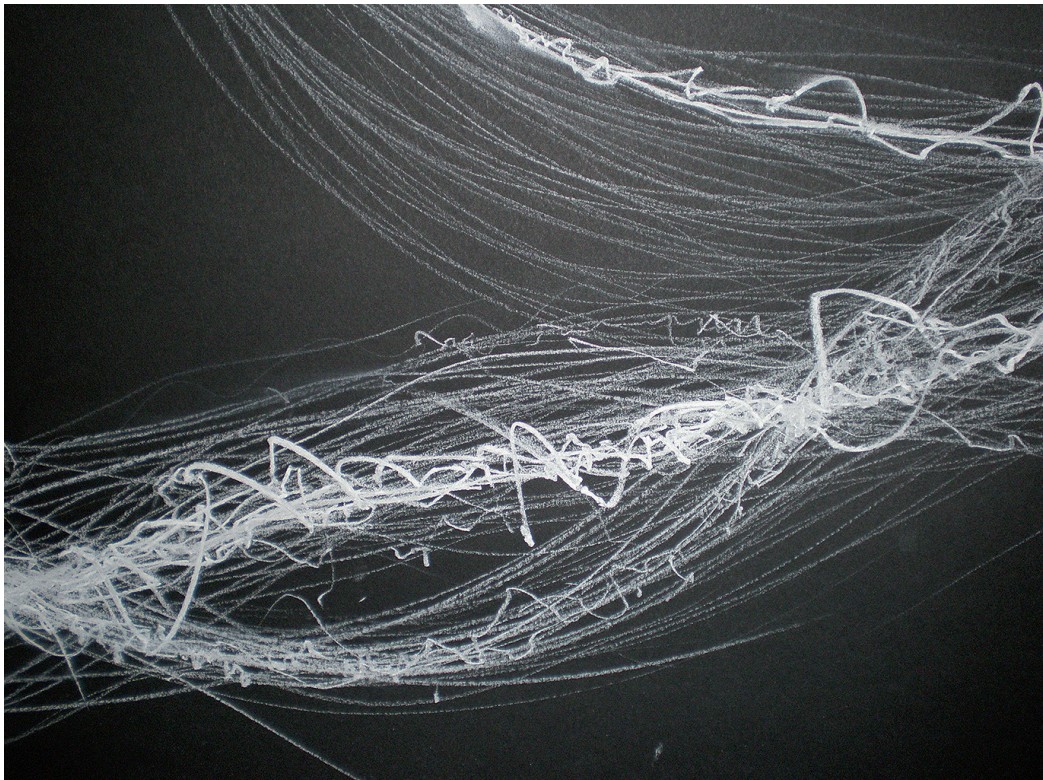


Jussi A. Saarinen

A Conceptual Analysis of the Oceanic Feeling

With a Special Note
on Painterly Aesthetics



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UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

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ABSTRACT

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The present study focuses on the concept of the oceanic feeling. It consists of four individual articles and an introduction. The introduction lays out the theoretical background for current debate on the topic, specifies the scope and aims of the thesis, and introduces its main ideas and arguments. The first article provides a comparative analysis of three primary accounts of the oceanic feeling, namely those of Romain Rolland, Sigmund Freud, and Anton Ehrenzweig. It is argued that these accounts share a basic theoretical structure that establishes as the necessary criterion for all oceanic states the loosening of ego boundaries and sufficient modal contact between differentiated and undifferentiated modalities of the mind. The implications of this notion are critically discussed. The second article examines Ehrenzweig's theory of oceanic states within painterly aesthetics. It calls into question two particular claims: first, that utilizing the undifferentiated mode of oceanic depth perception is a necessary precondition for authentic creativity, and second, that it projects into the artwork an unconscious substructure that lies beyond the reach of conscious perception. To sidestep some of the problems that these claims entail, a modification to Ehrenzweig's theorization is put forward. The third article introduces a novel taxonomical account of the oceanic feeling. It holds 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 relatively permanent feelings of unity, embracement, immanence, and openness that do not involve occurrent experiences of boundary dissolution. Based on the work of philosopher Matthew Ratcliffe, it is argued that both forms of oceanic feeling are existential feelings, i.e. pre-intentional bodily feelings that structure overall self-world experience. The fourth article elaborates on the aforementioned novel view within the context of painterly creativity. It is suggested that existential feelings may become the actual object of creative work. Oceanic changes in existential feeling may thus lead to a wider process of artistic self-transformation and to a restructuring of one's fundamental relations with oneself, others, and the world.

Keywords: oceanic feeling, Romain Rolland, Sigmund Freud, Anton Ehrenzweig, psychoanalysis, philosophy of emotion, Matthew Ratcliffe, existential feeling, artistic creativity, painterly aesthetics

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In Jyväskylä, 13.1.2015
Jussi A. Saarinen

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ORIGINAL PAPERS

LIST OF ORIGINAL PAPERS

- I Saariinen, J. A. (2012). The Oceanic State: A Conceptual Elucidation in Terms of Modal Contact. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 93 (4), 939–961.
- II Saariinen, J. A. (forthcoming). The Concept of the Oceanic Feeling in Artistic Creativity and in the Analysis of Visual Artworks. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 49 (3).
- III Saariinen, J. A. (2014). The Oceanic Feeling: A Case Study in Existential Feeling. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 21 (5–6), 196–217.
- IV Saariinen, J. A. (2014). The Oceanic Feeling in Painterly Creativity. *Contemporary Aesthetics*, vol. 12. Available online at <http://www.contempaesthetics.org>.

1 INTRODUCTION

The topic of this thesis is the concept of the oceanic feeling. Since its emergence into academic discussion, the concept has attracted the attention of scholars from various disciplines and theoretical backgrounds. However, despite being relatively well established, there is no definite consensus over its precise meaning. Opinions abound over the essential features of the feeling, the psychological mechanisms that bring it about, and the value it may hold. In other words, there are several significant points of discrepancy between extant accounts of the oceanic feeling. This study examines these accounts, considers their mutual relations, and puts forward a novel view that seeks to overcome their limitations. As a special point of emphasis, the study also considers the significance of the oceanic feeling in painterly aesthetics.

To provide a general understanding of current debate on the oceanic feeling, in section 1.1 I summarize the historical and semantic roots of the concept, and then discuss four contested points concerning the nature of the feeling. In doing so, I draw attention to several unsolved problems and underdeveloped areas of research on the topic. I will not present a neat taxonomy of the various accounts, nor will I provide a detailed exposé of any particular author's views on the matter. Instead, I refer to different authors' writings insofar as they exemplify the divergent views taken towards the oceanic feeling. On the whole, section 1.1 sets the stage for section 1.2, in which I specify the scope, aims, and composition of the thesis. To conclude, in section 1.3 I discuss the main ideas and arguments of my research.

1.1 Background and four key points of debate

The concept of the oceanic feeling made its way into academic discussion in the late 1920's through the correspondence between Sigmund Freud and French novelist Romain Rolland. Having read Freud's 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).¹ Rolland characterized this oceanic sentiment further as a dynamic source of vital renewal that occurred independently of any dogmatic constraints. He also pronounced that it was a constant state: a prolonged feeling that existed harmoniously alongside his critical faculties, uninformed by wishes for personal salvation or immortality. Finally, he claimed that the feeling was universal and thus analyzable with approximate accuracy. (See pp. 173–174.)

After nearly two years of hesitation, Freud finally offered an interpretation of the oceanic feeling in the first chapter of *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930). After reiterating Rolland’s description of the feeling, Freud declared he could not recognize it in himself, but appropriately deemed his personal disposition insufficient reason to deny its occurrence in others. Moreover, Freud proclaimed a general difficulty in dealing with feelings scientifically, and regarded the classification of the oceanic feeling based on its physiology an impractical option. He therefore turned to the “ideational contents” of the feeling, i.e. the conscious ideas most readily associated with its “feeling-tone” (1930, p. 65). Freud rephrased these ideational contents as those of “limitlessness and of a bond with the universe” (p. 68), of “an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole” (p. 65), and of “oneness with the universe” (p. 72). Moreover, he noted how the feeling could engender the special belief that “we cannot fall out of this world”, which might provide some consolation in the face of harsh reality (p. 65).

Importantly, Rolland had suggested that the oceanic feeling provided indisputable knowledge about the metaphysical nature of self-world relations, and by virtue of this was non-dogmatically religious in itself. Freud, however, was unconvinced, and undermined Rolland’s claim by providing a strictly ontogenetic interpretation of the oceanic feeling. In his view, the feeling was due to a primary state of all-embracing unity between infant and mother, which could be psychically preserved alongside “the narrower and more sharply demarcated ego feeling of maturity” (1930, p. 68). Freud had thus found a suitable match between the ideational contents he had derived from Rolland’s description and his own conception of an early phase of psychic development. In this scenario the oceanic feeling was nothing but the revival of infantile experience, and on that account, contained no inherent religious quality. Furthermore, that any particular feeling should exist for the sole purpose of revealing a metaphysical state of affairs was in Freud’s opinion completely alien to psychoanalytic thinking. He duly rounded off his public reply to Rolland in 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” (p. 72).

¹ In the French original, the 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).

