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*Hunger for Being Born Completely.
Plasticity and Desire*

The main claim of this article is that the plasticity of the human formation process does not consist in receiving passively an already-given shape, like hot wax stamped by a seal. Rather, it creates ever new shapes and makes a person overcome her own self-referential horizon. Furthermore, I argue that this formation process is directed by desire, meant as “hunger for being born completely” (Zambrano). The human being comes into the world without being born completely, and it is precisely such a hunger that directs the human positioning into the world.

I. Plasticity and formation (*Bildung*)

German phenomenologist Max Scheler (1874-1928) and Spanish philosopher María Zambrano (1904-1991) provided the fertile insight that the human being comes into the world without having been born completely and therefore lacks a definite form. The very fact of having come into existence without being fully born bestows a unique plasticity on the human formation process. In the following article I pursue further this idea and argue that desire, understood as the hunger for being born completely, is what orients this particular type of plasticity.¹

Nowadays, “synaptic plasticity” is a core concept of neuroscience.² From an interdisciplinary viewpoint the progress concerning “synaptic plasticity” achieved in neuroscience has a crucial impact on the philosophical reflection regarding the human being and does not necessarily adopt a reductionist perspective. The concept of plasticity already made its appearance in Goethe’s thoughts on the organism. In the second volume of his *Schriften zur Morphologie* [1824], Goethe explains that the nature of an organism is not confined to an essence or an immutable shape (*Bild, Gestalt*), but is characterized by a dynamic process of formation (*Bildung*),

1 This work summarizes some views expressed in G. Cusinato’s *Periagoge. Teoria della singolarità e filosofia come esercizio di formazione*, QuiEdit, Verona 2014 (II ed. 2017).

2 J. LeDoux, *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are*, New York, Penguin Books, 2002; E. R. Kandel, *In Search of Memory. The Emergence of a New Science of Mind*, New York 2006.

which he interprets as a transformation (*Umbildung*).³ Before Goethe, the process of *formation* had generally meant the capacity to passively take on any shape, in the same way as clay can be molded into the shape of a vase. Goethe points out that in the living being a formation process takes place which does not consist in passively receiving a form already present in the world of ideas, but rather in creating a new shape: nature forms something, not in the sense of bestowing an already given shape, but in that of creating ever new forms. In this concept of plasticity the emphasis is not so much on one's capacity of adapting in order to receive a shape but rather on an organism's creativeness.

In order to convey this difference, I will refer to the terms "change" and "transformation": 1) by plasticity as *change*, I mean one's capacity to acquire a new shape due to an external pressure or in order to adapt to the external environment. ⁴It may be the plasticity of a malleable piece of clay, the plasticity of an elastic material that recovers its initial shape when the external pressures have ceased, the mimetic plasticity of a chameleon or of an individual opportunistically adapting to a specific environment. 2) By plasticity as *transformation*, I mean the capacity of an organic, social or personal system to increase in its complexity in a specific way: in this case, the change in the equilibrium of one's own system or the distancing from oneself gives way to the *birth* of a new shape, that is to say, a new process of formation in the sense of a development, growth or blossom.

An extraordinary plasticity of the second type characterizes the process of human formation, and in this sort of plasticity the explicit element does not lie in the capacity to passively receive a shape, but rather in that of creating and bringing new shapes to life. Our individuality and singularity, as well as the development of our personality, are comprehensible precisely in relation to this creative plasticity.

II. Emotional social brain and emotional sharing

In this paper, I intend to investigate the creative plasticity of the human formation in relation to what is called "desire". Desire is desire for alterity. A desiring person directly experiences the reality of not being self-sufficient. Are desire for the Other, lack of self-sufficiency and the extreme complexity of human plasticity interconnected? It would be simplistic to think that the creative plasticity of the human formation process (*Bildung*) could be traced back to the synaptic plasticity of a single brain; the experience of desire for the Other would rather suggest that the plasticity of the human formation is connected to something very similar to an "emotional social brain". I argue that such a trans-subjective dimension of human formation is the specific result of social practices of emotional sharing.⁵ What an

3 W. Goethe, *Schriften zur Morphologie II*, in *Gesamtausgabe der Werke und Schriften*, Bd. XIX, Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, Stuttgart 1959.

