Affectivity in Existentialist Philosophy

Since fully covering such a topic in the short space imparted to this paper is an impossible task, I have chosen to focus on three philosophers: Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre. Of the three, only the latter was undoubtedly an existentialist — Heidegger explicitly rejected the categorisation (in the Letter on Humanism), and there is disagreement among commentators about Nietzsche’s status. However, they have two major common points which justify my focusing on them: firstly, they uphold the primacy of existence over essence. Against the rationalist trend prevalent until the end of the XVIIIth Century, which saw human nature as determined a priori (as rational), all three authors consider human beings as living, self-interpreting entities, whose understanding of themselves is dependent on specific cultural and historical conditions. Given that this self-understanding is taken as constitutive of what it means to be human, it becomes impossible to define the essence of man independently of (let alone prior to) his existence. Secondly (and consequently), they reject the idea that philosophy can start from the study of man as a detached, disembodied consciousness primarily bent on knowing the world — or even that such a consciousness exists, except as a fiction propagated by rationalism. Man is viewed as an embodied being, whose reason and cognitive powers are only the visible part of a much deeper and wider engagement with the world.

In turn, this rejection of the primacy of rationality and of consciousness explains the central part played by affectivity in our three authors’ works. In all its forms, affectivity is strongly tied to the body (although existentialist thinkers hold that it is neither identical to nor determined by physical reactions): once the importance of embodiment has been recognised, an analysis of affectivity becomes necessary to understand the ways in which human beings relate both to themselves and to the world. Whereas the rationalist tradition mostly rejected affectivity, either on moral grounds (as emotions interfere with self-mastery) or for epistemological reasons (because they cloud the clarity of mind supposedly required by knowledge), Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre insist on rehabilitating it, mostly for two reasons: firstly, as it is constitutive of what it means to be human, affectivity just cannot be set aside — so the rationalist ideal to do away with emotions is unmasked as an illusion, the roots of which need to be investigated. Secondly, affectivity plays a crucial and potentially positive role in the constitution of the self and in our relation to the world.

In this paper, I shall argue that Nietzsche considers affectivity primarily as a “psychologist” and as a moralist: this led him a) to criticise his epoch as characterised by negative affects (nihilism

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1 Some commentators, like A. Nehamas or T. Strong, favour a so-called “existentialist” interpretation of key themes such as the Eternal Return; others, like B. Leiter, read Nietzsche as a naturalist.

2 The case is less clear for Sartre because of Husserl’s influence on his philosophy. On the other hand, Sartre repeatedly criticised Husserl for failing to see that consciousness is always engaged in the world.

3 By “affectivity”, I mean a generic term covering affects, emotions, feelings, passions and moods. For lack of time, I cannot expand here on the conceptual differences between these notions.

4 Perhaps the clearest rejection of this view can be found in Sartre’s Sketch for a Theory of Emotions.

5 Roughly speaking, the trend started with Plato’s famous claim (in the Phaedo) that the body is a tomb, sôma sêma. However there are notable exceptions, such as Descartes (who recognised the positive part played by some passions, such as generosity or admiration) and more extensively Spinoza.
as the “feeling of valuelessness”) and more generally by the inability to feel properly, b) to retrace genealogically the genesis of negative feelings (such as resentment or guilt) and c) to sketch an analysis of the positive ways in which decadence could be overcome, and thus to establish a typology of positive affects. By contrast, both Heidegger and Sartre saw affectivity as ontologists: they were less interested in the moral distinction between positive and negative affects than in uncovering the deeper part played by affectivity in the disclosure of the world. This caused them a) to refine the notion of affectivity by bringing to the fore the importance of moods (as opposed to feelings), and b) to focus on moods that Nietzsche would have condemned as reactive (such as anxiety, boredom or nausea for example), the main reason for bracketing moral judgments being the high potential for ontological disclosiveness of such moods.

