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Jussi Saarinen

The Oceanic Feeling

A Case Study in Existential Feeling

Abstract: *In this paper I draw on contemporary philosophy of emotion to illuminate the phenomenological structure of so-called oceanic feelings. I suggest that oceanic feelings come in two distinct forms: (1) as transient episodes that consist in a feeling of dissolution of the psychological and sensory boundaries of the self, and (2) as a relatively permanent feeling of unity, embracement, immanence, and openness that does not involve occurrent experiences of boundary dissolution. I argue that both forms of feeling are existential feelings, i.e. pre-intentional bodily feelings that structure overall self–world experience. I re-conceptualize episodic oceanic feelings as shifts in existential feeling, and permanent oceanic feelings as stable existential orientations. On the whole, my analysis elucidates a class of feeling that is allegedly quite common, yet frequently misunderstood. It will also serve to enrich our understanding of the general phenomenological structure of our affective lives.*

Keywords: oceanic feeling; existential feeling; Romain Rolland; Peter Goldie; Matthew Ratcliffe.

1. Introduction

The role of bodily feelings in world-directed intentional experience has been much discussed in recent philosophy of emotion (*cf.* Goldie, 2000; Prinz, 2004; Ratcliffe, 2008; Slaby, 2008). Phenomenologically oriented philosophers in particular have sought to establish the intentionality of bodily feelings within experientially viable accounts of emotion. Matthew Ratcliffe (2005; 2008; 2010) has taken this phen-

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phenomenological discussion a crucial step further by introducing the idea of ‘existential feelings’, i.e. *pre-intentional* bodily feelings that structure self–world relations as a whole. According to Ratcliffe, it is only within the context of such background existential feelings that we have meaningful intentional experiences to speak of in the first place.

The notion of existential feelings has mostly been used to improve our understanding of various mental illnesses and psychopathological states of mind (*cf.* Benson, Gibson and Brand, 2013; Gerrans and Scherer, 2013; Ratcliffe, 2008; Ratcliffe and Colombetti, 2012; Svenaeus, 2013). In this article, I will contribute to the discussion from a somewhat different point of view. That is, I will use ‘existential feeling’ to illuminate the intentional and experiential structure of so-called oceanic feelings. These feelings are usually classified as mystical (rather than pathological or non-pathological, although they may turn out to be either). The analysis of oceanic feelings is relevant for two main reasons. First, it will serve to elucidate conceptually a class of affective experiencing that is allegedly quite common, yet frequently misunderstood. Second, it can be regarded as a case study that throws light on the general phenomenological structure of our affective lives. Overall, then, the analysis will deepen our knowledge of both oceanic feelings and existential feelings.

My analysis of oceanic feelings is also motivated by a conceptual tension that has not been addressed in cogent philosophical terms. The crux of the problem is this: while the received view has regarded the oceanic feeling rather straightforwardly as a transient feeling of oneness with the universe, it was originally portrayed by Nobel-winning novelist and mystic Romain Rolland as a permanent feeling with a fairly indefinite phenomenological profile. On the face of it, these two views may seem incompatible, which might prompt us to consider whether one might simply be preferred to the other. However, I will argue that both suggested forms of oceanic feeling with their differing phenomenology can and should be fitted into a single comprehensive account of the matter. I will call this the broad view of oceanic feeling.

Thus in what follows I will suggest that oceanic feelings come in two distinct experiential forms: (1) as transient episodes that consist in a feeling of dissolution of the psychological and sensory boundaries of the self, and (2) as a relatively permanent feeling of unity, embracement, immanence, and openness that does not involve an occurrent experience of boundary dissolution. I will argue that both forms of oceanic feeling are existential feelings. On these grounds, I will re-conceptualize episodic oceanic feelings as *shifts* in existential feeling and permanent oceanic feelings as stable existential *orientations*.

Furthermore, I will propose that episodes of oceanic feeling may be experienced either as devoid of any ascribable intentional object or as involving some intentional object, either real or imagined. I maintain that cases with experienced intentionality entail feelings of oneness. On the whole, then, both episodic and permanent forms of oceanic feeling will be accommodated within a coherent account of mind and emotion.¹

To build the basis for my case, I will first clarify the key features of Rolland's account of oceanic feeling. I will do so by contrasting his writings on the topic with the received view of the matter. Following this, I will discuss Peter Goldie's taxonomy of the oceanic feeling, and argue that his restricted view cannot deal adequately with both episodic and permanent forms of oceanic feeling. To conclude, I will draw on Ratcliffe's notion of existential feelings to develop and defend the more comprehensive broad view of oceanic feeling.

2. Rolland's Oceanic Feeling vis-à-vis the Received View

Why is Rolland's account of the oceanic feeling relevant to our analysis? Firstly, he introduced the concept into academic discussion, albeit indirectly: it was Sigmund Freud who analysed the concept publicly after obtaining it from the two men's private correspondence. Secondly, and more importantly, Rolland's rather perplexing assertion that the oceanic feeling was a permanent feeling has largely gone unexamined, which has led to a one-sided and incomplete understanding of the matter. Finally, Rolland made the noteworthy claim that the oceanic feeling was a relatively widespread phenomenon, as opposed to an obscure, idiosyncratic feeling. This claim seems to be supported by a variety of sources, both old and new (*cf.* Comte-Sponville, 2008, pp. 155–8; James, 1902/1994, pp. 419–68; Milner, 1957, pp. 142–4; Newton, 2008, pp. 47–50; Ostow, 2007, pp. 20–2). However, if this claim of commonness is to be properly assessed, we need a clearer understanding of what we seek to recognize as 'oceanic' in, for instance, descriptions of mystical and creative experiencing. In light of the above considerations, Rolland's account is key in drawing up a more comprehensive and accurate analysis of oceanic feelings.

