom': living organisms possess a degree of behavioural flexibility, yet their stability and self-maintenance depend on the continuous metabolic exchange of matter and energy with their environment. This dependence places all living beings in a fundamentally precarious position (Beer and Di Paolo 2023): organisms must constantly engage with their environment, requiring the *right* interaction to sustain their integrity. Consequently, their relations to the world are always relations of significance and concern. However, as Jonas ([1966] 2001) insists, there is no guarantee that these vital conditions can be maintained consistently. Therefore, life's 'reality, paradox and in a constant contradiction to the mechanical nature, is in principle a continued crisis, which to handle is never given and amounts each time to a continuation of the crisis' (Jonas 2010, p. 17, our translation).[9] This perpetual exposure to loss and dissolution constitutes what may be called the *ontological dimension of vulnerability* – a structural feature of all living existence.

According to Jonas ([1966] 2001), more complex life forms acquire increasing degrees of freedom. Animals, for instance, develop sensorimotor capacities for locomotion, enabling them to act on distant goals and to satisfy needs through objects that are not immediately available but must be sought, discovered, and approached. In this way, animal life introduces a temporal gap between need and satisfaction. Emotions bridge this gap by maintaining desire and orienting behaviour towards fulfilment. Hence, on the one hand, they closely link behaviour to the essential needs of animals. On the other hand, they act as signs of the intermittent nature of

[9] The idea that human beings are in principle vulnerable by virtue of their concrete, embodied, and corporeal constitution can also be found in early anthropological approaches, such as those of Max Scheler ([1928] 2018), Helmuth Plessner ([1928] 1975), and Arnold Gehlen ([1940] 2016).

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desire-satisfaction, which poses a risk for animals. Emotions thus testify to the tension between freedom and dependence that defines animal life.

In human beings, this tension becomes more pronounced. Drawing on Helmuth Plessner's conception of the human life form as one of 'eccentric positionality' (Plessner 1975), human existence is marked by a rupture of immediacy and a reflective distance from oneself. This distance makes possible self-awareness and cultural mediation, engaging spontaneously and flexibly with the situation, but it also introduces the potential for alienation, hyper-reflexivity, depersonalisation, or delusions (Melichar 2025). We may call this the *ontic dimension of vulnerability* – the fragility of our situated, meaningful relation to the world and others. Emotions, in this light, manifest both forms of vulnerabilities: they express our ontological precariousness as living beings and our ontic fragility as self-reflective, embodied persons embedded in social worlds. Vulnerability is therefore not an accidental feature but an intrinsic characteristic of human existence that will manifest differently depending on the individual's concrete social situatedness and bodily constitution (for an exemplary analysis in the context of dementia, see Tewes 2023; 2026; Tewes, Schlette, and Fuchs 2023).

From a phenomenological standpoint, emotions are modes of world-disclosure that are embodied and relational. Each emotional experience reveals what matters to us and thus manifests our dependencies – bodily, environmental, and intersubjective. Human existence, however, is irreducibly intersubjective: our vulnerabilities extend beyond our individual relation to the world to include our relations with others (see Chapter 5 in this volume). As Simone de Beauvoir (1956) emphasised, we are inevitably exposed to the freedom of others, which confronts us with ambiguity, dependence, and risk. In emotional relations – love, shame, empathy, jealousy – we open ourselves to others' responses and thereby to the possibility of being affirmed or wounded.

Reflections on our vulnerability and exposure as fundamental features of human life recur throughout intellectual history, yet, since the early twentieth century, the concept of vulnerability has gained remarkable prominence within philosophical discourse. Phenomenology has played a significant role in this development, although it has sometimes been criticised – especially in the case of Edmund Husserl – for allegedly overlooking the vulnerability of human existence or not according its sufficient theoretical weight (Boublil 2018). Nevertheless, important insights were acquired through Husserl's phenomenological method and other approaches within the phenomenological tradition, which have

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awarded human vulnerability a prominent position within philosophical reflection. Martin Heidegger ([1927] 2001) grounded his analytic of Dasein in its fundamental subjection to facticity and the socially structured world, revealing vulnerability as an existential condition of being-in-the-world. Maurice Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 1962) elaborated the corporeal openness and exposure that define our perceptual and intersubjective life. Emmanuel Levinas (1961) derived his ethics from the encounter with the other's vulnerability, where responsibility arises as the primordial mode of relation. Jean-Paul Sartre (1943), in his analysis of shame, likewise identified vulnerability as the core of interpersonal experience, disclosing the subject's dependence on the gaze of the other.