4 C. Malabou, *Plasticité*, Éditions Léo Scheer, Paris 1999.

5 G. Cusinato, *Care and Birth. Emotional Sharing as the Foundation of Care Relationships*, in S. Bourgault & E. Pulcini (eds.), *Emotions and Care: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Peeters,

individual is or may become largely depends on how she experiences the sharing of emotions underlying the social sphere through practices that do not only involve the people who are closest to her, but also the interaction with the entire cultural and aesthetic dimension, including for instance books and works of art. I suggest including these various concepts under the expression “exemplary testimony” and I am convinced that it is possible to develop a phenomenology of the maieutic testimony that is capable of positively or negatively affecting our plastic process of formation.

iii. Will of intellect and will of feeling

When trying to address the concept of plasticity in philosophical terms, one of the first problems that arise is that of the relationship between plasticity and will: plasticity would thus be the “elastic” effect produced by the will’s action on the human being. Below is my attempt to develop a different hypothesis. What do we mean by will? In Western philosophy, the will has often been traced back to the intellect and opposed to feeling as well as to the entire affective sphere. Kant’s position is in this respect emblematic, detecting in “pure will” a means to “correct” the affective sphere by submitting it to the ideal ought-to-be. Kant’s thesis may be countered with Spinoza’s view, who observed that the will cannot act upon affections, since an “emotion can only be controlled or destroyed by another emotion contrary thereto, and with more power for controlling emotion”.⁶

Kant’s reasoning is founded on the idea that ethics can only be based on pure will, or else it would be at the mercy of yearnings and impulses. This idea lies on the assumption that the affective sphere is a confused and disarranged entity governed by obscure drives. It follows that the existence of an order of feeling, desire and love, independent of both the drives and the intellect, is ruled out a priori. By applying the concept of intentionality to the emotional sphere, Brentano and the German phenomenology would later head in a different direction. But if we admit an intentional affective sphere separate from the drives and the intellect, how would it relate to the will? Do intentional feeling, desire or love have their own specific form of “will”?

If we admit a will of the intentional feeling, for the entire ethics a new perspective opens up, because it would undermine: 1) Spinoza’s objection against the will of the intellect – the will of intentional feeling would actually be able to affect emotions; and 2) Kant’s objection regarding the role of the affective sphere in ethics – the intentionality of feeling would not have the same direction as cravings and drives.

In Western culture the question of a will belonging to feeling has been dismissed almost entirely. Among the few exceptions Augustine deserves special mention. In

Leuven/Paris/Bristol (CT) 2018, 137-165.

6 «Affectus nec coerceri nec tolli potest, nisi per affectum contrarium et fortiolem affectu coercendo» (Spinoza, *Ethica*, IV, propositio 7).

his *Confessions* he describes a “good will” that, like a “weight”, draws us to a place where we find our peace,⁷ and actually converges with desire and love.

IV. The ought-to-be (*Sollen*) and the heart’s restlessness

When I look deep enough within myself, I inevitably perceive an original tension. What is it? Is it due to the distance I feel between what I am and what I ought to be in the Kantian sense? I don’t think so. According to Kant, the ought-to-be is achieved *res objecti* by a pure will that demands, *res subjecti*, the individual’s consent (*Beistimmung*). If I question myself, I discover something very different going on inside of me. The original tension I perceive and that underlies my existence is not due to a rift between my being (*Sein*) and what I ideally ought to be (*Sollen*), but rather to a conflict between my desire and my self-referential being. This tension cannot be traced back to some “heroic” will of the intellect, aiming at filling the gap between finitude and that which ideally ought to be, but rather to a certain restlessness of the heart, a feeling of boredom, disgust and dissatisfaction with the discrepancy between my desire and the limits of my selfish and self-referential “narrow self”. The starting point is not the distance between my actual being and what I ideally ought to be, but the discord between my desire and my self-centeredness.