Freud and Rolland never reached 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 and existential rewards of mystical experience on the other (see the Freud-Rolland correspondence in Parsons, 1999, pp. 170–179; and Rolland, 1930, pp. 277–288). The deadlock also owed to Freud’s limited grasp of the very essence of Rolland’s feeling. This shortcoming was not altogether surprising, given Freud’s skeptical approach to mysticism, the somewhat sketchy description he was given, and his lack of retrospective knowledge of Rolland’s overall ideological development. Even so, the impact of Freud’s analysis of the oceanic feeling on subsequent discussion has been immense. Indeed, after Freud had analyzed the feeling in terms of primary narcissism a general tendency to emphasize its regressive, defensive, and episodic aspects prevailed. William B. Parsons encapsulates this, the received view, concisely: “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” (1999, pp. 35–36).²

To clarify, we may break the received view down into four interconnected premises: 1) That the oceanic feeling consists in a *feeling of oneness with the universe*, 2) that the feeling is a *transient episode*, 3) that the feeling is psychologically generated by *regression into infantile unity*, and 4) that the feeling ultimately serves *reality-denying, defensive purposes*. Over the years, these four claims have been increasingly called into question. Accordingly, the main points of the present debate can be identified as concerning: a) the *distinctive experiential features* of the oceanic feeling, b) its possible *duration*, c) its *generating mechanisms*, and d) its *functional value*. I will now review each of these points in light of extant accounts of the oceanic feeling. This will serve to contextualize and elucidate the specific aims and scope of my thesis.

a) *Distinctive experiential features*

The most commonly highlighted experiential feature of the oceanic feeling is the *feeling of oneness* (or fusion/merger/union) with one’s entire surroundings. This is in line with Freud’s characterization of the feeling’s ideational contents as those of “being one with the external world as a whole”, and of “oneness with the universe”. Even so, there have been divergent opinions concerning *what* one can feel at one with in oceanic experience. While some authors have

² For more discussion on the emergence of the concept from the Freud-Rolland correspondence and its subsequent significance for the psychoanalysis-mysticism debate, see e.g. Fisher, 1976; Werman, 1977; Parsons, 1999, 2013; Fried, 2003; Meissner, 2005; Simmonds, 2006; Vermorel, 2008; Merkur, 2010.

claimed that the oceanic feeling is a feeling of oneness with the universe exclusively (see e.g. Werman, 1986; Goldie, 2008), others have suggested it can take on other objects as well, including deities (Mills, 1999), music (Kohut, 2011), meditational objects (Epstein, 1990), parts of nature (Koestler, 1954), and works of art (Stokes, 1978; Milner, 1957, 1987; Ehrenzweig, 1967; Wolson, 1995; Newton, 2001, 2008; Krausz, 2009). On the former exclusionary view, the oceanic feeling can be classified as one type of feeling of oneness, distinguished by its specific intentional object, the universe (see Goldie, 2008). In contrast, if we were to gather the latter inclusive views into an overall account, most if not all feelings of oneness could in effect be classified as oceanic, regardless of their intentional objects. Arthur Koestler captures the inclusive stance aptly: "That higher entity, of which the self feels a part, to which it surrenders its identity, may be nature, God, the anima mundi, the magic of form, or the ocean of sound" (2009, p. 258). However, it is worth noting that, although many authors encapsulate the oceanic feeling in terms of oneness with the 'universe', 'world', or 'everything', they may be using these concepts as figurative substitutes for various objects that are taken on in experience. Hence a painting that one feels completely at one with may under such circumstances be described as constituting one's entire world. In sum, many would agree with the gist of Mortimer Ostow's depiction of the oceanic feeling as an expression of the sense of union: "union with the lost object, union with the supernatural informant, union with everybody, everywhere, and union with the universe" (2007, p. 45-46).

In addition to the feeling of oneness, the *feeling of self-boundary dissolution* (or boundlessness/limitlessness/expansion) has commonly been presented as a core feature of the oceanic feeling. In fact, oneness and self-boundary dissolution have often been conflated or seen as inseparable aspects of the same oceanic experience. As such, the nature of their mutual relations and the possibility of their experiential distinctness have largely gone unexamined. Joel Kovel, for example, typifies the predominant approach by depicting the oceanic feeling as both a "sense of being one with the universe and of dissolving the boundaries of the ego" (1990, p. 71). There are, however, exceptions to viewing oneness and dissolution as inextricable. Consider Koestler's recollection of his own oceanic feeling. He writes: "The 'I' ceases to exist because it has, by a kind of mental osmosis, established communication with, and been dissolved in, the universal pool. It is the process of dissolution and limitless expansion which is sensed as the 'oceanic feeling,' as the draining of all tension, the absolute catharsis, the peace that passeth all understanding." (1954, p. 350-354.) Here unity could be interpreted as a possible outcome of the oceanic process of 'dissolution and limitless expansion'. More to the point, Robert C. Forman (1998) has proposed that the oceanic feeling is indeed a *precursor* to potential feelings of oneness. That is, he has identified the oceanic feeling as a dualist state of self-expansion in which one's awareness is field-like and unbounded, gradually broadening beyond the limits of the body. This state may then evolve into a unitive mystical state in which the perceived expansion of the self is experienced as permeating and

merging with things of the world.³ Interestingly enough, an experiential dimension defined as “oceanic boundlessness” has also been identified in studies on synesthesia and sexual ecstasy (Nielsen, Kruger, Hartmann, Passie, Fehr & Zedler, 2013) and hallucinogen-induced altered states of consciousness (Vollenweider, Gamma & Vollenweider-Scherpenhuyzen, 1999; Vollenweider, 2001). In these studies oceanic boundlessness has been characterized as a pleasurable experience of de-realization and ego-dissolution. Research suggests that ego-dissolution can begin with a mere loosening of ego-boundaries, which may or may not culminate in a feeling of merger with the universe (comparable to a full-blown mystical experience) (Vollenweider et al., 1999).

Finally, there are two additional features of the oceanic feeling that have not received quite as much attention as oneness and self-boundary dissolution. The first of these is the *feeling of connectedness* (or bonding/contact/communion) with something beyond oneself. This feature was also present in the Freud-Rolland correspondence. Whereas Rolland described his oceanic sensation as a ‘contact’, Freud rephrased its content as that of ‘an indissoluble bond with the universe’. In the words of David J. Fisher, “Rolland proposed that the oceanic feeling was a sensation of... *sublime connection* to objects, to one’s entire self, and to the universe as an indivisible whole. It ended the separation of the self from the outside world and from others and promised the individual participation in higher spiritual realms.” (1982, p. 256, my italics.) In this sense, the oceanic feeling can be seen to entail a feeling of ontological security and connectedness (see e.g. Levin, 1988; Epstein, 1990; Kovel, 1990) or, in more poetic terms, the feeling that one cannot ‘fall out of this world’. Lastly, the *feeling of eternity* (or timelessness/atemporality) completes the basic experiential profile of the oceanic feeling. Not only does the oceanic experience transcend psycho-spatial boundaries, it also dispenses with temporal restraints. As Hans Loewald puts it, “only a “now”, outside time, remains” (2000, p. 571).

Besides the primary characteristics enumerated above, most accounts identify various secondary affects typical of the oceanic state. Ecstasy, mania, joy, bliss, wellbeing, peace, tranquility, harmony, sublimity and vitality are among the most frequently mentioned positive affects (see e.g. Ehrenzweig, 1967; Storr, 1989; Fauteux, 1995; Rooney, 2007; Comte-Sponville, 2008). On the flip side, the oceanic feeling has been noted to induce negative affects ranging from fear of drowning and “losing one’s hold on the solid earth” (Milner, 1957, p. 24) to overwhelming dread and horror of annihilation (Harrison, 1986). Moreover, several psychoanalytical authors have introduced the controversial notion that the experience involves specific *latent* affects and impulses. Kevin Fauteux (1995), for instance, has suggested that the oceanic feeling may express denied sexual desires and aggressive impulses. D. J. Fisher makes the same point rather more dramatically: “Rolland’s oceanism conceals a strong sadistic

³ To be precise, Forman distinguishes not only between the oceanic feeling and feelings of unity, but between the oceanic feeling and feelings of self-boundary permeability, as well. On his view, the oceanic feeling of expansion should thus be seen as the precursor to feelings of both self-boundary dissolution and unity.

impulse, a monumental fury against humanity, a drive to destroy civilization..." (1982, p. 267). Jeffrey M. Masson, in turn, has argued that oceanic bliss implicitly incorporates "feelings of sadness" and "feelings of disgust with the world" (1980, p. 51). Whether or not such latent feelings underlie the oceanic feeling, they can be considered secondary since they are not phenomenologically distinctive of the experience itself.

In sum, the basic experiential features of oneness, dissolution, connectedness, and eternity are accentuated and combined in various ways in extant descriptions of the oceanic feeling. At least one of these basic features is always deemed necessary and distinctive of the oceanic feeling (with feelings of oneness and ego-dissolution most commonly suggested), whereas the secondary features can be regarded as contingent and therefore non-essential to the feeling. With all these different feelings thrown into the mix, the distinctive experiential profile of the oceanic feeling is still open to debate. Moreover, if oneness and ego-dissolution are seen as elemental yet distinct, unanswered questions over their relations remain. Is one prior to the other? Are both necessary for the oceanic feeling?

b) Duration

In his letters to Freud, Rolland had described his oceanic sensation as a "constant state", a "prolonged feeling", and a "vital trait" of his character (quoted in Parsons, 1999, pp. 173-174, 177-178). In other words, he suggested the feeling was in some sense a persistent phenomenon. Despite this, the overwhelming majority of authors have regarded the feeling as a *transient* emotional episode. This can be expected for at least two reasons. First, a continuous feeling of oneness, dissolution, etc. seems highly improbable and difficult to grasp both experientially and theoretically. Indeed, it is in the nature of emotions to be felt episodically; they tend to wax and wane in conscious experience. Second, most authors have likely been unaware of Rolland's characterization of the feeling, and have therefore relied chiefly on Freud's paraphrase of the matter. Whether or not Freud himself recognized the suggested permanence of Rolland's feeling is open to debate (see e.g. Parsons, 1999, for an affirmative view). Either way, Freud did not especially emphasize or explicate this aspect in his paradigmatic analysis of the feeling. In short, then, the oceanic feeling has generally been seen as a momentary disruption of normal conscious experience. Even authors that grant the feeling may somehow persist tend to consider it best relinquished for the sake of adaptive functioning. In Anthony Storr's words, "it would be naïve to suppose that people who reach this state of peace maintain it uninterruptedly or for ever. If life is to continue, one cannot linger for ever in a state of oceanic tranquillity." (1989, p. 197.)

The question of transience versus permanence has been raised into general awareness only relatively recently. Fisher was one of the earliest to note that Rolland's oceanic feeling was "a *prolonged* intuitive feeling of contact with the

eternal" (1982, p. 256, my italics). However, it was Parsons' comprehensive analysis of the Rolland-Freud correspondence that first highlighted the import of the matter (see Parsons, 1998; 1999). Crucially, Parsons distinguishes between the transient mystical episodes of Rolland's youth and the permanent mystical state of his maturity, and argues that Rolland himself identified the latter as the oceanic feeling. In Parsons' terms the feeling was a stable developmental achievement, "the existential denouement of a mystical and psychological process of becoming" (1999, p. 104). On this view, the oceanic feeling is a consciously cultivated and relatively persistent way of experiencing the world rather than a momentary lapse of everyday consciousness. However, Parsons has not explicated the manner in which such a constant state could (or should) be specified as an *affective* state, for instance as a feeling, mood, or emotion.