Let us therefore begin our analysis with a brief historical recap. On 5 December 1927 Rolland wrote Freud a puzzling letter. Having read

[1] I realize that some readers may perceive the term 'oceanic' as unnecessarily metaphorical or mystical. However, it is an established term in mysticism research that merits analysis in its own right.

Freud's recently published critical treatise on religion, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), Rolland requested an analysis of what he personally experienced to be the true source of all religion: 'the simple and direct fact of the feeling of the "eternal" (which, can very well not be eternal, but simply without perceptible limits, and like oceanic, as it were)' (quoted in Parsons, 1999, p. 173).² Rolland went on to describe this oceanic sentiment as a subterranean and dynamic source of vital renewal that occurred spontaneously and independently from organized religion. Curiously, he pronounced that it was a constant state: a prolonged feeling that existed non-invasively alongside his critical faculties, uninformed in any way by wishes for personal salvation or immortality. Finally, he claimed the feeling was common to thousands if not millions of men actually existing, albeit with individual nuance, and should thus be subject to analysis with an 'approximate exactitude'. An appropriate qualifier, considering that Rolland's description was fairly approximate itself, offering Freud a 'prolonged feeling', 'free vital upsurge', 'contact', 'sensation', 'sentiment', and 'constant state' for analysis (Parsons, 1999, pp. 173–4).

After a two-year period of hesitation — and only upon Rolland's approval — Freud finally offered a tentative interpretation of the oceanic feeling in the first chapter of *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930/1961). After recapitulating Rolland's account of the feeling, Freud claimed he could not discover it in himself, yet appropriately deemed this personal lack insufficient reason to deny its occurrence in others. Having said that, Freud declared a general difficulty in dealing with feelings scientifically, and regarded the classification of the oceanic feeling based on its physiological signs an impracticable option. He therefore turned to the 'ideational contents' of the feeling: the conscious beliefs and ideas most readily associated with its 'feeling-tone' (*ibid.*, p. 65). Freud rephrased these ideational contents as those of 'limitlessness and of a bond with the universe' (*ibid.*, p. 68), of 'an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole' (*ibid.*, p. 65), and of 'oneness with the universe' (*ibid.*, p. 72). Moreover, he noted the feeling could engender the special belief that 'We cannot fall out of this world', and might thereby provide some consolation in the face of mortality and loss (*ibid.*, p. 65).

Crucially, Rolland had implied that the universally innate oceanic feeling provided essential knowledge about man's metaphysical relation to the world, and by virtue of this was non-dogmatically religious

[2] In the French original, the cited extract reads as follows: 'le fait simple et direct de la sensation de l'Éternel (qui peut très bien n'être pas éternel, mais simplement sans bornes perceptibles, et comme océanique)' (quoted in Masson, 1980, p. 34).

in itself. Freud was unconvinced, and undermined Rolland's claim by providing a strictly ontogenetic interpretation of not only the oceanic feeling, but of religious need as well. In his view, the occurrence of the oceanic feeling was due to a primary state of all-embracing unity between infant and mother, which at least in some individuals could be preserved 'side by side with the narrower and more sharply demarcated ego feeling of maturity' (*ibid.*, p. 68). Freud had thus found a suitable match between the ideational contents he had derived from Rolland's description and his own speculative portrayal of an early affective phase of mental development. In this scenario the oceanic feeling was a revival of an infantile mode of experience and, on that account, contained no inherent religious quality. Rather, religion was best explained by later childhood helplessness and a consequent longing for fatherly protection — a view already expressed forcefully in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927/1961). Furthermore, that any particular feeling should exist for the sole purpose of revealing a metaphysical state of affairs was in Freud's opinion altogether alien to psychoanalytic thinking. He duly rounded off his public reply to Rolland in pithily unequivocal terms: 'Thus the part played by the oceanic feeling, which might seek something like the restoration of limitless narcissism, is ousted from a place in the foreground' (Freud, 1930/1961, p. 72).

Freud and Rolland failed to reach agreement over the nature and value of the oceanic feeling. This was partly due to their irreconcilable differences regarding the aims and methods of psychological science on the one hand, and the epistemological rewards of mystical experience on the other (see the Freud-Rolland correspondence in Parsons, 1999, pp. 170–9; and Rolland, 1930/2009, pp. 277–88). The impasse was also due to Freud's limited grasp of the very essence of Rolland's feeling — a shortcoming not altogether surprising, given Freud's sceptical approach to mysticism, the somewhat sketchy description he was given, and his lack of retrospective knowledge of Rolland's overall ideological development.

After Freud had analysed the oceanic feeling in terms of primary narcissism, a general tendency to emphasize its regressive, defensive, and episodic aspects took hold. Parsons encapsulates this, the received view, as follows: 'As many would have it, the oceanic feeling is but the psychoanalytic version of the perennialist claim that mysticism is "one and the same everywhere", and the occasional regression to the preverbal, pre-Oedipal "memory" of unity, motivated by the need to withdraw from a harsh and unforgiving reality, is the explanation behind the transient, ineffable experience of oneness with the

universe' (Parsons, 1999, pp. 35–6). In sum, the received view supposes that: 1) the oceanic feeling is a *transient* emotional episode, 2) that this episode consists in a *feeling of oneness* with the universe, and 3) that it is due to a *regressive-defensive* withdrawal from the world. (For endorsements of most or all of these claims, see e.g. Masson, 1980; Harrison, 1986; Ostow, 2007.)

As it stands, the received view neglects several key aspects of Rolland's account of the oceanic feeling. First, its emphasis on transience disregards the fact that Rolland had described the oceanic feeling as prolonged, constant, and durable. Second, it singles out one specific phenomenological feature, namely the occurrent feeling of oneness, as definitive of the oceanic feeling — even though Rolland portrayed it in looser experiential terms as something that underlay and informed his overall being. Finally, the received view depicts the feeling as a regressive-defensive withdrawal from the world, despite the fact that Rolland emphasized its mature, proactive, and transformational nature. While the first two aspects concern the actual experience of oceanic feeling, the third is a theoretical claim about its function and psychological motivation. In what follows, I will focus mostly on phenomenology, and bracket the question of function/motivation.