V. Desire and lack

Kant pictures the human as “crooked timber” that the pure will tries to straighten out according to what it ought to be, but never succeeds completely.⁸ What he proposes is an “orthopedic” scheme. Human beings are faulty and lacking and for this reason they try to conform to an ideal, unattainable and utterly transcendent “ought-to-be”. The relationship between desire and lack has also often been traced back to this scheme: desire is interpreted as the perception of lack, the fulfillment of which is assigned to a level of the Absolute or the Infinite that goes beyond this world. Just like the ought-to-be, this ideal level exerts an orthopedic function, straightening the individual’s imperfect being. From this perspective, desire is inevitably turned into a moralizing and moralistic repressive force. This argument has been criticized Deleuze and Guattari, leaning on the assertion of Clément Rosset:

The world acquires as its double some other sort of world, in accordance with the following line of argument: there is an object that desire feels the lack of; hence the

7 Augustine, *Conf.* XIII, 9,10

8 «Aus so krummem Holz, als woraus der Mensch gemacht ist, kann nichts ganz gezimmert werden» (I. Kant, *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht, Gesammelte Schriften*, hg. von der Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin 1902ff, Akademie Ausgabe VIII, 23).

world does not contain each and every object that exists; there is at least one object missing, the one that desire feels the lack of; hence there exists some other place that can cure desire (not in this world).⁹

The conclusion of their reasoning, however, should be revised: “some other place that can cure desire” is to be found beyond our self-referential “narrow selves”, *but still in this empirical world*. One may concede that desire acquires a positive value when it is considered to be independent from lack. Still, such a positive value appears to be subject to the will to power of the self-referential “narrow self”. By eliminating this lack, desire becomes a conformist justification of the existent. It introduces a conformist change, not a creative transformation. By excluding the relationship between desire and lack, philosophy turns into a philosophy of the *status quo*, turning desire into the mere affirmation of the subject or a reverberation of compulsive enjoyment.

Would a different relationship between desire and lack be conceivable? One possible hypothesis can be that the lack perceived by desire does not refer to any transcendent being lying beyond the world and experience, but rather to something beyond my self-referential egocentrism, as well as beyond the sheer factuality that is determined by a prevailing common sense and common feeling. Such a type of lack do not refer to an ideal or transcendent world, but is embedded in an immanent dimension, enhancing a positive transformation of this world and of this reality. This lack – which should not be interpreted as a vacuum to fulfill but as a source of the hunger for being born – entails a creative conception of plasticity: desire does not aim at complying with the form of a want that is pre-given in the world of ideas, or of the ought-to-be. Instead, it becomes the highest form of creative plasticity insofar as it aims at creating a new form for this lack.

The creative perspective of a plastic transformation allows us to avoid the usual series of solutions that have traditionally been used to explain the relationship between desire and lack. This does not concern what Hegel described as a “negation of the negation”, nor some sort of nostalgia for something from the past. The word “nostalgia” is composed of the Greek terms *nostos* (return) and *algos* (pain): it is the pain that urges us to return to our origins, to Ulysses’ Ithaca, or to reunite with our missing half in order to restore an original and complete unity, according to Aristophanes’ myth of the Androgynous refuted by Socrates in Plato’s *Symposium*.

These interpretations lie on the assumption that desire seeks something that is lacking in order to complete and strengthen what already is, according to a pre-defined project. Instead, desire experiences lack as an impulse to create something that is beyond itself, in the absence of any pre-given fixed solution scheme. Desire has no future and ideal goal. Insofar as it is not the realization of an *idea ante res* nor the execution of an algorithm, desire is not a sort of teleologism, nor does it

9 G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Penguin 2009 (1972), p. 26. Deleuze and Guattari refer to Rosset’s *Logique du pire* (1970).

aim at fulfilling this lack in the same way as an architect would realize the project of a bridge. But rather, lack drives desire to create something without knowing beforehand what form it should have.

So what is desire? It is the craving for an encounter with the Other. In and by the search for this encounter my existence takes shape plastically. To be faithful to one's desire does not entail the achievement of some pre-given goal, but rather the rebirth in one's encounter with the Other and the inauguration of a new and still unknown beginning. When I desire, I am not searching for my missing half in order to restore a self-sufficient and independent unity, but instead I am attempting to move out of my self-referential "narrow self" and to attain the perspective of my "cosmic self".