As far as I am aware, philosopher Peter Goldie (2008) is the only author who has considered the claim of constancy within a coherent theory of emotion. In brief, Goldie classifies the oceanic feeling as a mood, and then suggests that Rolland had a relatively lasting disposition to be in such moods. Goldie notes, for example, how "Rolland thought of himself as having a natural tendency to have feelings of oneness, to be in this kind of state" (p. 226). Moreover, 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" (p. 226). Despite these interesting observations, Goldie's reflection on duration is cut short: his remarks are suggestive rather than conclusive. As it stands, then, the discussion concerning duration remains theoretically underdeveloped. There is no detailed explication of what constitutes the permanent oceanic feeling, nor is there a cogent account as to how the episodic and permanent forms of oceanic feeling might stand in relation to each other.

c) *Generating mechanisms*

What kinds of mechanisms give rise to the oceanic feeling? Given that the bulk of answers originate from psychoanalytical theorization, it is unsurprising that ontogenetic and psychodynamic factors have gained explanatory prominence. Following Freud, the more traditional accounts explain the feeling in terms of *regression to an infantile developmental state*. Their guiding premise is that neonates inhabit a state of ego-undifferentiation and infant-mother unity. An affective, pre-symbolic memory of this state persists, and can subsequently be revived as the oceanic feeling. Mahler, Pine, and Bergman, for example, famously distinguished "normal symbiosis" as "that state of undifferentiation, of fusion with mother, in which "I" is not yet differentiated from the "not-I" and in which inside and outside are only gradually coming to be sensed as different" (1989, p. 44). Based on this, they surmised that the "dual unity within one common boundary... is perhaps what Freud and Romain Rolland discussed in their dialogue as the sense of boundlessness of the oceanic feeling" (p. 44). More recently, Fauteux (1994) and Ostow (2007) have followed a similar line of rea-

soning. Fauteux maintains that the adult oceanic experience regressively restores the symbiotic state, albeit imperfectly, and in doing so revives early feelings of tranquility, passivity, and unity. In his words, “symbiotic unity still seems the most incisive way to describe unitive oceanic experience and the archaic infant-maternal matrix it restores” (1994, p. 222). Ostow in turn reflects: “If our thoughts about regression are correct, then the oceanic feeling may reproduce the feeling that the infant has lost when he begins to appreciate that he and his mother are two separate individuals. The mystic’s yearning for union then expresses the wish to reunite with the mother into a symbiotic unit. Perhaps it is not yearning; perhaps the illusion of union satisfies the regressive need.” (2007, p. 46.) Ostow emphasizes that the oceanic feeling does not gratify the wish in mere imagination; instead, it involves the genuine reactivation of “a complex of affects and dispositions that prevailed early in childhood” (p. 69).

The aforementioned accounts hinge on the notion of primary unity between infant and mother. During the past few decades, however, this premise has been increasingly undermined by empirical infant research (for critical discussions, see e.g. Peterfreund, 1978; Horner, 1985; Stern, 1985; Harrison, 1986; Lachmann & Beebe, 1989; Merkur, 1999; Rochat, 2003; Pine, 2004; Silverman, 2004; Reddy, 2008; Taipale, 2014a). Indeed, recent evidence suggests there is no early phase of union or undifferentiation to which one can later return or regress. Instead, neonates appear to enter the world with a rudimentary form of non-reflexive self-awareness: they are able to distinguish themselves from others and are actively engaged with their environments. Following this shift in understanding, some authors have suggested that the oceanic feeling is due to a regressive and/or wish-fulfilling *fantasy* rather than the re-evocation of a pre-existent state (Harrison, 1986; Lachmann & Beebe, 1989). I. B. Harrison, for example, has argued that there is “no basis for the assumption that the oceanic feeling exists in normal infants or children”; hence “the fact that some adults experience oceanic feelings does not imply that they represent the original psychic state of the neonate” (1986, p. 156, 157). He concludes that “nothing is returned to, in the extreme regression of the oceanic feeling, except in fantasy” (p. 156). On this view the oceanic feeling is not a return to a prior state; however, it is still unmistakably regressive in its reversion to an infantile and hallucinatory form of wish fulfillment.⁴

In critical response to views that have emphasized regression in one form or another, accounts that either minimize its role or dispense with it altogether have also been advanced (see e.g. Deikman, 1966; Ehrenzweig, 1967; Werman, 1986; Storr, 1989; Kovel, 1990; Merkur, 1999; Loewald, 2000; Meissner, 2005; Rooney, 2007). Even though many of these accounts continue to subscribe to the

⁴ More recently, Joonas Taipale (2014a) has put forward a view that seeks to reconcile primary unity/symbiosis theories with those that advocate primary differentiation. He maintains that infantile experience consists of two co-constitutive elements: pleasure-seeking fantasy and factual kinaesthetic feel, perception, etc. This makes room for the claims of both groups of theories. Whereas moments of merger and union take place in the register of fantasy, moments of differentiation take place in the register of bodily fact.

unity/symbiosis view of neonatal life, they opt to explain the oceanic feeling in terms of present-day, fully developed psychological functioning. As David Werman (1986) puts it, “although the relative absence of boundaries in the infant may be the *prototype* for the oceanic experience and for states of consciousness where self-boundaries are blurred or disappear altogether, it is clear that these experiences are not simple regressions to an infantile level. The oceanic experience... is an *adult* phenomenon which in no significant manner can be duplicated by the infant.” (p. 136.) Kovel (1990) also maintains that an infantile prototype of the oceanic feeling truly exists, and like all “memories” of early development, can affect later experience. Even so, he makes a clear distinction between infantile and adult oceanic feelings. The key difference between the two is “that the infantile prototype of the oceanic experience must be in essence a moment of *falling asleep, of losing consciousness*”, whereas “all religious oceanic moments are marked by an *awakening, or a gaining of consciousness* – not the discharge of tension” (p. 74). Based on this, Kovel concludes that the “infantile version of the oceanic experience is simply that – a *version, or to use another term, an occasion*... Thus we need not assume that later versions of the oceanic experience are somehow produced by the memory of the first one.” (p. 76.)

In place of regression, then, several alternative explanatory mechanisms have been put forward. One such mechanism consists in the intrapsychic interplay between two separate modes of mentation. Broadly put, one of these modes is considered primary, free-flowing, and unconscious, while the other is secondary, rigid, and predominantly conscious.⁵ The oceanic feeling occurs when the primary mode blends into, displaces, or is sublimated into the secondary one. Anton Ehrenzweig exemplifies this approach by pointing out that the oceanic state “need not be due to a ‘regression’, to an infantile state, but could be the product of the extreme dedifferentiation in lower levels of the ego” (1967, p. 294). In his view, unconscious cognition is characterized by perceptual dedifferentiation. As this undifferentiated mode of perception disrupts differentiated conscious perception, it may also remove “the boundaries of individual existence and so produce a mystic oceanic feeling that is distinctively manic in quality” (p. 294). In similar fashion, Arthur Deikman (1966, 1971) has discussed the “de-automatization” of cognitive-perceptual structures in mystical self-boundary dissolution and unity. He describes deautomatization as the undoing of the analytic, abstract, and intellectual mode of adult thinking. In relation to mystical experiencing, Deikman (1966, p. 331) notes that “[o]ne might call the direction [of de-automatization] regressive in a developmental sense, but the actual experience is probably not within the psychological scope of any child.” Rather, “it is a de-automatization occurring in an adult mind, and the experience gains its richness from adult memories and functions now subject to a dif-

⁵ In psychoanalysis, these modes have been defined as primary and secondary (or depth and surface level) thinking. Primary process thinking strives towards immediate drive gratification, and is characterized by undifferentiated perception, preverbal content, and illogical forms and associations. Secondary process mentation, in contrast, is analytical and regulatory. It is governed by the rules of logic and causality, differentiated perception, and the reality principle.

ferent mode of consciousness" (p. 331). Lastly, Daniel Merkur (1999) has suggested that the oceanic feeling is due to a creative sublimation of primary merger fantasies. He maintains that the sublimation of these concrete fantasies of oneness with the maternal breast into actual experiences of oneness with "all-being" presupposes a sophisticated process of generalization, metaphorization, and abstraction. On these grounds, Merkur regards unitive experiences as "creative inspirations" that are "incommensurate with their ostensible sources in infancy" (p. 70).⁶

Some authors have stretched the explanatory parameters to include distinctly transcendental and mystical considerations. Rolland (1929; 1930; 1947), for example, drew on monist thought to conceptualize his oceanic feeling as contact with an absolute substance underlying all individuated being. In his view, this eternal and limitless "Ocean of Being" could be found in the individual (unconscious) mind, but was not restricted to or ontologically dependent upon its functioning. More recently, Cunningham (2006) has considered the oceanic feeling in similar terms as an awareness of the eternal "Self" discussed in Advaita Vedanta philosophy. Forman (1998), in turn, has suggested that the oceanic feeling is the experiential manifestation of an unlocalizable field-like consciousness that transcends the body, yet somehow interacts with it. On the whole, accounts that posit explanatory elements that reach beyond individual development and mentation tend to conceptualize these elements in religio-mystical or highly speculative terms. As interesting as such accounts may be, they tend to raise more questions than they answer.