Nietzsche’s diagnosis about the West is rather pessimistic: the modern type is decadent: “the diminution and levelling of European man constitutes our greatest danger (...). We see nothing today that wants to grow greater” (GMI, §12, 44, Nietzsche’s italics). Central to this decline is the fact that affectivity has become sick. For Nietzsche, healthy types (exemplified by the Pre-Socratics) had the instinctive ability to harmonise themselves, i.e. to both maintain and integrate inner conflicts by means of establishing a hierarchy among drives. While this harmony existed, we were attuned with ourselves, in the dual sense a) that we could feel the smallest variations in our emotions (we were well-tuned, so to speak) and b) we instinctively knew which kind of emotions to avoid or favour, and how much of the latter we can tolerate. But due to a “threatening anarchy among the instincts and [to] the fact that the foundation of the affects, which is called “life”, has been shaken” (BGE, §258, 202), we have lost this inner harmony. As a result, we have also lost our ability to feel properly, i.e. in a balanced way which ultimately enhances our power. We have been deprived of our “power of resistance against stimuli and have come to be at the mercy of accidents (...) — disintegration of the will” (WP, §44): we have become passive, not so much in the sense that we can’t control what happens to us (not even the healthy type could), but in that we cannot integrate our emotional reactions in such a way that they make us stronger.

Having become unable to deal with inner conflicts, we also have come to experience life as unbearably painful. We do not understand anymore that pain is necessary for life to expand, nor that happiness is not the avoidance of pain, but the ability to fully experience and overcome pain. Historically speaking, this triggered in us three apparently very different but deeply related strategies: waging a war against the senses (rationalism and Christian asceticism), trying to numb our sensibility (Buddhism), or drowning in an excess of passion (romanticism). For Nietzsche, all three attitudes are deeply decadent in that they stem from the loss of our instinctive ability to regulate ourselves, and from the newly appeared desire to avoid pain at all cost. Thus, “those who suffer from the impoverishment of life (...) seek rest, stillness, calm seas, redemption from themselves through art and knowledge, or intoxication, convulsions, anaesthesia and madness” (GS V, §370, 328). As I have just suggested, the first twin forms taken by this search for “calm seas”

6 WP, 13.
7 Thus the healthy type « has a taste only for what is good for him : his pleasure, his delight cease when the measure of what is good for him is transgressed » (EH, §2, p. 224).
8 In Nietzsche’s physiological terms, we have lost the capacity to “digest” events: our emotional reactions are overly quick and leave us at the mercy of whatever feeling rises in us (contrary to the healthy type, who “reacts slowly to all kinds of stimuli, with that slowness which long caution and deliberate pride have bred in him: he examines the stimulus that approaches him, he is far from meeting it halfway” (EH §2, 224).
9 Such a redemption has become necessary because the self is unbalanced. The (failed) attempt to redeem oneself through art is exemplified by Wagner, while Schopenhauer is the (equally flawed) model of redemption through knowledge.
are rationalism and asceticism. Both are motivated by the decadent type’s inability to deal with inner conflicts and thus ultimately by fear — “fear of the senses, of the desires, of the passions, when it goes so far as to counsel us against them, is already a symptom of weakness: extreme measures always indicate abnormal conditions” (WP §778). The first and perhaps most notable instance of such a reaction was Socrates, whom Nietzsche considers the father of rationalism:10 being prey to a newly appeared internal tyranny of unbalanced instincts, Socrates sought to save himself by means of a “counter-tyrant”, i.e. reason (TI, “The Problem of Socrates”, §9). Unable to harmonise his emotions, he tried to eradicate them by becoming indifferent to his own desires and needs, and thus turned to the kind of ascetic practices attributed to him by Xenophon, such as fasting, sleeping in the snow, spending the night in the company of desirable boys without touching them, etc. At the theoretical level, he introduced the metaphysical division between the intelligible and the sensible worlds so as to depreciate the latter, and with it, the body and the senses (cf. Zarathustra, the “contempts of the body”). In doing so, he produced a deeply distorted and deleterious image of human beings as divided entities, torn between reason and affectivity (the chariot of the Phaedrus), and wrongly attributed to consciousness (the “small reason”) the power of dominating the body (the “large reason”). As explained by the Genealogy of Morals, this conception of the human was taken up and made even more noxious by Christian asceticism (through the introduction of a feeling unknown to the Greeks, namely guilt)11. While the Pre-Socratic, healthy type was “whole”, “hewn out of stone” (Early Greek Philosophy, later preface (1879), p. 79), the rationalist — and later the Christian — is hopelessly at war with his own affectivity.