VI. Desire as the quest for a new constellation

The Latin verb "desiderare" (*desire*) is composed of the particle "de" – denoting a lack, or a destructive action¹⁰ – and the term *sidus, sideris* (pl. *sidera*), meaning "star". Thus, desire could correspond to the feeling one has when sensing a "lack of the stars" – that is not the lack of *one* star, but rather, of a *cluster* of stars. Now, it is widely acknowledged that, since antiquity, stars were assembled in constellations in order to decipher the starry sky. And constellations were used for the purpose of orientation, for instance in marine navigation. Furthermore, desire expresses two different meanings according to how the particle "de" is interpreted: 1) as the feeling of a "lack of constellations", that is to say, of orientation parameters – accepting this, desire would denote a nostalgia for points of reference that are missing; 2) the attempt to destroy ("de-") the constellation of stars ("sidera") that limit my existence, determining my destiny. In this second case, I do not feel any nostalgia for the constellation that oriented my existence in the past and that I no longer see, because it might be hidden behind some clouds. Instead, I feel deeply dissatisfied with the constellation that orients me and this incites me to move away from it in search of a new constellation that I cannot see yet. Desire is associated with a feeling of dissatisfaction towards my present destiny (the constellation that guided my hitherto existence), which is deconstructed in order to begin my quest for a new constellation, a new beginning to my existence. By abandoning the constellation that oriented it, I actually allow my existence to literally run off the rails of fatalism.

VII. The power of testimony

What is it that orients desire in its quest for a new constellation? I suggest that desire is not directed by the will of the intellect, but rather by emotional-sharing

10 In the verb "to de-construct" the particle "de-" denotes the action of undoing or negating a certain construct or structure.

practices oriented by the power of negative or positive maieutic testimonies. An individual offers a positive example when her existence develops without causing envy, and a negative one whenever her existence withers and implodes. From this perspective, the power of testimony is the cornerstone of an alternative ethics to that of Kant which is based on the categorical imperative. The power of testimony guides us maieutically to both an emotional and a reflective transformation. From now on, I will only focus on the former aspect.

The logic of maieutic testimony is phenomenologically different from that of the social model. The more universal a model is, the more it makes everyone equal, while the more universal a maieutic testimony is, the more it singularizes every individual it affects, provoking in each one of them a unique and original outcome.

Associated with the signs of success and social standing, a social model exerts a form of attraction that is not immune from the dynamics of resentment and envy. Instead, the positive testimony is in some way mysterious: it occurs whenever I realize that before another person's flourishing existence I do not feel envy, but indeed admiration or even gratitude.

What probably takes place in these cases is something similar to what occurs when I water the rose bush on my balcony: I do not water my flowers in expectation of obtaining something material in return, although I must admit that it is not a completely disinterested gesture either. Why do I care so much that the roses on my windowsill flourish instead of them wilting? The fact that those roses flourish thanks to my ministrations makes me happy; or rather, feeling that my care helps the roses blossom makes me feel more alive: it gives me a tiny confirmation of the fact that I am living. This feeling might be much greater if I was taking care of another person.

Viii. Hunger for being born completely

As I have already pointed out, the concept of plasticity has two main meanings: the capacity of receiving a pre-given shape and the capacity of initiating a new and still non-existing form. In the first case we have a model, that operates like a mold shaping my formation, and in the second case a maieutic testimony, which should not be understood as a pre-given form to be imitated, but rather as the maieutic space that enables me to create a new shape. Encountering a positive testimony, I access a space where I am able to continue my coming into existence. I could not find such a space in the limited horizon of my "narrow self". This explains why the maieutic testimony helps one to exceed the logic of envy, considered to be one of the main causes of human unhappiness.¹¹ In the case of positive testimony, the other person's flourishing is not perceived as "robbing" my own existence, but on the contrary it becomes the indispensable condition of my own flourishing.

11 On the relationship between envy and unhappiness, see B. Russel, *The Conquest of Happiness*, Liveright Pub Corp 2013 (1930), Chapter VI.

But why is the human being characterized by such an intense form of creative plasticity? After leaving the maternal womb, the human being is confronted with the problem of being born again in the encounter with the Other through emotional-sharing practices. Coming into the world without having finished being born, the human being feels a true “hunger for being born completely”.¹² The hunger for being born is the first elementary form from which the order of my feeling constantly configures and reconfigures. As a singular being, I am the order of my feeling (my *ordo amoris*): by establishing an order of relevance and priority, it allows me to position myself within the world, to build relationships with others, to act, to experience, to perceive and to know – in short, to exist. By experiencing the pangs of this craving for being born, I realize that my feeling as well as the way in which I experience things constitutes the very processes through which the further birth of my existence takes place. The hunger for being born entirely is the desire that orients the maieutic testimony, just like the longing for social recognition orients the social model.