At first glance, the explanations reviewed above may seem mutually incompatible. However, several authors have variously reconciled developmental, intrapsychic, and metaphysical factors in their accounts of the oceanic feeling (see e.g. Kovel, 1990; Parsons, 1999; Meissner, 2005; Newton, 2008). These accounts share the conviction that no single factor is explanatorily sufficient on its own. The term *transcendence* is often used to suggest that the feeling rises above a narrow set of developmental or psychological constituents. This idea is articulated by Kovel, who asks: "Does Freud's view of the oceanic experience adequately replace all transcendent kinds of explanation? Is there, in other words, nothing left over to the oceanic experience once its infantile roots have been laid bare?" (1990, p. 74.) He replies that, even if the adult oceanic feeling is influenced by ontogenetic factors, it exceeds the explanatory bounds of mere regressive-developmental dynamics. Likewise, Stephen Newton (2008) has located the prototype of oceanic experience in early ontogenesis, but criticizes classical psychoanalytic views for emphasizing developmental explanations at the expense of transcendental sources. Although Newton rejects any "union with the divine" or "visitation from a deity" (p. 80), he maintains "that the developmental *and* transcendental must coexist in the mystical experience if it is to have real mean-

⁶ Merkur has later qualified this view: "A decade ago, I advanced the suggestion that mystical experiences are *sublimations* of merger fantasies; but in retrospect I find the proposal unsatisfactory. It may be true; but even if it is, its explanatory power does not begin to do justice to the variety and complexity of unitive experiences." (2010, p. 18.)

ing" (p. 94). W. W. Meissner (2005) in turn acknowledges that "[b]oth regression and sublimation may have a role to play at certain stages or in certain aspects of the mystical progression", but contends "that they fall short of encompassing the full complexity of mystical experiences, and in no case do they serve as defining mechanisms of such experience" (p. 539). Building on Winnicottian theory, he classifies the oceanic feeling as a transitional experience in which the mystic's inner, subjective psychic life intersects with an external, possibly divine or otherwise metaphysically transcendent reality. Meissner thus maintains we should make room for the contributions of mystical theology alongside psychoanalysis.

Finally, on a strictly neurophysiological level the oceanic feeling appears to relate to changes in brain metabolism (Vollenweider et al., 1999). More precisely, the pleasurable experience of ego-boundary dissolution – i.e. the aforementioned dimension of oceanic boundlessness (OSE) – seems to involve the Central Neural Authority, a fronto-parietal network of areas responsible for the formation of a coherent sense of self in time and space. Based on research on hallucinogen-induced states of consciousness, Vollenweider et al. (1999) have suggested that extreme alterations in self-boundary experience and space-time perception may be produced by the overstimulation of the Central Neural Authority. The pleasure associated with oceanic boundlessness may in turn be due to a concomitant decrease in amygdala activity (Vollenweider, 2001).

Despite the diversity of generating mechanisms put forward, the question whether oceanic feelings experienced by different individuals (or by the same individual on separate occasions) could be due to differing mechanisms has largely gone unexamined. Could it be that in some cases the feeling might be caused, for example, by sublimated fantasies of unity (Lachmann & Beebe, 1989; Merkur, 1999), in other cases by unconscious perceptual dedifferentiation (Ehrenzweig, 1967), and in yet others by traces of early affective experiencing (Ostow, 2007)? If such plurality of causation is considered seriously, it would be apposite to elucidate the personal and situational factors that condition the emergence of the feeling. These factors may include for instance the activity the individual is engaged in, his psychodynamic history, beliefs, expectations and aims, and finally, his present affective state. In short, it is worth considering whether in separate cases differing personal and situational factors may induce different generating mechanisms to bring about the oceanic feeling.

d) Functional value

The value of the oceanic feeling was one of the main points of contention between Rolland and Freud. Rolland maintained that the benefits of the feeling were multiple: it could deliver knowledge of immutable metaphysical truths, guide socio-ethical behavior, inspire creativity, constitute a non-dogmatic religious life, and vitalize one's entire being. Freud, on the contrary, expressly denied that the oceanic state was either a reliable source of objective knowledge,

the origin of religion, or suitable for adaptation to the surrounding world. He did, however, recognize that the restoration of all-encompassing primary narcissism could play a consolatory role by denying outside threats to the ego (1930, p. 72).

The thoughts about value present in the Rolland-Freud correspondence have re-emerged in various forms in subsequent discussion on the oceanic feeling.⁷ Attitudes towards value can be broadly categorized into three groups: principally negative, principally positive, and neutral/mixed. Accounts in the negative group take a highly skeptical or straightforwardly rejective stance towards the possibility of positive value. This position tends to go hand in hand with viewing the oceanic feeling as a pathological form of defense. The most prominent example of this approach is Masson's *The Oceanic Feeling: The Origins of Religious Sentiment in India* (1980). Masson prefaces his study by asserting that psychoanalysis can reveal the defensive and pathological nature of much, if not all, religious behavior. Typical of asceticism, for example, is flight from a disconcerting (inner) reality. The inability to recognize or face emotions such as loss, sadness, and the yearning for contact leads to a detachment from healthy human relations – the only source of authentic happiness (p. 1–16). Simply put, the “desire for union [in the oceanic feeling] is both an attempt to deny a deeper need for companionship, and a means of displaying totally-disguised annihilation fantasies” (p. 70). Harrison argues the same point: “The oceanic feeling as observed in adults is a symptom, incorporating a defensive maneuver, comparable to a delusion denying the fact of intense distress” (1986, p. 156). On these views, then, the oceanic feeling is a negative denial of basic human need and a psychopathological retreat from an unsatisfying world.

On the opposite end of the spectrum the oceanic feeling is considered highly valuable and hence commendable. Some authors have highlighted the positive effects the feeling has on particular activities, most notably artistic creativity (Ehrenzweig, 1967; Milner, 1987; Rooney, 2007; Newton, 2008; Krausz, 2009). Others have discussed its benefits to an overall sense of being (Levin, 1988; Storr, 1989; Kovel, 1990; Loewald, 2000; Comte-Sponville, 2008). On an experiential level the feeling has been experienced as vitalizing one's entire being and safeguarding creativity from psychic rigidity and sterility. On the epistemological and ethical levels the feeling has been said to reveal the interconnectedness and unity underlying all reality, and as a result, to transform how we relate to others and ourselves. For this reason Kovel has argued that the oceanic feeling should serve as basis for social change. He claims somewhat ominously that “unless there is a radical transformation of society grounded in the sense of universal interconnectedness, we are all quite doomed (1990, p. 84). Hence “the truth embedded in the oceanic experience will have to be recognized for what it is instead of being pathologized or relegated to the sphere of

⁷ See Parsons (1999) for a comprehensive elucidation of how the positions taken on value by Rolland and Freud are discernible in later psychoanalytical discussions of the oceanic feeling. Parsons also questions whether Freud's assessment of mysticism – and hence the oceanic feeling – was as negative as is commonly presumed.

regression" (p. 84). David M. Levin views the feeling similarly as grounds for subverting a metaphysics that promotes unjustifiably rigid subject-object distinctions: "It is this 'feeling', this awareness, which preserves, through all the vicissitudes of ego-logical history, a sense of the ground, the 'unifying unity' of subject and object. Its retrieval and redemption are therefore necessary for the deconstruction of structures of experience reified under the influence of our prevailing metaphysics." (1988, p. 218–219.) Levin, like Kovel, sets his sights on wider social reform: "What I have in mind, then, is a movement which is not (so to speak) 'completed' until the 'oceanic' experience, the wisdom of interconnectedness and wholeness, has been brought back, brought into the present, and appropriately integrated into present living." (p. 218–219).

This brings us to the third and final group of views on value. Accounts in this group recognize that oceanic feelings may play various psychological functions, including goal-oriented, adaptive, defensive, and creative ones (see e.g. Werman, 1986; Parsons, 1999). As a consequence, such accounts are less likely to promulgate straightforwardly negative or positive evaluations of the feeling. Rather, the value of any given instance of the feeling is considered dependent upon its context, and especially on its outcomes. Take, for instance, André Comte-Sponville's remarks concerning the existential consequences of his personal oceanic experiences: "Though few and far between, these experiences have changed my daily life, making it a bit less heavy – and even, on good days, happier. They have lastingly transformed my relationship to the world, to other people, to myself, to art... to philosophy, to spirituality." (2008, p. 159.) From this point of view, then, for the oceanic feeling to be valuable "its fruits must be good for life" (James, 1902, p. 437). On the other end of the spectrum, the feeling may be symptomatic of psychopathology or open to manipulation by others with morally suspect motives. While generally valuing the feeling highly, Kovel also acknowledges "that the state of connectedness, or the oceanic consciousness that accompanies it, is not in itself a good thing", and cites the Nazi movement's exploitation of "oceanic release" as a notoriously malignant counterexample (1990, p. 86).

To shed more light on variable value, Fauteux (1995) has elaborated on the factors that determine whether the oceanic feeling is considered beneficial or detrimental. In his view, the deciding factor is whether the regressive feeling occurs in the service of the ego. For the oceanic state to be beneficent, one must "play with" the primary process it uncovers, "return to the world", and "act on" the experience (p. 81; for a similar view, see Wolson, 1995, on 'adaptive grandiosity'). In other words, "a re-emergence out of the unitive state into reality and the creative elaboration of its unconscious structures is necessary for the state to have beneficent, salutary value" (p. 160). Moreover, "the experience must be transient, not clung to, even though a regressive urge to remain may exist" (p. 160). On a more cautionary note, Fauteux points out how "a person might find that the maternal abyss is too seductive or voracious and does devour her" (p. 160). This may lead to a sense of being overwhelmed and lost, or even to psychosis. To highlight the differences in experienced value, Fauteux quotes Joseph

Campbell: "The schizophrenic patient is actually experiencing inadvertently that same beatific ocean deep which the yogi and saint are striving to enjoy: except that, whereas they are swimming in it, he is drowning" (p. 162-3).