But there is worse: whereas Socrates or the ascetic priest hoped to win this war, for Nietzsche the characteristic of our decadent age is that we have given up and only look for a peace born of exhaustion: “in an age of disintegration (…), human beings have in their bodies opposite, (…) drives that fight each other. (…) Their most profound desire is that the war that they are should come to a rest. Happiness appears to them in agreement with tranquilising and thought” (BGE, §200, 111-2. Nietzsche’s italics). This is the second expression of the search for calm seas:


11 For lack of time, I can’t expand here on the genealogy of moral feelings. Apart from the Genealogy of Morals, the most relevant passages are in Beyond Good and Evil (in particular §201 and §260). The main difference with GM is that in BGE, Nietzsche views the development of moral feelings as a reaction of the herd itself against the strong once a minimum of social stability has been achieved. The same aggressive drives that were praised for their usefulness against external dangers are “now experienced as dangerous” and “branded and slandered most” (BGE, §201, p. 113). By contrast, GM puts a very strong emphasis on the part played by a specific type, the ascetic priest, in the genesis of moral feelings. The priest is responsible for such crucial (and detrimental) “inventions” as the soul and bad conscience (GMII, §16) or guilt (GMIII, §20), as well as for the unleashing of resentment — which, interestingly, is not a new feeling: it was occasionally felt by the strong, but in such a way that it wasn’t internalised and thus did not “poison” (“Resentment itself, should it appear in the noble man, consummates and exhausts itself in an immediate reaction, and therefore does not poison; on the other hand, it fails to appear at all on countless occasions on which it inevitably appears in the weak and the impotent”, GMI, §10, p. 38). The priest is also the originator of a panoply of negative feelings, such as “love of the neighbour” (in fact grounded in fear of the neighbour, BGE §201), pity (which weakens the strong by spreading suffering), altruism and self-sacrifice (fundamentally forms of self-gratification, the “petty pleasures” required to encourage the Christian to go on living his sick existence, GMIII §18). To these, Nietzsche opposes the “pathos of distance” of the noble type (BGE §257, p. 201) or “love of the enemies” (GMI, §10, p. 38).
not triumph over the senses, but the longing for nothingness of the Buddhist, for whom happiness “appears essentially as narcotic, drug, rest, peace, (...) slackening of tension and relaxing of limbs, in short, passively” (GMI, §10, 38). This is an even worse form of decadence because it is more passive: whereas the rationalist prepared for battle against the senses, and thus intensified his will to power (although in a way that is ultimately self-detrimental), the Buddhist refuses to struggle altogether and hopes for extinction. Yet Nietzsche insists that it is only through conflict that life can grow — the most paradigmatic example of this is “great health”, which is not the absence of illness but the ability to be stimulated by and to overcome sickness: Buddhism is thus the worst way of treating affectivity, an “attempt to win for man an approximation to what in certain animals is hibernation (...)”, the minimum metabolism at which life still subsists without really entering consciousness” (GMIII, §17, p. 131). At the heart of the Buddhist’ rejection of life there is, once more, fear — fear of suffering: “one longs for a condition in which one no longer suffers: life is actually experienced as the ground of ills; one esteems unconscious states, without feeling (sleep, fainting) as incomparably more valuable than conscious ones” (WP, §44).

Thus for Nietzsche both rationalism and Buddhism are two extremes that stem from the same origin, namely the loss of the Pre-Socratic ability to harmonise the self. At the other end of the scale (but rooted in the same unbalance), there is the search for excitants exemplified by the Romantics, and by Wagner in particular. Such a quest is motivated by the same desire as that for calm seas: it seeks to escape a life become overly painful, this time by means of a constant drowning in an excess of passion meant to hide the background pain of existing: “passion: a matter of nerves and wearied souls: like the delight in high mountains, deserts, storms, orgies, and horrors” (WP §826). Because we have become degenerate types that can’t experience nuances or subtle feelings anymore (due the loss of self-harmony made worse by centuries of rationalism and Christianity), we need ever stronger stimuli: yet this does not indicate strength, but weakness — “in romanticism: this constant espressivo is no sign of strength but of a feeling of deficiency” (WP §826). Thus “Wagner’s art is sick. The problems he presents on stage — all of them problems of hysteric — the convulsive nature of his affects, his overexcited sensibility, his taste that ever required stronger spices (...) — all of this taken together represents a profile of sickness that permits no further doubt. (...) Nothing is more modern that this total sickness, this lateness and overexcitement of the nervous mechanism” (CW, §5, p. 166). Thus contrary to appearances, the Romantics’ rejection of classicism, their emphasis on passion and self-expressivity, are just as unhealthy as the rationalist’s attempt to squash emotions. In fact, they are the logical consequence of rationalism and asceticism: now that we can’t feel anymore, unless we are to embrace the ascetic renunciation to life we must be made to feel — “Wagner represents a great corruption of music (...) His inventiveness is not inconsiderable in the art of goading again those who are weariest, calling back into life those who are half dead” (CW §5, p. 166).