I will next work through the aforementioned discrepancies to spell out the essential features of Rolland's account of oceanic feeling. To begin, it is important to understand what the term 'oceanic' meant to him. This requires a turn to his metaphysical worldview — a pantheistic monism derived, amongst others, from Advaita Vedanta philosophy, Tolstoy, Leibniz, and Spinoza, the 'European Krishna' (Rolland, 1947/2010, p. 23). At the very core of Rolland's worldview we find the belief that everything consists of one absolute, eternal substance, alternately characterized as the 'Ocean of Satchidananda',³ the 'Ocean of Being', or quite simply, 'the Ocean' (Rolland, 1929/2007, pp. xvi–xiv, 15; 1930/2009, p. 227; 1947/2010, pp. 10–31). It is arguable that Rolland's use of the term 'oceanic' referred first and foremost to this primal metaphysical substance. This is supported by a number of Rolland's writings, including his autobiography, *Journey Within* (1947/2010), and the volumes he dubbed his 'Oceanic' works, namely the biographies of the Indian saints Ramakrishna and Vivekananda (from 1929 and 1930, respectively). In these books Rolland elaborated on the essence and value of the 'ocean', and

[3] *Sat*, Being; *Cit*, Consciousness; *Ananda*, Bliss.

described the various affective, behavioural, and ethical outcomes of immersion into its depths.

From a metaphysical point of view we can unearth a deeper meaning in Rolland's proclamation of the 'simple and direct fact of *the feeling of the "eternal"* (which, can very well not be eternal, but simply without perceptible limits, and like oceanic, as it were)' (quoted in Parsons, 1999, p. 173). In this passage we find him confirming to Freud his first-hand experience of something he regards as 'eternal', 'without perceptible limits', and 'oceanic'. This something is unmistakably the metaphysical 'Ocean of Being' of his other writings. However, Rolland does not articulate in precise terms what his feeling regarding this 'ocean' is like. For reasons that will become apparent below, we may surmise it involved a permanent sense of unity with the 'ocean', accompanied, for instance, by feelings of embracement, vitality, connectedness, and security.

The continuous presence of the 'ocean' in Rolland's experience is fleshed out further in his seminal letter to Freud. Here Rolland describes his feeling rather intriguingly as 'a contact' (quoted in Parsons, 1999, p. 173). This turn of phrase becomes comprehensible in light of Rolland's autobiography, in which he claimed to have always lived two lives simultaneously: one of the material, finite person confined to inheritance, space, and time, and the other of the spiritual, infinite self of 'formless Being... the very substance and breath of all life' (Rolland, 1947/2010, p. 10). The former, disconnected mode of existence had concealed the latter for much of his life, but through a series of 'sudden explosions' and 'spiritual outbursts', i.e. transient mystical episodes, he had gradually discovered the 'unrevealed Being' (*ibid.*, p. 10). Elsewhere Rolland recounts how 'one instant's contact with the Infinite is sufficient to make the Illusion of all "differentiated" egos, our own and other men's, disappear immediately' (Rolland, 1929/2007, p. 40). This led Rolland to pronounce his mature, permanent contact with the 'ocean' an 'immediate communion with universal Life' (*ibid.*, p. 10).

Considering the above, it is understandable that Rolland also presented the oceanic feeling to Freud as a 'vital trait' of his character (quoted in Parsons, 1999, p. 178). The contact he had found and cultivated had evolved into something he regarded as essential to his self. Although Freud had acknowledged that the feeling was durable in the sense that it could be preserved in the unconscious — and could upon its revival give rise to *ideas* of metaphysical permanence — he did not recognize that for Rolland it signified a mature developmental achievement. As Parsons puts it, Rolland's oceanic feeling was

nothing less than ‘the existential denouement of a mystical and psychological process of becoming’ (*ibid.*, p. 104): the achievement of a mature psyche involving a lifetime of introspection, disillusionment, and psychological structuration. Rolland’s presentation of his oceanic feeling to Freud thus incorporated a lengthy personal journey, from transient experiences to a sustained mystical path that eventually culminated in a consciously articulated ‘character trait’ (see Rolland, 1947/2010, pp. 1–31).

In its failure to recognize the permanent nature of Rolland’s oceanic feeling, the received view has placed undue emphasis on transiently occurring feeling. In latching onto the ideational content Freud identified as ‘oneness with the universe’, and in promoting this particular content, as a consciously felt experience, as the *sine qua non* of the oceanic feeling, the received view distorts Rolland’s account to a considerable extent. Interestingly enough, Rolland had not explicitly mentioned an occurrent feeling of oneness in his seminal letter to Freud. Instead, he had written that his ‘constant state’ felt ‘like a sheet of water... flushing under the bark’ (quoted in Parsons, 1999, p. 174).⁴ Apposite to this key metaphor, Starr (1972, pp. 151–2) has noted that in Rolland’s symbolism the bark (boat) frequently denoted a finite habitation that not only encloses and offers protection, but also confines and hampers free movement. My interpretation of the boat metaphor in Rolland’s letter is that the boat signifies the restrictive confines of the differentiated ego, whereas the water symbolizes the freedom of the limitless metaphysical ‘ocean’ (Saarinen, 2012). The ego may either impede or be used as a vehicle for making contact with the ‘ocean’. As noted above, this connectedness had become permanent in Rolland’s case. More importantly, he maintained that once he had discovered the ‘ocean’, it had become a boundless ‘source of vital renewal’ that did not affect the ‘critical faculties’ of the ego (quoted in Parsons, 1999, p. 174).