Finally, some accounts of the oceanic feeling convey rather conflicted or ambiguous views regarding its benefits and harms. Consider Fisher's account (see 1982; 2004). In his comment on Parsons' book *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling*, Fisher criticizes the author for his unwillingness "to accept the classical formulation of mysticism as immature, pathological, and primitive", and for maintaining "that mysticism can be therapeutic and adaptive" (2004, p. xxvi). Fisher then makes important distinctions between Parsons' account and his own: "[Parsons] takes strong exception to my interpretation of the oceanic feeling, rejecting out of hand my emphasis on narcissistic dynamics, the role of rage, despair, and self-inflation, and self-devaluation; he particularly finds offensive my view of the mechanism of reaction formation at the core of the oceanic feeling, especially with regard to the displacement of hostile and aggressive urges into loving and unifying ones." (pp. xxvi-xxvii.) To make his position clear, Fisher concludes: "I remain unconvinced about the healing or reparative value of mystical approaches to the mind" (p. xxvii). Having said that, Fisher nonetheless portrays Rolland's oceanic feeling as beneficent on several fronts: he tells us how it provided Rolland with comfort, artistic inspiration, a sense of meaning, access to others and the world, and feelings of empathy and compassion for those who suffer (2004, p. 78, pp. 138-139, pp. 300-302). It is unclear how such favorable consequences are compatible with Fisher's prior emphases on reaction formation, pathology, and immaturity.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that the value of the oceanic feeling has sometimes been confused with its presumed cause. Rolland, for instance, appeared to equate regression with negative value (1930, p. 286). Freud attempted to rectify Rolland's misconception by pointing out that psychoanalytical terms such as regression, narcissism, and the pleasure principle were of a purely descriptive nature, and did not carry any valuation per se (see Parsons, 1999, pp. 176-177). In the same vein, Goldie has observed that we can remain neutral about the origins of the oceanic feeling "whilst we are concerned with its ideational contents in mature adults, and whilst we are concerned with its value" (2008). Simply put, the value of the feeling is neither reducible to nor explained away by its generating mechanisms. Goldie asks whether we should try to avoid the oceanic feeling, seeing as it is in a sense misplaced: the feeling is of oneness when there are in fact many, or of faded boundaries when they are in fact intact. Indeed, delusion and disorder are real, adverse possibilities. However, Goldie is quick to add that not all oceanic feelings are necessarily like this; great joy, for instance, is also a possible outcome. Since the experience may turn out to have negative or positive value, or perhaps even both, Goldie suggests we pay heed to its *appropriateness* conditions, and leaves it at that. In sum, then, even though several authors have examined the oceanic feeling as a multivalent phenomenon, the varieties and determinants of its possible value are still open to debate. As a starting point, a clearer distinction between generating mecha-

nisms and value would definitely help attenuate the ambivalence found in some accounts.

In this background review I have highlighted four key points of debate concerning the oceanic feeling: its distinctive experiential features, its duration, its generating mechanisms, and its functional value. In doing so, I have identified relevant problems in current theorization on the topic. On the whole, the review has enabled a more extensive discussion of the literature than the thesis articles individually permit. Even so, I have not attempted to provide a comprehensive overview or classification of the various accounts according to the views they endorse. It should also be kept in mind that the discussed authors' views are often separated by subtle distinctions. Therefore a review of this sort cannot do complete justice to their individual nuance and complex relations.

1.2 The scope, aims, and composition of the thesis

I will now summarize the scope and aims of this study in light of the issues raised above, and also give a brief outline of its composition. To begin, it should be specified that my focus is exclusively on the oceanic feeling. This means that I do not discuss concepts that may in some respects be similar to the oceanic feeling, such as 'flow' or 'sublimity'. The first reason for this is manageability. The range of variously named states involving feelings of unity, dissolution, eternity, and so on is extensive, and could not possibly be accounted for in a study of this scale. It may well be that the 'oceanic feeling' overlaps significantly with such concepts. In any case, defining the necessary conditions of the oceanic feeling is prerequisite to applying this particular concept accurately, and hence to relating it to other concepts as well. The second reason for focusing exclusively on the oceanic feeling is equally practical. Opting for the 'oceanic' grounds the study in a reasonably bounded yet richly developed theoretical framework, namely psychoanalysis. The psychoanalytical framework provides a well-defined starting point for the study. This leads to a final note on scope. Although I draw from both psychoanalytical theorization and contemporary philosophy of emotion, I do not argue at length for any particular psychoanalytical or philosophical theory as being the best overall account of mind or affective experiencing. Different theories are discussed and utilized to the extent that they help make sense of the oceanic feeling. This is, of course, done as coherently and critically as possible.

The aims of the study are threefold.

The first aim is to provide a comparative analysis of three primary accounts of the oceanic feeling. These are identified as the accounts of Romain Rolland, Sigmund Freud, and Anton Ehrenzweig. The objective is to clarify the theoretical backgrounds against which the authors conceptualize the oceanic feeling and to illuminate the contexts in which they put it to use. More specifically, the analysis seeks to specify the differing metapsychological and metaphysical premises they rely on, and to contrast the claims they make about the

experiential features, genesis, duration, and value of the feeling. The final objective is to examine the mutual compatibility of the accounts. Despite their noteworthy differences, do they share any fundamental assumptions concerning the nature of the oceanic feeling? Do they delineate the same phenomenon? Could the accounts be accommodated within a single coherent view? In sum, the first aim is to enhance our understanding of the conceptual development and theoretical underpinnings of the oceanic feeling.

The second aim is to develop an improved account of the oceanic feeling. This is motivated by several enduring problems, especially as regards its distinctive features, duration, and classification. What do oceanic feelings essentially *feel* like? What do the transient and permanent forms of the feeling consist in, and how do they stand in relation to each other? Finally, are there sufficient grounds for distinguishing between different kinds of oceanic feelings based on phenomenology, duration, and/or generative mechanism? In sum, the novel view seeks to specify the phenomenological structure of oceanic feelings, to resolve the abiding theoretical tension between their episodic and permanent forms, and to establish a more accurate and comprehensive taxonomy of the matter. More generally, the aim is to shed light on the basic experiential structure of our affective lives. As such the novel view is also hoped to contribute more widely to contemporary philosophy of emotion.

The third aim is to examine the oceanic feeling in the context of painterly aesthetics. Again, the initial objective is to assess the most influential account in this area, i.e. that of Anton Ehrenzweig. The aim is to specify the various ways in which Ehrenzweig applies the term 'oceanic' to artistic creativity, aesthetic perception, and works of art, and to critique the ways in which he and other authors have used this conceptualization to analyze both painterly creativity and paintings. Reflecting on these issues bears on the practical question of how to use the concept in discussions of painterly aesthetics. The second objective is to elaborate the previously introduced novel account of oceanic feelings within the aesthetic domain. The specific intention is to show that the novel account improves our understanding of oceanic feelings in painterly creativity and artistic self-transformation.

Finally, a few words on composition. Besides the present introduction, this thesis consists of four independent peer-reviewed articles. Each article will principally address one of the three aims presented above. Article I elucidates the conceptual development, theoretical underpinnings, and mutual relations of the primary accounts of the oceanic feeling (aim 1). The article also tentatively discusses the question of kinds/classification. Article II focuses on Ehrenzweig's account, and critiques its application in the painterly aesthetic context (aim 3). Article III puts forward the novel view of the oceanic feeling, and in doing so, seeks to resolve long-standing theoretical problems concerning its essential features, duration, and classification (aim 2). Finally, article IV refines the novel view and uses it to gain a better understanding of the oceanic feeling in painterly creativity and artistic self-transformation (aim 3). Naturally, the

articles overlap in content to some extent. It is hoped that this repetition is not too burdensome for the reader.

1.3 Discussion of main ideas and arguments

Article I consists of three key ideas. First, I argue that the accounts of Rolland, Freud, and Ehrenzweig share a basic theoretical structure that establishes as the necessary criterion for all oceanic states the loosening of ego boundaries and sufficient *modal contact* between differentiated and undifferentiated modalities of the mind.⁸ However, within this shared intrapsychic framework each account employs distinct metapsychological premises to develop its own view. To support this observation I carry out a detailed comparison of the accounts and show that, in effect, each author maps out a separate undifferentiated modality of the unconscious mind. Freud delineates a primary mode of all-embracing *feeling*, Ehrenzweig a mature mode of undifferentiated *perceiving*, and Rolland a substantive mode of metaphysical *being*. Based on this, I present a provisional distinction between different *kinds* of oceanic states based on the modalities that presumably generate them. Accordingly, I put forward for consideration a *pluralist view* of the mind and its modalities. This view accommodates the modal contact characteristic of each primary account. On these grounds, it is plausible that oceanic states experienced by different individuals or by the same individual on separate occasions may involve different modalities.

The first article contributes mainly to the strand of psychoanalytic theorization that stresses the interplay between different modes of mentation. Indeed, I believe the introduction of 'modal contact' and the pluralist view enriches theoretical discussion about the intrapsychic mechanisms of oceanic states. It should be clarified, however, that my aim is not to argue that modal contact is the most compelling causal explanation for oceanic states. Rather, I maintain that it is a suitable *conceptual tool* for elucidating and systematizing (prior) theorization on the topic. As might be expected, assessing the primary accounts in terms of modal contact raises interesting questions about the nature of the mind and its various states. In response, I have provided theoretical space for the possibility that several different modal contacts can produce oceanic states. Again, this is a tentative suggestion rather than a rigorously defended argument. As for the hypothesized distinction between different *kinds* of oceanic states based on the type of modal contact they incorporate: I now find this proposal somewhat problematic. That is, even if oceanic states are *theoretically* dis-

⁸ Here the disruption of ego boundaries refers primarily to a structural alteration of the psyche rather than a felt experience. The term *modality*, in turn, refers to the particular manner in which something exists or is processed, experienced, or expressed. The term *contact* refers to a state of connection and interaction between modalities. *Modal contact*, then, refers to a state of connection between two or more modalities in a manner in which they feed into and influence each other's characteristic ways of experiencing, processing, or expression.

tinguishable based on the *possibility* of different generating mechanisms, ascertaining significant experiential differences between these states owing to their mechanisms may prove to be too difficult. Much hinges on whether it is plausible to separate purely perceptual oceanic states from affective ones. Whereas undifferentiated perception would suffice for the former, the feeling of ego boundary dissolution would form the essential phenomenological core of the latter. I leave this matter open. Perhaps the prudent option is to grant that oceanic states can be generated by different modalities, without conflating this notion with the question of kinds.

Article II critiques Ehrenzweig's theory of oceanic states in painterly aesthetics. To begin, I show how Ehrenzweig uses the attributive 'oceanic' to designate not only feeling but also a phase of the creative process, a certain form of imagery, a deep structural level of the ego, and most decisively, a special type of perception characteristic of that deep level. After that I discuss some of the problematic aspects of his account. Contentiously, Ehrenzweig argues that plunging into the undifferentiated mode of oceanic depth perception is a precondition for authentic creativity. He also maintains it projects into the artwork an unconscious substructure that lies beyond the reach of conscious perception. The recipient of the artwork may then experience this hidden formal order affectively or intuitively, mainly by shifting to the mode of oceanic perception that supposedly played a role in creating it. To sidestep some of the problems that these claims entail, I suggest a modification to Ehrenzweig's rather straightforward view of the relation between the artist's ego and his artwork. Although I acknowledge that perceptual oceanic states may exist and contribute to artistic creativity, I deny that oceanic perception during creativity necessarily projects into the artwork a concealed structure that determines its authenticity or aesthetic impact. Thus when it comes to aesthetic analysis, it is both futile and unwarranted to infer from finished paintings whether oceanic states were experienced and utilized during their creation. We may nonetheless describe the aesthetic impact of paintings as oceanic, namely when they elicit feelings of dissolution, boundlessness, and the like. In terms of artistic productivity, in turn, the interesting question is not whether oceanic states are necessary for creativity but whether they can *enhance* it. If so, why, and under what conditions?