However, all hope is not lost: “[man] gives rise to an interest, a tension (...), as if with him something were announcing and preparing itself, as it man were not a goal but only a way, an episode, a bridge, a great promise” (GMII, §16, 85). Although a return to Pre-Socratic health is not possible (once reflectivity has settled in, it can’t be rid of voluntarily — one cannot choose not to be conscious), Nietzsche gives some scattered indications of what restored health could look like

12 “For a typically healthy person (...), being sick can even become an energetic stimulus for life, for living more. This, in fact, is how that long period of sickness appears to me now: as it were, I discovered life anew, including myself; I tasted all good and even little things, as others cannot easily taste them — I turned my will to health, to life, into a philosophy”. EH, §2, p. 224.

13 Compare with GM III, §17, p. 134: “The hypnotic sense of nothingness, the repose of deepest sleep, in short absence of suffering — sufferers and those profoundly depressed will count this as the supreme good, as the value of values”.

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for the “noble” type. The first thing to note is that it does not entail a rejection of affectivity: on the contrary, “noble mindedness” is a passion. “The passion that attacks those who are noble is peculiar (...). It involves the use of a rare and singular standard and almost a madness (...), the discovery of values for which no scales have been invented yet” (GMI, §55, 117). However the use of the singular here (“a passion”) is significant: the noble type is governed by a “dominating passion, which even brings with it the supreme form of health: here the coordination of the inner systems and their operation in the service of one end is best achieved” (WP, §778). Like the Pre-Socratics, the noble type has inner harmony; however, because of the historical inheritance he is exposed to through his belonging to a later culture, he has much more to harmonise than the Pre-Socratics. And because he has a much higher degree of self-awareness, such a harmonisation cannot be fully instinctive: it needs “a real mastery and subtlety in waging war against oneself, in other words, self control, self-outwitting” (BGE §200, 111). Thus Goethe, one of Nietzsche’s models for the healthy individual, “carried the strongest instincts [...of the XVIIIth Century] in him: sentimentality, idolatry of nature, the anti-historical, idealistic, unrealistic and revolutionary instincts” (TI, §49, 83). Yet faced with this inner diversity, greater than any of the Pre-Socratics was confronted to, Goethe managed to unite himself through his passion for completeness: “what he wanted was totality: he fought against the separation of reason, sensation, emotion, and will (...); he disciplined himself into wholeness, he created himself”14 (ibidem). Thus the healthy type does not deny his body or his senses; neither does he shrink in front of suffering. On the contrary, the ultimate proof that he is healthy lies in his ability to endure pain, and even to use it so as to further his strength. The more conflicts one can face and maintain in oneself without being destroyed by them, the richer and stronger the individual: “how much one is able to endure: distress, want, bad weather, sickness, toil, solitude (...). One stands forth as one was born, unbreakable, tensed, ready for new, even harder, remoter things, like a bow that distress only serves to draw tauter” (GMI §12, 44).

Once health has been restored, one can experience affects and emotions in a fundamentally different way, the model for which is provided by artistic creation. Art is seen by Nietzsche as a fundamentally transformative process, whereby the artist both maximises tensions and harmony within himself, and projects this newly acquired “perfection” onto his work: art is a transmutation of the self and of the world dependent on having the right ability to feel. Contrary to the rationalist and the Buddhist, the artist does not seek to deny or extinguish his emotions and feelings: quite the opposite, intoxication, by means of which the “system of emotions is excited and intensified” (TI, §10, 56), is viewed by later Nietzsche as a precondition for all artistic states (and not just Dionysian states, as in the early work). Yet whereas romantic excesses were made necessary by a dulling of sensibility, intoxication generates the “extreme sharpness of certain senses, so they understand quite a different sign language — and create one” (WP, §881). The artist’s perceptions acquire the ability both to encompass the sublimely vast and to focus on the infinitesimally small: “tremendous distances are surveyed and, as it were, for the first time apprehended. (...) The refinement of the organs for the apprehension of much that is extremely small and fleeting; divination, the power of understanding with only the least assistance, at the slightest suggestion (...). All these climactic moments of life mutually stimulate one another” (WP, §800). Yet whereas the romantic would lose himself in this sea of new emotions, the Dionysian artist maintains his inner balance and sense of self throughout the creative process: “becoming more beautiful as the expression of a victorious will, of increased coordination, of a harmonising of all the strong desires, of an infallibly perpendicular stress” (WP, §800). This higher openness to