Viewed in this light, the phrase ‘water flushing *under* the bark’ evokes neither a feeling of complete self-dissolution nor of concurrent feelings of oneness, fusion, or the like. Rather, it portrays the sense of an intact self: one that is aware of, and ‘sailing’ in accord with, a vast and vital substance (Saarinen, 2012). In fact, for Rolland the possibility of an unceasing feeling of oneness with the universe suggested an extreme mystical position that he emphatically renounced (Rolland, 1929/2007, pp. 167–8; 1930/2009, p. 227). For example, Rolland

[4] In his autobiography Rolland similarly proclaimed: ‘Under my barque, fathomless depths!’ (Rolland, 1947/2010, p. 110).

recounts that when Vivekananda wished to remain in an infinite state of oneness, his teacher Ramakrishna counselled him: ‘This realization will become so natural to you... that in your *normal state* you will realise the One Divinity in all beings; you will do great things in the world; you will bring spiritual consciousness to men, and assuage the misery of the humble and the poor’ (Rolland, 1929/2007, p. 192, my italics). Rolland arguably cast himself in a role comparable to that of Vivekananda, in that his early episodic mystical experiences consolidated into a fundamental mode of being that guided his ethical and socio-political efforts. This echoes William James’s observation regarding the aims of Advaita Vedanta mysticism: ‘The Vedantists say that one may stumble into superconsciousness sporadically... but it is then impure. Their test of purity, like our test of religion’s value, is empirical: its fruits must be good for life. When a man comes out of Samadhi, they assure us that he remains “enlightened, a sage, a prophet, a saint, his *whole character changed, his life changed, illuminated*”’ (James, 1902/1994, p. 437, my italics). For all intents and purposes, then, Rolland wanted to portray himself as a person in whom oceanic feeling, critical scepticism, and moral virtue not only coexisted harmoniously, but also supported each other in everyday life.

Seeing as Rolland was more concerned with the value and implications of his oceanic feeling than its precise articulation, he left us with various interpretative possibilities to pursue. Be that as it may, I trust the above review provides sufficiently convincing grounds for arguing that over time his oceanic feeling had developed into something stable, into a constitutive element of his overall self-world experience. Despite this — or perhaps *because* of this — he did not delineate the feeling in precise phenomenological terms. In any case, we may conclude that Rolland’s account is the very antithesis of the received view, and relegates the notion of a world-weary, transient feeling (with the distinctive phenomenology of oneness) into the background.

3. The Broad View of Oceanic Feeling

I have scrutinized Rolland’s account at some length in order to foreground a significant yet widely neglected aspect of oceanic feeling, i.e. its allegedly permanent and constitutive nature. In doing so, I have aimed to justify the necessity of fitting this aspect into an accurate and comprehensive account of the phenomenon. As it stands, the conceptual tension between the permanent feeling of Rolland’s account and the episodic feeling of the received view is as yet unsolved, and

continues to undermine discussions of the matter. Until this tension is resolved, our understanding of oceanic feeling will be deficient and inconsistent.

As a solution, I will expound the broad view of oceanic feeling. This view will distinguish between, and accommodate, (1) episodes of oceanic feeling that consist in a temporary dissolution of experienced boundaries of the self, and (2) a relatively permanent feeling of unity, embracement, immanence, and openness that does not involve an occurrent experience of boundary dissolution. The broad view will provide answers to the following questions: in what sense can oceanic feeling, as a kind of *feeling*, be permanent? How does this permanent feeling stand in relation to episodic oceanic feelings?

To develop the broad view, I will examine two contemporary philosophical models for understanding feelings and emotions, i.e. those of Peter Goldie and Matthew Ratcliffe. I will first discuss how Goldie's thoughts on bodily feeling, emotion, and mood underlie his taxonomy of oceanic feeling. I will suggest that even though his taxonomy can help us clarify how occurrent feelings of oneness might figure in episodic oceanic feelings, it does not suffice in grasping the structure of the permanent oceanic feeling. The discussion of Goldie's model will also serve to highlight the complex issue of intentionality in oceanic feelings. In order to provide a more comprehensive account, I will introduce Ratcliffe's notion of existential feelings and suggest that, as pre-intentional modes of structuring self-world relations, they can help make sense of the permanent and constitutive aspects of oceanic feeling. In general, setting forth the broad view will accentuate the need for more complexity in our analysis of affective states.

Let us now turn to Goldie's take on the matter. In his article 'Freud and the Oceanic Feeling' (2008), Goldie suggests we categorize the oceanic feeling based on its intentional object, i.e. in terms of what the feeling is about, or what it is directed towards in the world. Goldie excludes the possibility that the oceanic feeling is a bodily feeling, since on his terms bodily feelings take as their object states of the body rather than objects beyond its boundaries (see also Goldie, 2000, pp. 51–7). Following this, he introduces two taxonomical possibilities: (1) that the oceanic feeling is a feeling, and its object is oneness with the universe, and (2) that the oceanic feeling is a feeling of oneness, and its object is the universe. Goldie rejects the first option because it relegates the oceanic feeling into a heteronymous class of indefinite feelings. Instead he argues that the second option gives the phenomenon much-needed clarity: not only does it help us delineate the distinctive properties of oceanic feeling in particular, it also enables us to

identify the core phenomenology of all feelings of oneness — which, in Goldie's description, boils down to a 'peculiar sense of a weakening or even removal of the psychological and sensory boundaries between oneself and the object of the feeling' (Goldie, 2008, p. 224). As such, feelings of oneness may take as their intentional object any number of things, including persons, artworks, nature, and God, whereas the oceanic feeling can only have as its object the whole universe, everything. Goldie's restricted account, then, presents the oceanic feeling as one type of feeling of oneness, defined by its characteristic object, the universe.

Goldie goes on to specify that feelings of oneness may be either emotions or moods. In his view, the two can be distinguished by the specificity of their objects — the objects of emotions being more specific than those of moods (see also Goldie, 2000). Goldie qualifies this distinction by acknowledging that specificity comes in degrees; hence there are no sharp dividing lines between emotion and mood. Over time emotion can turn into mood and mood into emotion, and emotion may be long-lasting whereas mood may be brief. Goldie posits the oceanic feeling as a mood since its intentional object — the universe, everything — is plainly more nebulous than the relatively distinct objects of emotion (such as persons, states of affairs, or particular things). Moreover, even if moods cannot bring about specific actions like emotions can, they may influence patterns of behaviour in a more general manner. Borrowing from William James, Goldie notes how the oceanic feeling, as a mood, 'expands, unites, and says yes' (Goldie, 2008, p. 225).