The general emphasis of the first two articles is on ways in which other authors have conceptualized the oceanic feeling. As such, their main strength lies in opening up fresh views on existing theories. If we consider the articles in light of the four points of debate enumerated above, they contribute primarily to discussions about generating mechanisms and (creative) value. Less is said about the problems of distinctive experience and duration. That is, even though the feeling of oneness is already renounced as a necessary feature, the basic experiential profile of the oceanic feeling remains sketchy. Likewise, although the phenomenon of permanence is acknowledged and discussed provisionally as a 'disposition', this is not elaborated further. In sum, the first two articles do not yet provide a positive original account of what oceanic feelings consist in or

how they should be classified. In order to develop such an account, I shift from the psychoanalytical and somewhat mechanistic intrapsychic approach to a more philosophical and experience-close analysis. This enables me to establish a coherent taxonomy of oceanic feelings based on their intentional experiential structure and duration.

In article III, then, I draw from the work of philosophers Peter Goldie and Matthew Ratcliffe to develop the novel view of oceanic feeling. I argue 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 relatively permanent feelings of unity, embracement, immanence, and openness that do not involve occurrent experiences of boundary dissolution. I suggest that both forms of feeling are *existential feelings*, i.e. pre-intentional bodily feelings that structure overall self-world experience. I therefore re-conceptualize episodic oceanic feelings as *shifts* in existential feeling, and permanent oceanic feelings as stable existential *orientations*. Furthermore, I propose that episodic oceanic feelings may be experienced either as devoid of any ascribable intentional object or as involving some intentional object (either real or imagined). In the latter case feelings of oneness must follow. In sum, the article supports the distinction between two kinds of oceanic feelings based on phenomenology and duration, and through this, answers long-standing questions about their essential features and taxonomy. Moreover, it gives a clear account of the role self-boundary dissolution and oneness play in oceanic feelings.

Finally, article IV elaborates the novel view within the context of painterly creativity. I begin by arguing that episodic oceanic feelings of self-boundary dissolution cannot be classified as emotions, moods, or bodily feelings (in the established senses of these terms). I reiterate that episodes of oceanic feeling should instead be classified as shifts in pre-intentional existential feeling. Again, such shifts may or may not include an intentional object, but if they do, a feeling of oneness with the given object must follow. It is thus within the context of pre-intentional oceanic shifts that feelings of oneness with paintings occur. To conclude, I discuss the implications of my account for the pursuits of painterly creativity and artistic self-transformation. Painterly creativity does not depend on shifts in existential feeling, nor do such shifts necessarily entail creative results, even within the context of creative activity. Even so, I regard painting as an activity that may induce changes in existential feeling, and as such raise into conscious awareness the role existential feelings play in structuring overall experience. This means that existential feelings may become one of the actual objects of creative work: that which is worked on in painting. Simply put, artistic work can involve the conscious reorganization of one's existential orientation. In this sense, I maintain that oceanic changes in existential feeling may lead to a wider process of self-transformation, i.e., to a restructuring of one's fundamental relations with oneself, others, and the world.

The original contribution of articles III and IV is the analysis of oceanic feelings as existential feelings. However, one might question how this phenomenological and bodily oriented approach fits in with the psychoanalytical and

intrapsychically oriented approach of the first two articles. Since the scope of this study does not permit a detailed scrutiny of the relations between psychoanalysis and phenomenology, a few justificatory remarks are in order. From a pragmatic point of view, the two can be understood as operating on separate yet complementary levels of analysis. As such, they can be used to spotlight different aspects of the same phenomenon. Indeed, I employ psychoanalysis and phenomenology – and the key concepts derived from them, ‘modal contact’ and ‘existential feeling’ – to achieve two different ends. Whereas the former allows us to discuss the psychological factors that give rise to oceanic feelings, the latter enables us to delineate what the feelings consist in experientially and existentially. Hence the oceanic shift in existential feeling should not be mistaken for a causative mechanism; instead, it should be understood as a description of the feeling’s experiential and intentional structure. In this sense, the existential shift *is* the episodic oceanic feeling: the pre-intentional feeling of finding oneself in the world with dissolving self-boundaries. Likewise, the oceanic existential orientation describes a stable background feeling of unity with a particular kind of world – a world that provides ontological security and discloses a space of meaningful possibility.

A worthy challenge for future research is the development of analyses that further integrate elements from both phenomenology and psychoanalysis. Pertinent to this aim, recent studies have suggested that the two approaches share fundamental premises concerning the bodily constitution of the self. As Joonas Taipale puts it (2014b, p. 230), “both disciplines consider selfhood fundamentally a bodily matter, both interpret the body as a junction point between inner and outer, both discuss the body as an experiential being, both conceive the feeling of existence in terms of bodily experience, and both regard the self as a layered and sedimented being that is structured in time”. Psychoanalysis adds to the picture a strong developmental emphasis: the notion that the earliest forms of bodily experience constitute the primary feeling of being, and simultaneously lay the foundations for the ‘sedimentary’ organization of the self (Taipale, 2014b; see also Lehtonen et al., 2006; Lehtonen, 2011). From this point of view, elements from the earliest bodily-affective and less differentiated modes of experience may endure and feed into the more mature modes of self-experience. This, in turn, can give rise to the oceanic feeling, which is experienced as a shift in one’s overall self-world relations. In sum, bodily affect seems like a good starting point for an account that integrates psychoanalysis and phenomenology into a coherent view of oceanic feelings.

In this introduction I have presented the motives, theoretical backgrounds, aims, scope, and main ideas of this study. The goal has been to equip the reader with sufficient tools to assess the contents of the individual articles. Indeed, it is now up to the reader to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments put forward.

YHTEENVETO

Tutkimukseni käsittelee valtamerellisen tunnetilan käsitettä.

Työni perustavin tavoite on luoda kattava analyysi valtamerellisen tilan käsitteen keskeisimmistä merkityksistä. Erittelen ensimmäisessä artikkelissa (I) sitä, minkälaisiin psyykkisiin ilmiöihin käsitteellä on pääsääntöisesti viitattu ja minkälaisiin teoreettisiin taustaoletuksiin sen eri käyttötavat on sidottu. Esitän, että primaarisiksi luonnehtimiani selontekoja (eli Romain Rollandin *metafyysistä*, Sigmund Freudin *kehityksellistä* ja Anton Ehrenzweigin *kognitiivis-havainnollista* selontekoa) yhdistää yksi tärkeä piirre: kukin olettaa valtamerellisen tilan välttämättömäksi ehdoksi egon rajojen hälvenemisen ja riittävän *modaalisen kontaktin* eriytyneen ja eriytymättömän psyykkisen prosessoinnin välillä. Tästä yhtäläisyydestä huolimatta argumentoin, että primaariset selonteot rajaavat huomionsa kohteeksi varsin erityyppiset valtamerelliset tilat. Perustelen väitettäni tarkastelemalla niitä metapsykologisia premissejä, joiden varaan kunkin selonteon luonnehdinnat modaalisesta kontaktista rakentuvat. Toisin sanoen havainnollistan, kuinka niiden käsitykset eriytyneestä ja eriytymättömästä psyykkisestä prosessoinnista perustuvat toisistaan eriäviin mielen ominaisuuksiin ja rakenteisiin. Tästä syystä en käsittele selontekoja yhden ainoan tai autenttisen valtamerellisen tilan kilpailevina selitysmalleina. Sen sijaan ehdotan *pluralistista* mielen mallia, joka luo teoreettista tilaa eri tyyppisten valtamerellisten tilojen mahdolliselle olemassaololle.

Tutkimuksen toinen tavoite on muodostaa aiempaa monipuolisempi ja yhtenäisempi kuvaus valtamerellisestä tilasta. Vallalla on pitkään ollut näkemys, jonka mukaan valtamerellinen tunne on ensisijaisesti *ykseyden tunnetta*, jolloin varsinainen valtamerellinen tila määrittyy tämän ykseyden tunteen perusteella. Valtamerellisen tilan taksonomiaan paneutuvassa artikkelissa (III) problematisoin oletuksen, että ykseyden tunne on tilan välttämätön ehto. Esitän, että ykseyden tunnetta korostavat teoretikot nojaavat yksipuolisesti Freudin selonteon kapeahkoon käsitykseen ja jättävät huomiotta Rollandin alkuperäisen, huomattavasti laaja-alaisemman näkemyksen tilan luonteesta.

Keskeisin väitteeni on, että on olemassa kahdenlaisia valtamerellisiä tunteita. Ensinnäkin ne voivat olla hetkellisiä episodeja, jotka koostuvat minuuden psykologisten ja sensoristen rajojen hälvenemisestä. Toiseksi valtamerellinen tunne voi olla suhteellisen pysyvä kokemusta ja todellisuutta organisoiva tunne, jonka pohjalta maailma näyttäytyy kannattelevana ja turvallisena kokonaisuutena. Tähän ei liity kokemusta minuuden rajojen hälvenemisestä. Määritän filosofi Matthew Ratcliffen emootioteoriaan perustuen molemmat valtamerellisen tunteen tyypit *eksistentiaalisiksi tunteiksi*. Tämä tarkoittaa sitä, että ne ovat esiententionaalisia kehollisia tunteita, jotka jäsentävät kaikkea maailmaan suuntautuvaa intentionaalista ajattelua, tuntemista ja toimintaa. Lisäksi käsitteellistän episodimaisen valtamerellisen tunteen siirtymäksi eksistentiaalisessa tunteessa ja pysyvän valtamerellisen tunteen vakiintuneeksi eksistentiaaliseksi orientaatioksi. Episodimaisiin valtamerellisiin tunteisiin voi joko liittyä tai olla liittymättä kokemus intentionaalista objektista. Jos niihin liittyy kokemus intentionaali-

sesta objektista, tästä väistämättä seuraa ykseyden tunne kyseisen objektin kanssa.