IX. Ratcliffe: “Feelings of being”

Feelings of Being by Matthew Ratcliffe is one of the most significant texts on emotions written in the last years.¹³ According to Ratcliffe, the recent philosophical debate has focused too much on the concept of “emotion” thus overlooking the field of “existential feelings”, that Ratcliffe primarily conceives of in terms of “mood” and characterizes as “finding ourselves in the world”. The particularity of Ratcliffe’s thesis lies in the fact that he tries to demonstrate that in the structure of these “existential feelings”, the bodily dimension coexists with an intentional structure directed towards the world. Thus, Ratcliffe suggests that we resort to “existential feelings” in order to refuse Damasio’s distinction between “background feelings” – referring to the bodily condition (i.e. a bodily comfort or discomfort) and understood as “body states rather than emotional states” – and *emotions* oriented towards an object in the world. “Existential feelings” are rather bodily feelings that constitute the “background relations to the world”, that is to say, the predominant background atmosphere that directs one’s relationship to the world and from which the very feeling of being in the world emerges.

I hold that the intention underlying this theory – an attempt to draw our attention to the pre-reflexive emotional breakthrough in which our very positioning in the world and our sense of reality are rooted – is correct. Yet, Ratcliffe fails to distinguish between environment (*Umwelt*) and world (*Welt*). It is essential that the last remnants of the dualism between living body (*Leib*) and mind are

12 I quote Spanish philosopher María Zambrano’s enlightening expression: “*hambre de nacer del todo*” (see M. Zambrano, *Hacia un saber sobre el alma*, Alianza, Madrid 2000).

13 M. Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being. Phenomenology, Psychiatry and the Sense of Reality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008.

removed: we are our living body, interactively related with the expressive field of life. Furthermore, our way of positioning ourselves in the world is grounded on the feeling of our living body. Nonetheless, the living body's feeling is not an indistinct whole, but rather it articulates itself on different intentional levels. Modesty is also a feeling of the living body: it would in fact be impossible to conceive of it without referring immediately and directly to the living body, and it appears physically through the typical blush on one's cheek. Nevertheless, modesty bears a form of intentionality that we must carefully distinguish from the pre-intentionality of an itching hand or a toothache. Strictly speaking, organic sensations are directed towards an interaction with the environment: in no way does the sensation of itching due to a mosquito's bite or a toothache prepare one's positioning in a condition of openness to the world (*Weltoffenheit* meaning both the act of opening up *to* the world and an opening up *of* the world to me), but only my positioning in an environment or ecological niche (*Umwelt*). Complex feelings such as modesty or respect for the Other allow us to access reality in a way that is different from the access to reality made possible by the organic sensation of itching: these are two independent, although complementary, ways of accessing reality.

In a later work, Ratcliffe suggests that we understand these affective tonalities or "moods" as the elements "that constitute the meaning of life".¹⁴ Ratcliffe's concept of "mood" is a reformulation of Heidegger's theory of affective tonalities ("*Stimmungen*"). How should these predominant background undertones be understood when, according to Ratcliffe, they pre-intentionally orient one's relationship to the world and from which one's feeling of being in the world emerges? Should we imagine them as ontological invariables, exceeding the historical dimension, or should they more simply be identified as common sense, or what Blankenburg called the "natural evidence"?¹⁵ And if they are traced back to common sense, why should we consider them to be primary rather than social constructs? Ultimately, is it really possible to establish "the meaning of life" on the grounds of simple moods?

As a matter of fact, Ratcliffe interprets Heidegger's affective tonalities in the sense offered by Scheler, namely as that which boosts intentionality towards openness to/of the world (*Weltoffenheit*). In Scheler, however, *Weltoffenheit* refers to an order of intentional feeling (*ordo amoris*) that is different from the impulsive order (*Triebstruktur*) of *bodily feelings*, which is instead intentionally oriented to interacting with the environment (*Umwelt*).

Human beings do not merely *feel* that they are in the world, but rather they are led to position themselves in the world by their own constitutional incompleteness, that is to say, by the fact that they have not yet finished being born, or as Zambrano would say, by their actual "hunger for being born completely".