Although Goldie's account is cogently structured, it contains one crucial problem: it is primarily based on Freud's interpretation of the oceanic feeling (as a feeling of oneness with the universe) without a questioning of the validity of this reading. To reiterate, the oceanic feeling Rolland presented to Freud cannot simply be equated with an occurrent feeling of oneness. Goldie thus repeats the fundamental misidentification of the received view, and ends up mostly focusing on one contingent experiential feature of a much more complex whole. Of course the present criticism would not be justified had Goldie expressed an explicit aim to classify the oceanic feeling in terms of Freud's paradigmatic account (as the title of his article, 'Freud and the Oceanic Feeling', would indeed suggest). However, Goldie *does* recognize the significance of Rolland's take on the matter and, more importantly, attempts to articulate the oceanic feeling in terms of its constancy.

Moreover, given his initial positing of the whole universe as its (vague) intentional object, Goldie is effectively left with no other option but to classify the oceanic feeling as a mood. Having done that, he does not seem completely satisfied with ‘mood’ in accounting for the permanence of the feeling. For example, he describes how in Rolland’s maturity ‘the state was more and more a part of his life: an *existential condition*, which he thought could be shared by anyone of whatever religion’ (*ibid.*, p. 226, my italics). ‘Existential condition’ seems to imply something more deeply and permanently ingrained than mood. However, Goldie does not take this observation any further, nor does he elaborate the sense in which a feeling of oneness could have been a permanent part of Rolland’s life.

Is Goldie perhaps suggesting that Rolland was an oceanic sort of person, in that he had a relatively lasting disposition to be in oceanic moods? Indeed, earlier in the same paragraph Goldie writes: ‘Rolland thought of himself as having a *natural tendency* to have feelings of oneness, to be in this kind of state’ (*ibid.*, p. 226, my italics). Contrary to this, however, Rolland had asserted that what was permanent was the *feeling itself*, rather than the *tendency* to feel it (even though he did regard the capacity for oceanic feeling a universal feature of the human psyche). Crucially, seeing as dispositions cannot in themselves be felt, Rolland’s prolonged oceanic feeling cannot be a disposition. For the same reason it cannot be a character trait, either. Hence, faced with the idea of a feeling that is a kind of existential condition, we need some other concept apart from mood, disposition, or trait to do the job for us.⁵

I hold that Ratcliffe’s conception of existential feelings can help us develop a much more accurate and complete account of oceanic feeling. Ratcliffe maintains that feelings are classified as existential in virtue of two shared characteristics. Firstly, they are *pre-intentional* background feelings that structure experience as a whole (as opposed to intentional states directed at particular objects or situations within the world). Ratcliffe calls these feelings existential because they constitute our changeable sense of reality, and of our belonging to and relating to the world. He frequently depicts existential feelings as ‘ways of finding ourselves in the world’ which constrain the kinds of experience we are capable of having. As such, Ratcliffe believes they provide us with a fundamental sense of possibility and meaning and, accordingly, structure our intentional thought, emotion, and action.

[5] Following Goldie, I consider a ‘trait’ to be a relatively stable disposition to have thoughts and feelings of a certain sort, or in some cases the lack of such a disposition (Goldie, 2003, pp. 139, 153).

On his view, being in a world that matters in a personal way presupposes existential feeling (Ratcliffe, 2005; 2008; 2010).

Secondly, existential feelings are *bodily* feelings (Ratcliffe, 2008, pp. 38, 41). To specify the sense in which existential feelings are bodily, Ratcliffe distinguishes between noematic, noetic, and existential bodily feelings (2012; see also Ratcliffe and Colombetti, 2012). First, he designates as *noematic* those bodily feelings that are *of* the body or parts of the body. Simply put, these feelings have the body as their intentional object, e.g. feeling the pounding of one's heart. In *noetic* feelings, the body is in turn felt as *that through which* objects and states of affairs within the world are experienced. Ratcliffe points out that, even though the body is not necessarily an object of attention in noetic feelings, it contributes to experience through a kind of background awareness. For example, while sitting in a delayed train trying to catch a flight on time, one's attention will likely be directed towards the world: to checking the time, listening to announcements, and so on. Nonetheless, the body provides a background sense of anxious urgency to the situation by feeling tight, tense, and confined (Ratcliffe and Colombetti, 2012, p. 147). In sum, noetic feelings are incorporated in intentionality directed beyond the body, yet through the body.⁶ Finally, *existential* bodily feelings constitute a general feeling of *being* that is neither noematic nor noetic. Unlike the other two bodily feelings, existential feelings cannot be classified as intentional states directed towards anything. In terms of affective states, they provide us with 'the context in which we have intentional states with noetic and noematic aspects' (Ratcliffe, 2012, p. 39). In essence, existential feelings furnish us with a pre-intentional bodily background to experience.⁷

[6] For further discussion on how bodily feelings can have world-directed intentionality, see e.g. Goldie on the borrowed intentionality of 'feeling towards' (Goldie, 2000; 2003), Jesse Prinz on 'embodied appraisal' (Prinz, 2004), and Jan Slaby on 'affective intentionality' (Slaby, 2008). Slaby's account in particular is a concise analysis of what Ratcliffe calls noetic bodily feeling.