Tutkimukseni kolmas tavoite on tarkastella valtamerellisen tilan käsitteen käytön ehtoja ja rajoja maalaamiseen liittyvässä estetiikassa ja luovuustutkimuksessa. Yhtenäisen määritelmän puuttuessa käsitteen käyttö on ollut melko kirjavaa ja paikoittain epäloogista. Toisinaan on tehty perusteettomia ja kehämäisiä päätelmiä valtamerellisen tilan ja taideteosten kuvakielen välisistä suhteista. Tämä johtuu pitkälti Ehrenzweigin ongelmallisesta väittämästä, jonka mukaan valtamerelliselle tilalle tyypillinen eriytymätön havainnointi on autenttisen luovuuden välttämätön ehto ja projisoituu aina itse taideteoksen piilotaajuiseen rakenteeseen. Artikkelissa II avaan ja kritisoin nimenomaan Ehrenzweigin teoretisointia. Tämän lisäksi tarkastelen kriittisesti kahta erillistä teostulkintaa, joissa sovelletaan hänen näkemyksiään luovasta valtamerellisestä tilasta. Vaikka valtamerellinen tila vaikuttaisikin olennaisesti havaitsemisen tapaan ja sitä kautta kuvalliseen ilmaisuun, osoitan, ettei ole mitään luotettavia keinoja tehdä johtopäätöksiä tilan läsnäolosta itse luovassa prosessissa. Esitän, että valtamerellisen tilan käsitteellä on tästä huolimatta perusteltu paikkansa esteettisessä analyysissä, erityisesti vastaanottajan kokemusten ja teosten kokonaisvaikutelmien luonnehdinnoissa.

Viimeisessä artikkelissa (IV) sovellan määritelmäni valtamerellisestä tunteesta eksistentiaalisena tunteena taiteellisen luovuuden analyysiin. Tarkastelen erityisesti maalaamisprosessia ja sen aikana esiintyviä muutoksia eksistentiaalisessa tunteessa. Esitän, että tällaisten muutosten myötä kokemuksen taustalla vaikuttavat eksistentiaaliset tunteet voivat nousta tietoisuuteen ja siten myös varsinaisen taiteellisen työskentelyn kohteiksi. Valtamerelliselle tunteelle on tyypillistä, että kiinteiksi ja pysyviksi koetut rajat itsen ja maailman välillä häilyvät ja paljastuvat joustaviksi. Maalaamisen yhteydessä tällainen kokemus voi olla vapauttava, luovaa työskentelyä edesauttava tekijä. Lisäksi valtamerellinen muutos eksistentiaalisessa tunteessa voi mahdollistaa itsen ja maailman välisen suhteen perustavanlaatuisen uudelleen jäsentämisen taiteellisen työskentelyn kautta.

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I

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II

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III

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IV

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The oceanic feeling in painterly creativity

Jussi A. Saarinen

Abstract

The oceanic feeling has been a relatively persistent topic of discussion in both creativity research and aesthetics. Characterized by a sensation of self-boundary dissolution, the feeling has often been reported to involve experiences of fusion with various objects, including works of art. In this article, I will discuss the oceanic feeling in the specific context of painterly creativity. I will begin by arguing that the oceanic feeling cannot be classified as an emotion, mood, or bodily feeling in the established senses of these terms. I will then introduce philosopher Matthew Ratcliffe's theory of existential feelings to help formulate a more accurate view of the oceanic feeling. More specifically, I will suggest that oceanic feelings should be classified as shifts in existential feeling. To conclude, I will briefly discuss the implications of my account of the oceanic feeling for the more general pursuits of painterly creativity and artistic self-transformation.

Keywords: oceanic feeling, existential feeling, painterly creativity

1. Introduction

Painting can be an intensely affective affair. During the course of the creative process, it is not unusual for the artist to feel apprehensive about producing something unsatisfactory, frustrated by seemingly insoluble problems of color and composition, irritated by unsolicited interruptions, enchanted by the developing work at hand, delighted about creating something new and surprising, somber about surrendering the finished work of art, and, in the end, proud of her achievement. States such as these are commonly classified as *emotions*. Like all emotions, they are *intentional* states directed towards relatively specific objects within the world – things, the self, other persons, events, actions, or states of affairs. Sometimes the intentional objects of affective states are not clearly specifiable: they may also be experienced as vague or unfocused. One may, for instance, feel angry at everything or nothing in particular.

States that take on relatively unspecific intentional objects may be classified as *moods*. In the painterly context, a moderate mood of hypomania, for example, is often felt as carrying the creative process forward, whereas a dejected mood can make the slightest of setbacks feel overwhelming – perhaps dealing a fatal blow to the entire endeavor. Finally, the intentionality of an affective state may be directed exclusively towards one's body, or part(s) of it. After hours of demanding work the painter may feel sore in the joints, tired in the eyes, and heavy in the legs. Such states can in turn be classified as *bodily feelings*.¹

With these distinctions in mind, let us next consider two first-person descriptions of a special type of feeling in the painterly context. In the first description, artist Stephen Newton tells us of a sudden change in experience while working on a collage:

I began to paint at the top right hand corner... and was moving downwards when the vertical canvas seemed to slide down to a horizontal position. 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. I was not in any way fearful of drowning, being overwhelmed or lost; rather the experience was to be expected and welcomed and, at that time, didn't take me by surprise. When I was once again deposited on dry land, the painting had been completed.²

In the second description, philosopher and painter Michael Krausz recounts a life-changing experience amidst a series of large abstract canvases painted by his friend: "I suddenly experienced myself in the space of the work instead of looking at it. More than that: I experienced an 'interpenetration' of my self and the space of the painting. In that space, I suddenly became much more highly visually sensitive – to spatial relations, coloration and more."³ As a consequence of this experience, Krausz developed an "inner necessity" to paint, and confirms that these kinds of "non-dualistic" experiences continue to affect his creative work.⁴

At first view, such feelings of self-boundary dissolution and fusion with the artwork at hand may appear quite outlandish. However, a closer look at writings on both

artistic creativity and aesthetic experience suggests that feelings of this kind might be somewhat common.⁵ As expected, the concepts and tropes used to describe such experiences have been rich and varied. Even so, the depictions tend to point to a common experiential core. As Krausz observes, “characterizations of nondualistic experiences might deploy such metaphors as ‘interpenetration’ of subject and object, or ‘fusion’ of artist and work, or ‘overcoming’, or ‘dissolving’, or ‘transcending’ such binary opposites as subjective and objective reality. All these idioms suggest that, under particular circumstances, sharp distinctions between such binary terms as self and other, or subject and object, are undone.”⁶ Krausz also points out how these states have been variously designated as “nirvanic, epiphanic, numinous, religious, flow, ecstatic, or oceanic” depending on one’s preferred orientation.⁷ Since I have become theoretically acquainted with the phenomenon via the psychoanalytical tradition, I will use the *oceanic feeling* as my term of choice.⁸

Having said that, I will not discuss the oceanic feeling in psychoanalytical terms in this article. Instead, I will draw on contemporary philosophy of emotion to improve our understanding of the feeling and its occurrence in painterly creativity. To begin, I will discuss the question of taxonomy. Can the oceanic feeling be adequately classified as an emotion, mood, or bodily feeling? I will examine each possibility in turn, and argue that these affective categories do not suffice in grasping the essence of the oceanic feeling. This analysis will also serve to highlight the complex matter of intentionality in oceanic feeling. In order to classify the oceanic feeling more accurately, and to provide a plausible account of its intentional structure, I will then introduce philosopher Matthew Ratcliffe’s notion of existential feelings. More specifically, I will argue that oceanic feelings should be viewed as significant shifts in existential feeling. To conclude, I will discuss some of the implications my account of the oceanic feeling has for the more general understanding of painterly creativity.

2. The oceanic feeling: emotion, mood, or bodily feeling?

Let us begin with a definition. I maintain that the defining feature of the oceanic feeling is *a feeling of dissolution of the psychological and sensory boundaries of the self*. From this point of view, any feeling of fusion, merger, or oneness with a given object (e.g. an artwork) is a secondary and contingent feature of the oceanic feeling,

rather than its primary distinctive property. This is so because any feeling of fusion, etc. presupposes a feeling of self-boundary dissolution, even if the latter does not necessarily engender the former. On that account, if we were to classify the oceanic feeling as an emotion, we might consider it to be one type of feeling of dissolution, distinguished by its characteristic object, the ‘self’ (just as acrophobia is a type of fear that is distinguished by its characteristic object, high places). Positing the self as the intentional object of the oceanic feeling is a plausible option, seeing as this is the case in various self-referential emotions, such as shame and self-pity.⁹ If we commit to this option, the intentional object of the oceanic feeling could be further specified as a particular aspect of the self, namely its psychological and sensory boundaries. The oceanic feeling could then be classified as an emotion in which the feeling of dissolution is directed towards the boundaries of the self.

However, I consider this option somewhat contrived and phenomenologically insufficient. Even though the oceanic feeling undeniably concerns the self, I believe it does so in a much more comprehensive and fundamental sense than mere self-referential emotion allows for. Whereas self-referential emotions represent a particular intentional object *within* the world (the self) in a relatively selective, evaluative, and focused light (e.g. as shameful, guilty, or pitiful), the oceanic feeling seems to constitute an all-embracing sense of *a certain kind* of world. Simply put, the oceanic feeling does not just represent the self or one of its features under a limited affective aspect; it discloses the world – including the self, its boundaries, and its relations to other objects – in a more constitutive way.