14 M. Ratcliffe, *The Phenomenology of Mood and the Meaning of Life*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*, edited by Peter Goldie, Oxford 2009, 353.

15 W. Blankenburg, *Der Verlust der natürlichen Selbstverständlichkeit. Ein Beitrag zur Psychopathologie symptomarmer Schizophrenien*, Parodos, Berlin 2012 [1967].

X. Moods and intentional feelings

Besides Ratcliffe's theory, one may ask whether it is possible to find one's positioning in the world and the meaning of life in what is designated as a general pre-intentional state of mind or mood, and whether such a mood could play a role in orienting this positioning. The "hunger for being born completely", as well as the bodily feelings of the body schema, marks a clear distinction between the level of "moods" and the one of intentional feeling. I suggest that only an intentional feeling, and not a generic mood, is capable of orienting a person in her positioning in the world. Giving some practical examples: a generic mood like depression or apathy is different from the sadness I might feel after arguing with a friend. Similarly, a generic mood of euphoria is different from the feeling of joy caused by the receipt of good news. Moods and affective tonalities are "intentionally" oriented in a very general way to the world. The very fact that a mood is experienced as an unwarranted state is the reason why I ask myself what is happening within me, and I am often annoyed by my incapacity to understand how such a confused mood relates to the way I exist and feel. Properly speaking, at this level there is no such thing as an intentionality towards one's positioning in the world yet. Actually, a mood is metabolized by emotions, sometimes supported by reflection, thus receiving a meaning that directs it with regard to the way I exist, as well as an intentionality as regards my process of formation and my positioning. *Emotions are human beings' most important anthropogenetic devices in that they metabolize moods into existential positioning.*

Our positioning in the world is not rooted in moods: even a mood such as the sheer feeling of being in the world is only the posthumous result of a positioning that has already taken place and therefore appears to be obvious. Moods are incapable of producing one's positioning in the world and any "residual" intentionality we may find in them is only the effect of an intentionality that lies in the common sense and the common feeling in which they happen to be immersed. Any argument that resorts to the mood of being in the world in order to demonstrate one's positioning in the world is either tautological or relapses to a *petitio principii*. This ambiguity is due to the fact that we mistake our feeling of being in the world, which is still immersed in natural evidence of common sense and common feeling, for the origin of our positioning in the world. But common sense evidence is, in its turn, a cultural product: in order to attain such an evidence, one's positioning must have already taken place. When I feel that I am in the world, I am not in a situation that precedes my positioning in the world, but rather, without realizing it, I am already immersed in the positioning of natural evidence. I am not aware of this positioning because it is taken for granted in the social environment I live in.

As Blankenburg, for instance, points out, the schizophrenic lives at the mercy of moods or attitudes that are incapable of referring to any "invisible" (i.e. obvious, or taken for granted) positioning of natural evidence.¹⁶ Insofar as this individual only

refers to such moods, he is incapable of accessing the world and interacting with the expressive level of the Other. In order to feel that we are in the world, we first need to position ourselves through our encounter with the Other.

XI. Emotions and metabolizing moods into feelings

Words like “moods”, “emotions” and “feelings” are often confused. By “emotions” I mean what orients an organism’s or a person’s positioning within reality. Here I will restrict my analysis to those emotions that orient a person’s positioning. At this level, I understand an “emotion” to be what allows a person to position themselves in the world by metabolizing their moods into feelings.

Again, I will try to make myself clear by resorting to a practical example. When I am in a bad mood, I often experience this situation as one in which I am incapable of relating this perturbed state to my way of existing and feeling. I perceive this mood as something unwarranted and precisely for this reason I examine what is going on inside of me. How many times have we happened to be in a bad mood without knowing the reason, and even having the impression that there is no reason for it? In a way, in these cases, I am suspended in an indefinite situation as if I were not able to understand how to position myself in the world and to assume a clearly-justified position towards others.