Together, these perspectives articulate a shared phenomenological insight: emotions are existentially significant modes of being affected that reveal both the finitude and interdependence constitutive of human life. They do not merely accompany vulnerability; they disclose it as the very condition of existence.

4 Applied Perspectives: Phenomenological Psychopathology and Psychotherapy

The preceding sections have shown that emotions, embodiment, and vulnerability are constitutive dimensions of human existence rather than peripheral features of it. This section turns to the applied implications of these insights by examining how phenomenological analyses of emotions inform contemporary psychopathology and psychotherapy. The following subsections explore how emotional life – when disturbed or transformed – reveals the structural fragility of selfhood and the self–world relation, and how such disruptions can become the focus of therapeutic understanding and care.

Phenomenological Psychopathology and Emotions

Phenomenological psychopathology approaches mental disorders as alterations in the basic structures of subjectivity, embodiment, and world-disclosure rather than as isolated dysfunctions of mental mechanisms. Emotions are central to these structures: they are not merely internal states or transient reactions but dynamic, self- and world-disclosing forces that propel us towards particular responses, provide reasons for action, and guide our behaviour through experienced values. At the same time, emotions expose us to the world and others, shaping the forms of relationships

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and pulling us into reactive dynamics. They reveal the inherent vulnerability of our existence – the susceptibility of embodied, affective life to disturbance and breakdown. This vulnerability is the fundamental precondition from which psychopathologies can develop. Whether or not all psychopathologies are primarily emotional disorders (Johnson-Laird 2021; Maiese 2023), understanding emotions and their related vulnerabilities remains crucial for understanding the genesis and structure of psychopathological phenomena.

Phenomenology has a long and influential tradition in psychiatry, dating back to Karl Jaspers ([1913] 1953), who argued that genuine understanding (*Verstehen*) of mental illness requires integrating the patients' subjective experiences. Phenomenological psychopathology examines mental disorders as transformations in the fundamental structure of experience – in how a person relates to themself, others, and the world. Recent developments in this field seek to reconstruct and further develop phenomenological theory within today's interdisciplinary context of psychopathology, philosophy of psychiatry, and psychotherapy. This approach serves as both a complement and a corrective to the dominant trends of biological psychiatry and diagnostic frameworks like the DSM-5, which lack a systematic account of lived experience and the first-personal meaning of mental illnesses. Contemporary phenomenological research has advanced our understanding of disorders such as depression, anxiety, trauma, and schizophrenia, highlighting the experiential disruptions underlying diagnostic categories (Stanghellini et al. 2019; Tewes and Stanghellini 2021). In the following, we briefly illustrate these advances through selected examples of conceptual innovations in the phenomenology of emotion.

Emotions as circular, embodied interactions with the environment: Traumatic experiences, for instance, are affective-centripetal events that disturb the person's psychic unity and sense of coherence, impacting their personality and subjective structure. Depraz (2018) discusses traumatic experiences as a 'disorganisation of the psyche' that has a profound impact on the identity of a person. For instance, they transform a person's abilities to anticipate events and their sense of possibilities (Wilde 2020, p. 225). Since traumatic experiences significantly alter the organisation of how an individual perceives the world, they entail consequences for the centrifugal aspect of emotions as well: compensatory reactions, for instance, emotional numbing (see Chapter 4 in this volume), profoundly impact motivations and action tendencies (Wilde 2022, pp. 694–95).