14 See also: “to be classical, one must possess all the strong, seemingly contradictory gifts and desires — but in such a way that they go together beneath one yoke (...), to reflect a total state (of a people or of a culture) in one’s deepest and innermost soul” (WP §848).
feelings is the sign of an increase in inner strength which feeds back into the perceptions
themselves: “in this state, your own fullness leads you to enrich everything: whatever you see (...) you see as swollen, packed, vigorous, over-loaded with strength” (TI, §9, 56). Correlatively, the
discharge of force in the creative process is seen as an attempt to harmonise the outside with the
inside, i.e. to make the work the reflection of the artist’s newly enhanced self: “in this state you
transform things until they are the mirror of your own power — until they reflect your
perfection. This necessity to transform things into perfection is — art” (TI, §9, 56).

As we have just seen, for Nietzsche the study of affectivity cannot be dissociated from a
genealogical appraisal of decadence in the West, and is ultimately governed by his ethical concern
for the part it plays in the constitution of the self. By contrast, early Heidegger considers
affectivity as an ontologist, and thus mostly in non ethical and a-historical way: rather than
diagnosing the sickness of affectivity in the present age, he is interested in the relation between
Dasein (i.e. an entity whose being involves an understanding of what it means to be) and its
world. This leads him to inquire into the conditions of possibility for the disclosure of such a
world. Among these, which he calls “existentials”, affectedness (Befindlichkeit), and more
specifically mood (Stimmung) play a major role (along with understanding (Verstand) and
discourse (Rede). In §29 of Being and Time, Heidegger insists on three characteristics common to
all moods: a) they are indicative of Dasein’s thrownness, b) they “disclose being-in-the-world as a
whole”, and c) they make things matter to us. I shall examine them briefly in turn. Heidegger’s
first claim is that moods disclose thrownness as the “facticity of being delivered over” (BT G136) to
a world which we do not choose, nor constitute. “In state-of-mind Dasein is always brought before
itself, and has always found itself (...) in the sense of finding itself in the mood that it has” (BT
G136). By insisting on the passivity and groundlessness inherent to our being thrown (moods
indicate “a disclosive submission to the world”, BT G137-38), Heidegger establishes against
Husserl the impossibility of taking the subject as an autonomous and isolated starting point for
phenomenological analysis: thus, “a mood assails us. It comes neither from the “outside” nor from
“inside”, but arises out of being-in-the-world, as a way of such being” (BT G136). Dasein finds
itself already in its mood and beyond itself, already attuned in ways that are beyond its control.
Against the rationalist ideal of detachment and objectivity, Heidegger points out that “when we
master a mood, we do so by way of a counter mood; we are never free of moods” (BT, G136). The
same desire to refute any solipsistic or internalist interpretation of moods governs Heidegger’s
insistence on their publicness: “publicness, as the kind of being which belongs to the “they”, not
only has in general its own way of having a mood, but needs moods and “makes” them for itself”
(BT G139).

The second claim is that in revealing our thrownness, moods reveal being-in-the-world
itself: thus, “in having a mood, Dasein is always disclosed mood-wise as that entity to which it has
been delivered over in its being, (...) which, in existing, it has to be” (BT G134). Although our
moods are changeable, the fact that we have moods is not: a mood-less Dasein would not be
Dasein. Yet most of the time we do not know which mood which mood we are in: “[in mood] Dasein is