[7] In linking together pre-intentionality and bodily feeling, Ratcliffe draws on Merleau-Ponty's notion of the 'lived body', and argues that the lived body is not only directed at things in the world: it also opens up a 'pre-objective view' of the world as a space of purposive, practical activity. As such, it shapes all our experience (Ratcliffe, 2008, pp. 107–8). Elsewhere, to clarify how a feeling can be pre-intentional and bodily, Ratcliffe discusses the feeling of tiredness. He notes how we may 'inhabit our tiredness' while remaining curiously unaware of it. In this sense, the tiredness may be 'phenomenologically deep, a shape that all experience takes'. Ratcliffe thus maintains that we may distinguish between intentional bodily feelings like eyestrain, 'which present the body or something else in some way, and "pre-intentional" feelings, such as a background feeling of tiredness that shapes all experience and thought' (Ratcliffe, 2010, pp. 365–6).

Ratcliffe notes that existential feelings can be brief, e.g. in transient feelings of derealization, or processes that unfold over a prolonged period of time, e.g. in the development of chronic depression.⁸ Although existential feelings generally remain in the background of experience, Ratcliffe holds that they may become objects of attention and rational reflection (Ratcliffe, 2012, p. 27). Usually this happens when a notable change or *shift* in the existential feeling occurs, and the orientation one previously took for granted becomes conspicuous by its absence. In this process, the contingency of one's earlier orientation is revealed. For example, Ratcliffe notes how in religious conversion experience 'a world that is drained of life... can be shaken up to reveal a different and wider space of possibility, something *more*, something *greater*' (Ratcliffe, 2008, p. 274). Importantly, once an existential feeling becomes the object of attention, one's reactions and attitudes toward it can reshape its structure.

That said, existential feelings are conceptually elusive, making the articulation of their phenomenology a particularly challenging task. Ratcliffe and Colombetti observe that in everyday talk and in the talk of psychiatric patients existential feelings are often described in all-enveloping terms — for instance, as feelings of unfamiliarity, unreality, being at home, being at one, surreality, strangeness, and so on (Ratcliffe and Colombetti, 2012, p. 147). Moreover, in these descriptions body and world tend to be interchangeable. Sometimes expressions such as 'I feel strange', 'my body feels strange', and 'the world feels strange' can refer to the same existential feeling, simply picking out one particular aspect of the self–world relation (*ibid.*, p. 147).

We are now in a better position to argue that both episodic and permanent forms of oceanic feeling are existential feelings. Let us begin by dealing with episodic oceanic feelings. I hold that these are transient *shifts* in existential feeling that consist in an experience of dissolution of the psychological and sensory boundaries of the self. Moreover, I suggest these shifts may be experienced as either devoid of any ascribable intentional object, or experienced as involving an intentional object, either real or imagined. Descriptions of the former experiences are typically diffuse, whereas descriptions of the latter tend to emphasize feelings of union or merger with a particular object.

[8] Ratcliffe mentions that if a particular existential feeling persists long enough — even over a lifetime — it may come to be regarded as a character trait or an entrenched disposition (Ratcliffe, 2008, pp. 38, 213; 2012, p. 24). I do not take him as using these terms in a particularly technical sense here. I believe they are instead meant to convey the possible stability and consistency of an existential feeling in constituting one's overall experience.

Despite incorporating intentionality, oceanic episodes that take on distinct objects in experience presuppose a shift in pre-intentional existential feeling that dissolves the experienced boundaries of the self. In other words, without such a fundamental change in how one's self-world relations are experientially structured, the feeling of oneness with a particular object could not come about.

Contrary to Goldie, I maintain that oceanic episodes with experienced intentionality *cannot* take as their object the universe, the world, the All, everything, or any other such nebulous entity. As Ratcliffe puts it, the world that we inhabit and find ourselves in 'is not an *object* of emotion, however general that object might be' (Ratcliffe, 2008, p. 24); rather, it is 'a practical, social world in which we are purposively immersed' (*ibid.*, p. 70). Ratcliffe uses fear as an example to contrast the feeling of finding oneself in a world with specific emotions and moods directed towards entities *within* that world: 'When we are afraid of an entity, our fear may be described as a state of the self (being afraid), an attitude towards something (fearing it) or as a way in which the object of emotion appears (threatening)' (*ibid.*, p. 24). He continues by pointing out that we do not relate to the world in this way; instead the world 'is where I already am before I have any such emotion, a context in which I might find myself afraid or find an object threatening' (*ibid.*, p. 24).⁹ For an oceanic feeling to involve intentionality, then, it must be attributable with a sufficiently distinct object in experience. Furthermore, it is arguable that all such cases of experienced boundary dissolution between self and intentional object entail a feeling of oneness with the given object. On that account, Goldie's own examples of feelings of oneness with one's dance partner or lover can be viewed as prime examples of episodic oceanic shifts that involve intentionality (*ibid.*, p. 225).

To illuminate the subtle differences in experienced intentionality, let us take a look at some examples. Rolland, for instance, recollects the experience of merging with a mountain while hiking as a young man: 'For a moment my soul left me to melt into the luminous mass of the Breithorn... Yes, extravagant as it may sound, for some moments I *was* the Breithorn' (quoted in Parsons, 1998, pp. 506–7). In aesthetics, in turn, we find many depictions of feelings of oneness with works of art (see, for example, Ehrenzweig, 1967/2000, p. 119; Milner, 1957, p.

[9] On these grounds I maintain that expressions along the lines of 'I feel at one with the world/everything' or 'I feel that the world and I are one' refer to pre-intentional existential feeling, that is, to how one finds oneself *in a* world. That the experienced world cannot be taken as an intentional object may, however, be a restriction specific only to feeling. We may, for instance, take the world as an object of our thought.

142; Newton, 2008, pp. 47–50). Consider artist Stephen Newton’s account of his ‘full “oceanic” experience’ while painting: ‘Suddenly and inexplicably, I found myself at the centre of an endless grey sea, with its surface covered as far as the eye could see with floating fragments or flotsam of canvas collage, scraps of line, painted and glued canvas, all rising and falling around my person half submerged at the centre of its infinity’ (Newton, 2008, p. 50). Newton describes his experience further as a ‘peculiar sensation of envelopment... [in which] the whole womb of the painting draws you into itself in a total engulfment... [resulting in a] loss of self in this mystical union’ (*ibid.*, p. 47). Here, it is within the context of an oceanic existential shift that the feeling of oneness with a particular object, the painting, is experienced, and a noetic feeling of the painting as enveloping occurs.