Bodily resonance: Resonances denote the bodily processes of attunement and synchronisation – both conscious and pre-reflective – through which

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we maintain a felt connection with others and the world (Fuchs 2020a). In psychopathology, this capacity for resonance may be diminished or hyperactivated. In depression, affective resonance is dampened: the body loses vitality, its affective attunement with the environment, and the felt perception of time transforms (Fuchs 2020b, pp. 53–54; 2013a). Because the 'body is out of tune' and 'oversensitive to the sad, anxious, and boring tune qualities of the world', the latter becomes a 'unhomelike' place (Svenaeus 2013, p. 15). Osler (2021) interprets depression as a condition of what she calls 'bodily saturation', which implies a lack of resonance. Because individuals possess only limited capacities to process their own and others' affects, the overwhelming feelings of sadness, melancholy, or emptiness do not permit the depressed person to resonate with the affective experiences of others. Rather than interpreting this as a sign of egocentrism, Osler describes the overwhelmed bodily capacity – bodily saturation – as a case of deficient bodily resonance. By contrast, for instance, in anxiety disorders, resonance becomes amplified and distorted, leading to an over-responsiveness to potential threats (Fuchs 2024, pp. 84–85). A heightened bodily resonance can be identified in the hypersensitivity in borderline personality disorder, which is associated with a tendency of individuals to affectively overreact to situations; this tendency has been described as translating into an instability of embodiment that weakens the sense of identity (Schmidt 2021b). In all these cases, the body ceases to mediate an open and balanced relation to the environment, revealing the centrality of embodied sense-making in mental health.

Affective affordances: Some changes in psychopathological experiences also involve alterations in the field of affective affordances (Maiese 2022). De Haan et al. (2013, p. 7) compare the affordance structure of typical depressive and obsessive-compulsive experiences. Depression diminishes and restricts action possibilities, making them seem uniform, undifferentiated, and devoid of attraction. In obsessive-compulsive disorder, by contrast, a single affordance (e.g., a door handle to be touched, a list of items to control) becomes overwhelmingly salient, dominating the perceptual field and narrowing the scope of engagement. These modifications reflect disturbances in affective attunement, showing how psychopathological change is not merely cognitive or behavioural but involves a reconfiguration of one's practical and evaluative relationship to the world.

Variety of non-intentional affective experiences: Existential feelings are bodily-affective orientations that form our most basic sense of belonging and connectedness to the world. In conditions such as schizophrenic crises, this background can collapse, leading to a radical alteration of the senses of

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self and reality. Drawing on Renée's experiences as recounted in *An Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl* (Sechehaye [1951] 1979), Ratcliffe (2009, p. 189) argues that there is not a single, unitary sense of reality that is either simply present or absent. Instead, he suggests that there are qualitatively distinct ways in which reality can be experienced, depending on one's existential feelings – diverse styles in which something can appear as existing. In Renée's case, the sense of familiarity is lost and replaced by a modified experience of the 'is': 'things appear as just "present" in some strange, detached way, stripped of all practical significance' (Ratcliffe 2009, p. 189). Significant changes in background feelings can also affect time-consciousness; for instance, in depression, individuals may experience a dual temporality – subjective time slows or congeals, while their cognitive awareness of the environment's temporality remains largely unchanged (Fuchs 2013a; Moskalewicz 2016; 2018). Recent approaches have extended these phenomenological analyses and examined the impact of background feeling on time-perception in other mental health challenges, for example, in addiction (Moskalewicz and Messas 2022), but have also argued that sometimes, rather, it is the alteration of temporality that structures affectivity, for example, in mania (Moskalewicz and Schwartz 2020). The profound impact that disturbances in an individual's background affectivity can have on various aspects of their experience of the world has been further illustrated in the context of borderline personality disorder (Stanghellini and Rosfort 2013b; Schmidt 2022) or dementia (Chapter 9 in this volume).