15 After the “turn”, Heidegger will change his approach and insist on the historical character of certain
moods (in particular wonder). See “What is Philosophy”.
16 This collective character of moods is particularly apparent in the case of strong moods — I remember
being in Paris when the French team won the world cup. Even though I neither knew nor cared about
football, I was swept away by an atmosphere of enthusiasm, pride and optimism which lasted for days and
transformed the most mundane activities, such as taking the underground, into a shared experience of
slightly dazed happiness.
disclosed to itself prior to all cognition and volition, and beyond their range of disclosure” (BT G136, Heidegger’s italics). Moods are the very background on which both world and Dasein are disclosed, and from which only all intentional acts are possible: “mood has already disclosed, in every case, being-in-the-world as a whole, and makes it possible first of all to direct oneself towards something” (BT G136, Heidegger’s italics). Moods are thus ontologically prior to any form of mental directedness: “Only because the “senses” [Sinne] belong ontologically to an entity whose kind of being is being-in-the-world with a state-of-mind can they be “touched” by anything or “have a sense for” something in such a way that what touches them shows itself as an affect” (BT G138). This discovery explains the third characteristic of moods: the fact that entities can “matter” to it [Dasein] is grounded in one’s state-of-mind” (BT, G138). We do not encounter neutral entities on which we would project subjective emotional qualities. On the contrary, we can only be affected by entities, and thus react to them or make decisions regarding them, if they have already been disclosed to us as attractive, fearsome, boring (etc) by the mood we are in. Heidegger gives the example of boredom: “[a book] can ultimately be boring only because the attunement already plays around it. It does not cause the boredom, nor does it receive it merely as something attributed by the subject. In short: boredom — and thus ultimately every attunement — is a hybrid, partly objective, partly subjective” (FCM 88). So while being boring is a genuine aspect of the book, boredom is the background state-of-mind upon which it is disclosed as boring.

While Dasein always has moods, some moods, however, are more fundamental than others in that they do not only disclose entities, but also the very structure of being-in-the-world. This is particularly clear in the case of anxiety: “that in the face of which one has anxiety is not an entity-within-the-world” (BT G186); on the contrary, it is “completely indeterminate” (ibidem). Contrary to fear, anxiety has no worldly object. Yet although it does not have any ontic object, anxiety performs a kind of existential epoché which reveals the ontological structure of being-in-the-world. Thus, “that in the face of which one has anxiety is being-in-the-world as such” (BT G186, Heidegger’s italics). Heidegger elaborates on this claim by indicating that in anxiety, the relevance for us of entities in the world disappears. The fact that they do not matter to us anymore allows the whole network of significance, which usually is both presupposed and covered up by our involvement with the world, to come forward. Thus “on the basis of this insignificance of what is within-the-world, the world in its worldhood is all that still obtrudes itself” (BT G187, Heidegger’s italics). The two slightly different claims (“the world as such is that in the face of which one has anxiety” (BT 186-87) and “being-in-the-world itself is that in the face of which anxiety is anxious” (BT 187), my italics in both cases) are complementary. When our involvement with entities is bracketed, the world appears to offer us an infinite field of possibilities; however, this very infinity, joined with our temporary impossibility of practically engaging with worldly entities (or making decisions about them) reveals our “nullity”, i.e. the groundlessness of being-in-the-world. If nothing matters to us, it also becomes clear that while many forms of involvement

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17 This is emphasised in other passage, which asserts that “the possibilities of disclosure which belong to cognition reach far too short a way compared with the primordial disclosure belonging to moods, in which Dasein is brought before its being as “there” (BT G134, my italics).

18 Cf. also the following: “attunement is not something inconstant, fleeting, merely subjective; rather because attunement is the originary way in which every Dasein is as it is, it is not what is most inconstant, but that which gives Dasein subsistence and possibility in its very foundations” (FCM 64).

19 This third characteristic of moods commits Heidegger to a plurirealist view of the world: to paraphrase a famous passage of Being and Time, the bear we come across in the forest is not the same as that calmly studied by the naturalist. The first, being encountered in a specific environment (say, my walking alone and without any means of defence) and on the background of a specific mood (fear), is fearsome. The second, also encountered on the background of a different mood (theoria, not as the absence of mood but as a mood of scientific detachment and impartiality, cf. BT G138), is not.
are possible, we have no ground for committing ourselves to anything. From this follows a third characteristic of anxiety: “anxiety makes manifest in Dasein its being towards its ownmost potentiality for being — i.e. its being free for the freedom of choosing itself and taking hold of itself. Anxiety brings Dasein face to face with its being free for, the authenticity of its being” (BT G188, Heidegger’s italics).