The examples above appear to differ experientially from instances in which no particular intentional object is ascribable in association with the feeling of boundary dissolution. Consider, for example, the personal report of philosopher André Comte-Sponville, who proclaims: ‘Yes, like countless others, I have experienced what Freud called “that sense of eternity, of something limitless, something with no borders”, that sense that “you cannot fall out of the universe”, the sense of being “at one with the All”’ (Comte-Sponville, 2008, p. 155). He goes on to describe this transient oceanic experience as ‘an immanence, a unity, an immersion, an insideness’ (*ibid.*, p. 155), ‘...The ego *had* vanished: no more separation or representation, only the silent *presentation* of everything. No more value judgments; only reality. No more time; only the present. No more nothingness; only being’ (*ibid.*, p. 157). Once the episode was over, ‘words returned, and thought, and the ego, and separation. But it didn’t matter; the universe was still there, and I was there with it, or within it. How can you fall out of the All?’ (*ibid.*, p. 158).¹⁰ This account is more diffuse than those that report feelings of oneness with particular intentional objects. It seems to convey the experience of an oceanic existential shift *per se* — of a fundamental change in how one finds oneself in the world, without self-boundaries.

Distinguishing oceanic episodes that incorporate intentionality from those that do not may turn out to be simpler in theory than in practice. Whether or not a clear experiential line can be drawn between the two does not, however, affect my main point: that episodic oceanic feelings are best understood as transient shifts in

[10] This is a condensation of Comte-Sponville’s description. For further elaboration of its key features, see Comte-Sponville (2008, pp. 150–201).

existential feeling that consist in an experience of dissolution of the psychological and sensory boundaries of the self. In sum, the shift occurs in something that is pre-intentional, regardless of the changes it may bring about in intentional experience.

The question might be raised whether separating oceanic shifts that incorporate intentionality from those that do not calls for the addition of a third form of oceanic feeling, namely ‘episodic intentional’.¹¹ I do not find this necessary, since episodic oceanic feelings that incorporate intentionality are subsumed under pre-intentional oceanic shifts. In other words, an intentional feeling of oneness with any given object arises as a secondary effect within the context of a primary shift in existential feeling, i.e. an oceanic shift that consists in the feeling of boundary dissolution. It is worth noting that this account entails that the same unitary episodic feeling may include both intentional and pre-intentional aspects. I do not see this as particularly problematic; in fact, seeing as background existential feelings are characterized as structuring intentional states, surely existential feelings and intentional states can, and normally do, exist concurrently. The crucial question is whether kinds of *shifts* in existential feeling can occur that momentarily dissipate intentionality. I maintain that oceanic existential shifts may be precisely these kinds of experiences.

Let us now turn to the permanent form of oceanic feeling. I take this to be a stable ‘way of finding oneself in the world’. Moreover, I suggest that the term *existential orientation* best captures the constant, constitutive, and all-encompassing nature of this feeling. In short, an ‘existential orientation’ is a relatively settled and pervasive form of existential feeling. That said, spelling out the specific kind of ‘being in the world’ that the oceanic existential orientation constitutes is challenging. To begin with, it could be described as providing a background feeling of *unity* or *being at one* with the world. It is important to recognize, however, that here the ‘feeling of being at one’ is clearly distinct from the feeling of oneness that may accompany episodic oceanic shifts. The latter results from an experience of boundary dissolution that incorporates specific intentional objects. By contrast, the ‘feeling of being at one’ characteristic of the oceanic orientation describes how one’s relation to the world is fundamentally structured, without reference to episodic feeling. In sum, even if the oceanic orientation might predispose one to having experiences of boundary dissolution and attendant feelings of oneness with specific objects, these

[11] I thank an anonymous reviewer for making this observation.

cannot be regarded as essential/distinctive features of the orientation itself.

We may, however, question whether an underlying feeling of ‘being at one with the world’ suffices to distinguish the oceanic orientation from other (similar) existential orientations. As Ratcliffe observes, ‘we can feel at one with the world in many different ways — at one with nature, at home with others, like a smooth-running component harmoniously integrated into a bigger machine, at peace with things or part of things’ (Ratcliffe, 2008, p. 285). On that account, I propose three further criteria for the oceanic orientation. First, it imparts a sense of secure *embracement*, of ‘being held’, or in more poetic terms, of ‘not falling out of this world’.¹² Embracement is intimately connected with the next criterion, the sense of *immanence*. For want of a better description, this is the feeling of ‘something’ unperceivable permanently pervading and sustaining the universe. This is not, as Freud would have it, a mere ‘intellectual perception’ (Freud, 1930/1961, p. 65), but a pre-articulate feeling upon which a variety of religious and metaphysical beliefs can be founded. Finally, the oceanic orientation discloses a world of *significant possibility*, a world to be actively and creatively engaged with rather than one to be withdrawn from into a state of passivity.¹³ Rolland was notably wary of any sustained mystical disengagement from worldly affairs, and emphasized instead the energizing effect of the oceanic orientation on social and political action (Rolland, 1929/2007, pp. 167–8, 192; Parsons, 1999, pp. 173–4; Starr, 1971; Fisher, 1988).¹⁴ In short, the oceanic orientation is a background feeling of unity with a *certain kind* of world — an

[12] Rolland affirms this rather grandiloquently: ‘I feel myself held aloft by the infallible hand of the Free Necessity that emanates from God. I shall not fall, for I am nothing. My fall would be His... I can fall only in Him’ (Rolland, 1947/2010, pp. 21–2).