Social, extended, and shared emotion: A major development in recent decades for psychopathology and psychotherapy is the growing research on interaffectivity – the embodied, reciprocal dynamics of emotional communication and empathy (Fuchs and Koch 2014; De Jaegher 2015; Fuchs 2017). In the diverse psychopathologies, disturbances in interaffective structures and processes have been described as either underlying or resulting from significant alterations of our experience of the social world – for instance, particularly in autism (Tewes 2024; see also Chapter 13 in this volume), borderline personality disorder (Schmidt 2021c; 2023a; Petrolini and Schmidt-Boddy 2025), but also depression (Osler 2021; Sik 2024). Phenomenology shifts the understanding of psychopathology from an individualistic to a relational and ecological perspective. This has ethical and political significance, since mental disorders cannot be reduced to private dysfunctions but involve complex interactions with environmental design and the shared life-world (Krueger and Colombetti 2018; Krueger 2023; see also Chapter 13 in this volume). Remembering that

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affordances in Gibson's sense depend not only on psychological states but also on the properties and arrangements of the environment, we can interpret reactive depression, for example, as involving misleading or disordered affective affordances – a world that does not offer suitable invitations to act.

Taken together, these phenomenological perspectives reveal that psychopathology is not merely a deviation from normal mental functioning but a modification of the very structures that constitute subjectivity. By analysing how emotions, embodiment, and vulnerability configure the lived world, phenomenological psychopathology bridges conceptual, clinical, and therapeutic dimensions, offering a framework in which mental illness appears as a disturbance of existence rather than as a mechanistic failure.

Clinical Relevance and Therapeutic Implications

The findings of the phenomenology of emotions are also of central importance for psychotherapeutic theory and practice. Phenomenological insights have influenced the development of numerous therapeutic approaches, including Carl Rogers' client-centred therapy (see also Chapter 21 in this volume), existential-phenomenological therapy (Deurzen et al. 2019; see also the chapters in Part II of this book), the person-centred dialectic developed by Stanghellini and colleagues (Stanghellini and Mancini 2017; Messas et al. 2018), as well as body-oriented and movement therapies (see Chapter 20 in this volume).

For psychotherapies, phenomenology serves two complementary purposes. On the one hand, it provides a philosophical meta-perspective that integrates insights from different approaches (Melichar 2024a) by clarifying how behaviour and habits, unconscious processes, and the social context of psychopathologies interrelate. On the other hand, phenomenology supports therapeutic practice by focusing on the subjectivity and existential structures of clients, helping to bring to reflective awareness the experiential aspects of their suffering and revealing new ways of responding to and transforming these experiences (Sik 2024). In this way, phenomenology complements natural-scientific approaches to therapy, constituting a systematic framework for the first-personal dimension of healing.

Traditional psychotherapeutic schools have largely focused on explicit learning processes – awareness, insight, the recognition of connections, or the intentional modification of thoughts or behaviours. What happens on the non-verbal and pre-reflective level between therapist and client has

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often been overlooked. Yet, process research, particularly through video-based interaction analyses, demonstrates that even in the earliest session, subliminal interpersonal synchronisations – such as micro-movements, gestures, and postural adjustments – occur and significantly influence therapeutic progression (Stern et al. 1998a; 1998b; Ramseyer and Tschacher 2011; De Jaegher et al. 2017; Fuchs 2017).

The phenomenology of emotions offers further potential for advancing psychotherapeutic methodology. In particular, understanding the embodied and intersubjective nature of emotions is central for developing phenomenologically grounded treatment models. For instance, bodily resonance in various forms of psychotherapy involves shared emotions, mutual coordination, and synchronised rhythms (Ramseyer and Tschacher 2011; 2014; Tschacher, Rees, and Ramseyer 2014). These processes create a specific sphere of interaffectivity that constitutes an important and effective factor in the therapeutic process. To move beyond descriptive theory and achieve methodological rigour in capturing these non-verbal dynamics, researchers are increasingly employing first-person and micro-phenomenological methods, which enable fine-grained analyses of micro-processes and experiences (Soto 2025). The contributions to this book explore the resources of a phenomenology of embodied emotions for psychotherapy, generating conceptual and practical foundations for developing body-based therapeutic inventions.