Thus Heidegger shows that while all moods can form the background of the disclosure of entities, some moods — anxiety in particular — are especially disclosive in that they reveal the ontological lineaments of being-in-the-world. Sartre develops this idea by showing the part played by another mood, i.e. nausea, and by bringing to the fore an element which remains very embryonic in Heidegger’s thought, namely the connection between affectivity and embodiment. In his analysis of the second component of original affectivity (the other being pure sensible qualities), i.e. mood [humeur] as “non-positional 21 affective tonality”, he identifies two fundamental moods: nausea and anxiety 22. Each of them, when properly analysed, reveals a fundamental aspect of consciousness’ existence: nausea brings out its primordial relation to its body, and thus its contingency. Conversely, anxiety highlights consciousness’ ability to transcend this contingency, and thus its freedom. While these assertions are clearly reformulations of Heidegger’s first two claims about mood in §29 of Being and Time (respectively, they reveal thrownness and being-in-the-world), there are two important differences: firstly, whereas Heidegger thought that this was conjointly true of all moods, and especially true of anxiety, Sartre separates these disclosive aspects to refer each to a specific mood, and does not talk much about moods in general. Secondly, while Heidegger implicitly considered Dasein as a fairly disincarnated entity, Sartre’s analysis of the two primordial moods is designed to emphasise consciousness’ relation to its body.

This is particularly clear in the case of nausea. According to Sartre, nausea occurs when we are not aware of any particular pure affective quality: this unusual lack generates a contrario an awareness of the pure fact that we are embodied, and thus of our finitude as something indefinable and yet heavy and repellent: “coenaesthetic affectivity is then the pure non-positional apprehension [saisie] of a contingency without colour, a pure apprehension of the self as de facto existence” (BN 338). In this case, we experience a “perpetual apprehension on the part of my for-

20 Deep boredom, in which case “entities as a whole have become indifferent” (GA 29/30, 208), is another such mood. “What is Metaphysics” offers a revised treatment of anxiety, which is now seen as disclosive of the “nothing of the world”.

21 In BN, Sartre introduces the difference between positional and non positional awareness of objects. The first occurs when I consciously intend an object, such a line on my computer screen. It is, however, always accompanied by a non positional awareness of the background (for example, the screen itself, or the window behind my computer). Yet there is a more fundamental form of non positional awareness in that each positional awareness of an object is accompanied by a non-positional awareness (of) consciousness itself as not being its object. Sartre expresses this by saying that consciousness is always consciousness of something (the intended object) and (of) itself (as intending that object and being separated from it by the very activity which intends it). Consciousness’ non-positional awareness (of) itself is defined as a “pre-reflective cogito” which, although it is covered up by our thematic focus upon our intended objects, is nevertheless the condition of possibility of all intentional acts. Correlatively, negation is revealed as the ground of consciousness’ relation both to itself and to its objects: consciousness is essentially a self-negating activity in the sense that it constantly transcends itself towards objects with which it cannot identify.

22 It could be argued that there is a third fundamental mood, namely shame, if only because the latter discloses another fundamental dimension of consciousness’ existence, i.e. intersubjectivity. However Sartre explicitly refers to it as an “emotional attitude”, not as a mood. As I do not have the space here to present a developed argument, I have left the issue aside entirely. Cf. Philippe Cabestan, “Qu’est-ce que s’émouvoir? Emotion et Affectivité chez Sartre”, in Alter, n° 7, 1999, p. 91-120.
itself of an insipid and distanceless taste”: a “discrete and insurmountable nausea perpetually reveals my body to my consciousness” (BN 338, translation modified). Although Sartre’s insistence on embodiment is not Heideggerian, there are three common points with Heidegger here: firstly, nausea is an ontological feature. Sartre underlines that far from being an empirical aversion, it is the transcendental condition of possibility for “concrete and empirical nauseas, in front of rotten meat, fresh blood, excrements, etc” (ibidem). Secondly, like anxiety nausea has two modes of being: on the one hand, it constantly lurks in the background of our relation to the world and to ourselves, generating a vague feeling of unease and distaste. On the other, this impression can be thematised and become an acute awareness of our contingency (as Roquentin experiences in Nausea). Finally, nausea induces the kind of comportment described by Heidegger as falling. Sartre indicates that our non-positional awareness of embodiment may spur us to seek physical pain or pleasure, which consciousness can transcend within the framework of affective projects which then hide its own contingency from it. However (like anxiety) nausea is inescapable: “as soon as pain or pleasure are existed by consciousness, they in turn manifest its facticity and its contingency, and are uncovered on the background of this nausea” (BN 338, translation modified).