These chaotic moods are metabolized by a person’s emotions into that person’s very positioning in the world. Thus, emotions give a direction to these moods with respect to one’s individual way of existing, as well as an intentionality with regard to one’s formation process. Initially, I may feel in a bad mood and even upset because I see no reason for it. Such disposition urges me to understand my situation better and after a few hours I may realize that I am in a bad mood because a friend of mine had not replied to my email the day before. Emotion turns this awareness, that is attained at the reflective level, in a transformation of my affective sphere. At that point, a generic mood turns into a positioning, for instance a feeling of anger or sadness. If this process does not take place, the person remains at the mercy of her own moods and dispositions, incapable of accessing the world and interacting with others on the expressive level, and ultimately unable to be in touch with her own self.

The fact that emotions metabolize moods into feelings by interacting with a particular person’s formation process is the crucial point. In my opinion, when I metabolize a generic bad mood into a particular form of sadness, I am actually giving shape to my singularity: the distinct feature of my personality may be detected in the way in which I express my sadness.

Feelings are moods that are shaped by relating them to an individual’s *order of feeling* (in the sense of an *ordo amoris*)¹⁷. What happens when I get emotional? If I

17 Cfr. M. Scheler, *Ordo amoris*, in *Selected Philosophical Essays*, trans. David R. Lachterman, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1973, 103-104.

think about it, my answer would be that, when I am moved by something, I come into contact with something unexpected and I feel as though I do not have the adequate ready-made answers to this new challenge. In a certain sense, at first my emotions confuse me and leave me without answers. Afterwards, though, they urge me to re-orient myself. From this perspective, emotions may be conceived of as the “laboratory” in which one invents new affective responses. The metabolizing process taking place in this emotional “laboratory” is extremely complex and concerns the deepest core of our freedom and personality. At this stage, not only do I orient and bestow a form of intentionality upon my moods, but I also re-orient my feelings and my previous order of feeling in order to fit in better the new situation I am experiencing. When this process occurs repeatedly bringing about similar affective responses, a disposition, that is to say, a feeling is formed.

XII. The order of feeling

Before drawing to a conclusion, I would like to avoid a serious misunderstanding: through the concept of *order of feeling* my aim is not to re-propose some sort of paternalistic or moralistic viewpoint. In Western culture, drives, feelings, emotions and desire have often been considered to be an unreliable and chaotic material which needs to be “straightened out” by referring either to the world of ideas (platonian idealism) or to the ought-to-be (Kant). In 1972, Deleuze and Guattari developed a different hypothesis. In their book *Anti-Oedipus*, they suggested that drives should be unrestrained. In both cases, the possibility of an “order of feeling” is not taken into account. The idea of an “order” of feeling is problematic if such “order” is imposed *to* feeling from above, but not when this order arises *from* feeling itself. This idea may well appear bizarre, since we are used to think of the concept of “order” as something that is imposed from by thought or by will. Instead, the concept of *order of feeling* allows us to eliminate the opposition between feeling and thinking that characterizes most of Western thought. Besides, what does “thinking” mean? Is not thinking also, in some respect, the act of feeling a feeling?

A further objection could be that, if this order stems from feeling, then it would surely be a “subjective”, “arbitrary”, “irrational” and “vitalistic” order. This objection lies on the arguable assumption that life and the irrational are equivalent. One could instead concede that such an order of feeling is neither “irrational” nor “subjective”, being based on the capacity of each living organism to relate and attune with life’s expressive level through “*emotional sharing*” practices, which are neither arbitrary nor subjective.

Xlii. Conclusion: Desire and birth

The human being comes into the world without having been born completely. This means that our formation process is not pre-determined and is extremely plastic. Its plasticity should not be interpreted as a *change*, conveying a form and

direction to it, but rather as a *transformation* through which a person's feature and singularity is gradually brought forth in a dynamic order of feeling. When I metabolize a generic bad mood in a particular form of sadness, I am actually expressing and giving shape to my singularity, which occurs in the interaction of affective, reflective and hermeneutic levels. This is not an isolated and self-sufficient process, but the further continuation of my own birth in the encounter with the Other. Having come into the world without having yet finished being born, the human being literally feels a "hunger for being born completely". And this hunger is desire, which does not mean the perception of a lack in this empirical world, that refers to an ideal and transcendent world, but the awareness that the self-referential perspective of one's "narrow self" is insufficient and limited. The constitutive incompleteness of human being, that is to say, desire understood as "hunger for being born completely" in the encounter with the Other, is what drives one's positioning in the world.

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