[13] The inclusion of this last criterion could be contested by claiming that it is a normative statement rather than a descriptive one, i.e. that it says something about what the oceanic orientation should give rise to, rather than what it consists in phenomenologically. However, I maintain that the fundamental feeling that the world can be engaged with in a meaningful way is a key experiential constituent of finding oneself in an ‘oceanic’ world, regardless of the actions that may follow. This criterion sets the oceanic orientation apart from similar yet more world-weary existential orientations that may also include background feelings of unity, embracement, and immanence. The addition of this final criterion is supported by the accounts of, for example, Rolland and Comte-Sponville. However, I grant that one could opt to omit this criterion and still be left with a relatively plausible account of the oceanic orientation. I thank an anonymous referee for requesting this clarification.

[14] See also Comte-Sponville (2008, p. 159), who discusses the lasting transformations his oceanic orientation has brought about in his relationships with the world, other people, himself, art, philosophy, and spirituality.

immanent world that embraces and opens up a space of meaningful possibility.

By and large, then, it seems that the oceanic orientation is experienced as giving a positive tone to 'being in the world'. This differs from the more ambiguous valence of episodic oceanic shifts, which may be experienced as anything from immensely liberating to downright terrifying. Perhaps the perception of the oceanic orientation as generally positive is due to its propensity to 'expand, unite, and say yes'. It can open up possibilities, promote a sense of connectedness, and push toward meaningful involvement in the world. This may be contrasted with a deeply depressive existential orientation that can be said to 'diminish, separate, and say no'. In both orientations the world reveals itself in a certain way, disclosing a particular space of possibility and significance. Whether an orientation is regarded as positive/beneficial or negative/pathological seems to turn on the sense of impoverishment and loss. Ratcliffe notes that in psychiatric illness there may be 'a loss of the sense of others, a feeling of disconnectedness from the world, a feeling of being imprisoned in a limited world, a loss of feeling, a feeling of the loss of feeling, a draining away of significance, a breakdown of coherence and so on' (Ratcliffe, 2008, p. 283). More specifically, 'what distinguishes a predicament as *existentially* pathological is a particular kind of loss, a loss of the sense of other people or a loss of possibilities involving access to other people' (*ibid.*, p. 287). Viewed in this light, the oceanic orientation tends to be a good thing. It unites and connects. However, this may not always be so: in some cases the orientation may be *felt* as positive while being simultaneously harmful/pathological. Coupled with a manic disposition, for instance, its tendency to 'expand, unite, and say yes' is liable to achieve detrimental proportions, resulting, amongst other things, in a loss of access to other people.

To conclude, the oceanic existential orientation can be understood as developing and establishing itself in many different ways. As mentioned earlier, existential feelings often come under scrutiny after significant shifts in their structure. Following Charles Taylor, we might say that these shifts open stable background orientations to a very fundamental kind of self-interpretative evaluation (Taylor, 1985, pp. 45–76). This can provide us with insight into our lives as subjects — into what our lives amount to, and into what matters to us. Ratcliffe puts a pronouncedly existential spin on this idea: 'when we reflect upon changes [in existential feeling], we come to recognize that there is a question to be addressed regarding the nature of our sense of reality, a question that cannot be asked if reality is taken as a given'

(Ratcliffe, 2008, p. 266). It is arguable that existential oceanic shifts tend to give rise to re-evaluations of reality, and may push one toward an oceanic existential orientation. Indeed, in the literature it is commonplace to find that oceanic shifts engender an effort to sustain the desirable ‘oceanic’ reality, often through methodical cultivation (see, for example, Comte-Sponville, 2008, p. 159; Ehrenzweig, 1967/2000; James, 1902/1994, pp. 436–61; Milner, 1957, pp. 142–3; Newton, 2008; Parsons, 1999, pp. 100–4; Rolland, 1947/2010, pp. 24–5). The methods vary from yoga to painting. Finally, having an oceanic orientation may predispose one to having episodes of boundary dissolution and, through that, to experiencing feelings of oneness with things. Whether or not oceanic shifts are *necessary* for an oceanic orientation to develop is an open question. I presume it is possible that such an orientation may unfold gradually, without pronounced experiences of boundary dissolution. This, however, is speculation.

4. Conclusion

In the broad view presented above, I have suggested that oceanic feelings come in two distinct forms: (1) as transient episodes that consist in a feeling of dissolution of the psychological and sensory boundaries of the self, and (2) as a relatively permanent feeling of unity, immanence, embracement, and openness that does not involve recurrent experiences of boundary dissolution. Both forms of oceanic feeling are existential feelings, i.e. pre-intentional bodily feelings that structure self–world experience on the whole. On these grounds, I have re-conceptualized episodic oceanic feelings as shifts in existential feeling, and permanent oceanic feelings as stable existential orientations. Furthermore, I have proposed that episodes of oceanic feeling may be experienced as devoid of any ascribable intentional object, or experienced as involving particular intentional objects, either real or imagined. In the latter cases feelings of oneness must follow.

In expounding the broad view I have sought to achieve two main objectives. Firstly, I have aimed to elucidate the experiential structure of oceanic feelings. This has served to resolve a significant conceptual tension inherent in prior theorization on oceanic feeling. Secondly, I have aimed to demonstrate that ‘existential feeling’ is a crucial conceptual tool in untangling the complex nature of affective experiencing. Whereas Ratcliffe and others have mainly applied ‘existential feeling’ to illuminate the experiential structure of mental illness, I have attempted to demonstrate its usefulness in a different domain through my analysis of oceanic feeling. On the whole, I hope to have

shown that the notion of ‘existential feeling’ helps us understand how pre-intentional background feelings shape our sense of reality and structure our intentional emotions, thoughts, and actions. Moreover, the theory of ‘existential feeling’ clarifies how this all-encompassing experience of reality can shift and thereby instigate the unfolding of alternative ways of ‘being in the world’. The analysis provided is thus a case study that not only clarifies the experiential nature of a particular class of feeling, but also throws light on the general phenomenological structure of our affective lives.¹⁵

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