What anxiety discloses is no the burden of existing but human freedom. When I am anxious, I become aware of two things: a) that nothing in the world can determine my choices because I am radically separated from the in-itself by my nihilating activity (therefore nothing can act as a “cause” on me unless I construe it as such, thematically or non-thematically); b) that nothing in myself can determine my choices either. Anxiety forces me to adopt the standpoint of pure reflection and thus to abandon bad faith in order to realise that what I see as myself (the ego) is a construct to which I can’t be identified. A “nothingness has slipped into the heart of my relation to myself: I am not the one I shall be (...) because what I am is not the foundation of what I will be [in the sense that my present does not determine my future, the idea that the past is causally active is an illusion of impure reflection]. Finally, because no existing being can determine strictly what I am going to be. (...) I am the self which I will be on the mode of not being it. (...) Anxiety is precisely the consciousness of being one’s own future on the mode of not being it » (BN 31-32, translation modified). Thus freedom is revealed by anxiety as the pure nihilating activity of consciousness: “for the for-itself, to be is to nihilate the in-itself which it is. Under these conditions, freedom can be nothing other than this nihilation” (BN 439). As far as the relation of original affectivity to the body is concerned, the two moods work in opposite ways:

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23 For Sartre, the main characteristic of pure reflection has no content and is the true movement of consciousness: it is a reflection almost in the optical sense, as it is dependent on consciousness always having objects from which it separates itself by having a non-positional awareness (of) itself as intending them. Sartre puts it clearly in the following passage: “it is by means of that of which it is conscious that consciousness distinguishes itself in its own eyes and that it can be self-consciousness; a consciousness which would not be consciousness (of) something would be consciousness (of) nothing » (BN 173). Pure reflection is thus both transparent and elusive, due to the fact that consciousness can only appear to itself indirectly (non-positionally), as the self-negating activity whereby objects are intended: “pure reflection, the simple presence of the reflective for-itself to the reflected for-itself, is at once the original form of reflection and its ideal form (BN 155, translation modified). By contrast, impure reflection is “what gives itself primarily in everyday life” and explains the constitution of the ego: it “constitutes the succession of psychical facts or psyche (...). Its motivation is within it in a twofold movement of interiorisation and objectification: to apprehend the reflected as an in-itself in order to turn oneself into this in-itself which is apprehended” (BN 159-160, translation modified). As a result, the ego is not really identical to consciousness: it is “in-itself, not for-itself (...). It is always given as having been there before consciousness — and at the same time as possessing depths which have to be revealed gradually. Thus the ego appears to consciousness as a transcendent in-itself, as an existent in the human world, not as consciousness” (BN 103, translation modified).
while nausea is the revelation of the inescapability of physical embodiment (because consciousness cannot fully transcend its body), anxiety shows that its being embodied does not determine consciousness (because the latter constantly transcends its corporeity, although the process is made infinite by the fact that it cannot be completely). Thus although it is less apparent, anxiety has no less relation to the body than nausea — in this regard, it is perhaps also significant that the starting point chosen by Sartre should be that of vertigo, which involves strong bodily sensations (although of course anxiety is not a physical or empirical form vertigo).

While Nietzsche was mostly interested in the transformative part played by affectivity for the constitution of the self, and on establishing a typology of feelings and emotions, Heidegger and Sartre focused on the ontological disclosingness of moods. Whereas Nietzsche’s perspective was resolutely axiological and strongly influenced by his antagonism to Christianity, Heidegger’s own views (in particular about anxiety) were partially shaped by his reading of Kierkegaard and by his own Christian upbringing. There are also substantial differences between Sartre’s and Heidegger’s ontological assumptions (in particular re: the status of consciousness and negation) which I have overlooked for the sake of brevity. Yet all three authors have a strong common point, which is that they have made it impossible for philosophers to ignore the central part played by affectivity both in the constitution of the self and in the disclosure of the world. They indicated research directions which more recent developments within the Continental tradition explored further — in particular Merleau Ponty for embodiment and M. Henry for the notion of original affectivity.

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List of abbreviations:

Nietzsche


Heidegger


Sartre