Understanding interpersonal resonances also opens new possibilities for therapeutic techniques that operate not through cognitive reappraisal but through bodily self-regulation and affective attunement (see Chapter 19 in this volume). Such approaches include enhancing interoceptive and emotional awareness, as well as techniques based on relaxation, mindfulness, movement, music, or dance therapy (see Chapter 20 in his volume). Although these possibilities have been recognised, systematic research on the phenomenology and embodiment of emotions in psychotherapy remains limited. The phenomenological foundations of bodily resonance need further elaboration to better inform emerging techniques.

A central question for further research is, therefore, how clinicians' own affective and bodily resonances shape diagnosis and therapeutic process, and how they can cultivate reflective awareness of these embodied reactions (Caldwell 2024). This intensified focus on process and subjective change aligns with the broader research task of redefining how therapeutic success is measured, particularly by highlighting the unique, individualised shifts that are central and noticeable in phenomenological investigations. The third part of this volume contributes to this ongoing development by

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showing how a phenomenological understanding of embodied emotions can provide the theoretical grounding for both innovative therapeutic interventions and refined, process-based measures of efficacy.

5 Conclusion

Emotions – ranging from the subtlest existential feelings to the most overwhelming passion – reveal themselves as modes of world-disclosure and resonance, through which human beings encounter, shape, and are shaped by others and the world. They express our embodied dependencies and existential precariousness, and, in doing so, they illuminate the mutual entanglement of affectivity, embodiment, and vulnerability. Vulnerability is therefore not an accidental condition, but an integral part of human existence, shaping the overall way we are beings-in-the-world.

Phenomenological analysis, focusing on the dynamic relationship between the lived body and affective exposure, provides a powerful approach that supplements and expands approaches in emotion research, psychopathology, and psychotherapy. It is apt to demonstrate that emotions are not merely reactive states but constitutive forces of experience – they open us to the world, connect us with others, and render us susceptible to disturbance and transformation alike.

Yet thematising emotions also poses challenges for phenomenology. We often realise later that our judgements about our emotional life were mistaken, and we failed to understand, for example, the jealousy directed at a colleague or the estrangement from a partner. While we still see ourselves as loyal and faithful, emotional tendencies already work against this self-image and draw us away from it. As Stanghellini and Rosfort (2013a, p. 100) observe, 'our understanding of [human feelings] reveals that we are often wrong about what we think we feel, and when we form an appropriate opinion we often feel that we have only grasped a paltry part of what is actually going on in our emotional life'. On the one hand, this means that emotions are far from being completely transparent from the first-person perspective, but can be further explored using phenomenological methods. On the other hand, phenomenological accounts can be brought into a reciprocal exchange in theory building and empirical projects with other research perspectives, such as psychological, neurological, sociological, or enactive approaches, to achieve a mutually enriched understanding of emotions.

It is precisely in this spirit that this volume brings together contemporary phenomenological perspectives on emotions with clinical and

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therapeutic research. The guiding motivation behind it is to unveil the entanglement between our emotional life and the fundamental structure of human existence – our openness, fragility, and capacity for change. For it is precisely the three perspectives offered in phenomenology, psychopathology, and psychotherapy that examine emotions as self- and world-disclosing phenomena, as potential sites of breakdown, and as sources of recovery. Integrating these three perspectives, we hope, will equip readers with the conceptual and practical tools necessary to move beyond symptom-oriented approaches towards a person-centred understanding of mental life – one that addresses the embodied, existential, and intersubjective dimensions of both suffering and flourishing.

Looking forward, the volume thus invites continued dialogue between philosophy and the empirical sciences of mind, between theoretical reflection and therapeutic practice. In doing so, it affirms that to study emotions phenomenologically is to study the very texture of human existence – a texture woven from the interlacing threads of embodiment, vulnerability, and care.

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