If, then, we regard the oceanic feeling as a world-disclosing feeling, classifying it as a mood rather than an emotion becomes a reasonable option. On the view that moods are distinguishable from emotions due to the unfocused nature of their intentional objects, one could argue that the ‘world’ is a sufficiently vague intentional object to warrant the classification of the oceanic feeling as a mood. Indeed, the philosopher Peter Goldie has chosen this line of reasoning in classifying the oceanic feeling as a feeling (mood) of oneness that takes as its intentional object the universe as a whole.¹⁰ However, my understanding of the oceanic feeling differs from Goldie’s view in two crucial respects. First, as stated above, I regard any feeling of oneness occurring in conjunction with the oceanic feeling as a secondary and contingent feature of the

oceanic feeling, not as its primary distinctive feature. Second, and more importantly for the matter of mood, the sense in which I refer to a 'world' that is disclosed in oceanic feeling differs from the sense in which Goldie designates the 'universe' as its intentional object of feeling. Certainly, we may have various different intentional attitudes towards the world and the universe (with 'world' and 'universe' taking on many possible meanings, both literal and figurative). One may, for instance, *believe* that the world (in a concrete sense) consists of atoms, *feel* awe at the vastness of the universe (in an abstract or theoretical sense), or *desire* that the world (in an experiential, subjective sense) come to an end. However, by 'world' I refer to a pre-given experiential space of meaning and possibility that each of us already necessarily inhabits. This world is a world of practical engagement we are immersed in, rather than an objectified world we feel or think towards. In sum, then, the 'world' in the present sense is not an unspecific intentional object of feeling, but a space of possibility that is constituted and disclosed by the oceanic feeling in a particular way. For this reason the oceanic feeling should not be classified as a mood or a generalized emotion.

Finally, we may ask whether the oceanic feeling might simply be a bodily feeling. It could be argued that the sense of a 'self' – including its psychological and sensory boundaries – is developmentally established through bodily interaction with one's caretakers, and is therefore fundamentally bodily in nature. On that account, the feeling of dissolution could be understood as directed towards an aspect of the body or bodily self. Viewed in this light, the oceanic feeling could be classified as a kind of disturbance in bodily awareness. I believe this is a step in the right direction. However, even if the sense of self-boundaries is essentially bodily, I maintain that the feeling of boundary dissolution is not a bodily feeling in the restricted meaning of the term. That is, it is not a feeling of the condition of the body exclusively, or of a change therein – similar to a racing heart or the sudden appearance of goose bumps. As I already suggested in connection with self-referential emotions, the oceanic feeling appears to concern the self, its boundaries, and its relation to the world in a much more fundamental and comprehensive way. In effect, it seems to constitute a particular kind of self-world relation. Thus the claim that the oceanic feeling takes as its exclusive intentional object the body or its parts is too narrow in scope.

To summarize, I have sought to demonstrate the insufficiency of the concepts of emotion, mood, and bodily feeling in accounting for the oceanic feeling. This analysis has also served to foreground the complex question of intentionality in its proper classification. Interestingly, the descriptions given by Newton, Krausz, and others suggest that the oceanic feeling may well be a significant change in one's overall existential state, or feeling of *being*, rather than a feeling directed towards the world or any of its objects. Perhaps an alternative approach is therefore in order. Could the oceanic feeling instead be classified as a type of affective state that does not intrinsically contain intentionality? Could it provide intentional states with certain kinds of directedness, rather than being intentionally directed itself? In the next section, I will pursue this line of argument.

3. The oceanic feeling as a shift in existential feeling

I have set forth the idea that the oceanic feeling belongs to a group of affective states that constitutes an overall feeling of being, and thus discloses the world to us in a pre-given way. How, then, should we identify and designate this distinct class of affective states? I believe philosopher Matthew Ratcliffe's notion of *existential feelings* can help us delineate the phenomenon more accurately.¹¹ Ratcliffe maintains that feelings can be classified as existential in virtue of two shared properties. Firstly, they are *pre-intentional* background feelings that structure experience as a whole. As such, they are distinguishable from intentional states directed at objects within the world. Ratcliffe frequently depicts existential feelings as "ways of finding ourselves in the world" that constrain the kinds of experience we are capable of having. Indeed, he has chosen the attributive 'existential' to accentuate that the feelings in question constitute our changeable sense of reality, and of our belonging to and relating to the world. In sum, existential feelings provide us with a pre-intentional sense of possibility and meaning, and accordingly, structure our intentional feeling and thinking.

The second necessary property of existential feelings is that they are *bodily* feelings. As I suggested above, characterizing the oceanic feeling in bodily terms is a step in the right direction. However, taking this step requires us to recognize that feelings can be bodily in various ways. To clarify the particular sense in which existential feelings are bodily, Ratcliffe has introduced a tripartite distinction between noematic, noetic,

and existential bodily feelings.¹² First he designates as *noematic* those bodily feelings that are *of* the body or its parts. These are the kind of bodily feelings I have discussed above, i.e. feelings that have the body as their exclusive intentional object. Simply put, noematic feelings refer to the *felt* body. However, as Ratcliffe notes, we do not generally experience our bodies as sealed containers with some experiences falling neatly on the inside and others on the outside.¹³ Moreover, bodily feelings need not necessarily be phenomenologically conspicuous, i.e., objects of our conscious experience. On this account, the body can also be understood as the *feeling* body: a medium for world-directed experience.

In *noetic* feelings, then, the body is *that through which* objects other than the body are experienced. Even though the body is not necessarily an object of attention in noetic feelings, it contributes to emotional experience through a kind of background awareness. In short, noetic feelings are incorporated in intentionality directed beyond the body, yet through the body.¹⁴ For example, when the activity of painting flows effortlessly, the painter's attention will presumably be directed towards the world – primarily on the painting being worked on. Her focus might be on the mixing of colors; on the way the paint spreads over the canvas; on the emergence of form and contrast, and so on. Even so, concurrent bodily feelings of openness, alertness, and responsiveness are likely to provide the situation with a sense of fluidity and ease. In this way, noetic feelings are incorporated into the experience of the painting as pleasingly receptive to one's painterly gestures. In contrast to this, the painter may feel increasingly frustrated by a formal or material problem in her work.¹⁵ An attentional shift toward the body may then make her aware of a physical feeling of being stuck, or of being weighed down and confined by the work at hand. Such noetic feelings in turn contribute to experiencing the painting as resistant and overbearing. In this situation the painter might seek some fresh air to clear her head, or stretch her limbs to break the deadlock.

Finally, *existential* bodily feelings constitute a more fundamental and all-encompassing feeling of *being*. Following Merleau-Ponty, Ratcliffe maintains 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.¹⁶ Unlike the other two bodily feelings, then, existential feelings cannot be classified as intentional states

directed either towards the body or the world beyond its boundaries. Instead, they provide us with a bodily backdrop to overall experience, determining the parameters within which noetic feelings are incorporated into particular emotions and moods. Simply put, existential feelings establish a pre-intentional orientation to the world, whereas noetic feelings are incorporated in feelings towards objects within such a world.

Perhaps an example can serve to clarify the firm connection between pre-intentional existential feelings and intentional affective states. Consider feeling enthusiastic about painting and enjoying it on a regular basis. Feeling such enthusiasm and joy towards the activity presupposes that one already inhabits a world in which experiencing things as interesting and enjoyable is an actual possibility. This disposition cannot, however, be taken for granted. Indeed, someone who is deeply depressed finds herself in a world completely devoid of such possibilities. For her, everything feels fundamentally and inescapably lacking in interest and joy. This is not an emotion directed towards a situation; it *is* the situation. In sum, the depressive existential feeling forms a frame through which the world is experienced as constricted, bereft of significance and vitality, and lacking in certain experiential possibilities.¹⁷

Even though existential feelings generally remain in the background of our experience, they may under certain conditions become objects of attention and rational reflection. Usually this happens when a significant change or *shift* in the existential feeling occurs, and the orientation one previously took for granted becomes conspicuous in its absence. As Ratcliffe notes, it is changes in existential feeling that uncover their contribution to experience and thus reveal the contingency of our prior orientations.¹⁸ Such changes may be experienced as positive or negative. For example, Ratcliffe observes how in religious conversion experiences “a world that is drained of life... can be shaken up to reveal a different and wider space of possibility, something *more*, something *greater*.”¹⁹ The opposite holds true in transitions into pathological states such as psychosis and depression, in which the experiential world is characterized by a sense of loss of connection to other people, life, and shared reality.

On that account, I maintain that oceanic feelings of self-boundary dissolution are significant shifts in existential feeling. Ordinarily, we experience ourselves as distinct from other people and things, even if there is individual variation in the felt permeability of self-boundaries. In fact, most forms of everyday human interaction require us to experience the boundaries between things, people, and ourselves as relatively fixed and stable. The oceanic feeling is a sudden and often very momentous change in this common existential orientation. Simply put, the felt dissolution of the psychological and sensory boundaries of the self disrupts the taken-for-granted sense of reality and substitutes it temporarily with one that is thoroughly different in kind.

What, then, does such an oceanic existential shift consist in? I believe there are two experiential options available: 1) That oceanic shifts in existential feeling are experienced as devoid of any ascribable intentional object, or 2) that they are experienced as involving an intentional object, either real or imagined. In the former case, the shift dispenses with specific intentional relatedness to one's surroundings, and hence, does not amount to a feeling of oneness or fusion with any particular objects. For lack of a better term, we may call such cases diffuse or pure oceanic feelings. The philosopher André Comte-Sponville has encapsulated this orientation succinctly by describing his own oceanic experience as "an immanence, a unity, an immersion, an insiderness."²⁰ He continues: "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."²¹ In the second case, the experience of self-boundary dissolution is accompanied by intentional directedness towards particular objects. Indeed, I believe that all cases of self-boundary dissolution that *do* involve an intentional object necessarily entail a feeling of fusion or oneness with that object (seeing as the boundaries between the self and the object are experienced as dissipated). Be that as it may, it is important to recognize that without a fundamental shift in how one's self-world relations are pre-intentionally structured, the feeling of oneness with a particular intentional object could not come about in the first place.

In light of the above, the experience of fusion with a work of art can be viewed as one possible upshot of the oceanic shift in existential feeling. This is not a particularly surprising outcome of the oceanic feeling in the painterly context. Indeed, it is

expectable that the feeling of merger will be directed at the object one is intently engaged with during the moment of self-boundary dissolution. Newton, for instance, has described his oceanic experience as involving 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.”²² The art pedagogue and critic Anton Ehrenzweig has similarly noted how, in the oceanic state, “the artist feels at one with his work, not unlike the nursling on his mother’s breast who feels at one with his mother.”²³ In sum, it is within the context of a pre-intentional oceanic shift that the feeling of fusion with the particular intentional object, the painting, is experienced.

4. Conclusion

Painterly creativity does not depend on shifts in existential feeling, nor do such shifts necessarily entail creative results, even within the context of creative activity. Even so, painting is an activity that may induce changes in existential feeling, and as such, can raise into conscious awareness the role existential feelings play in structuring overall experience. This means that existential feelings may also become one of the actual objects of creative work: that which is worked on in painting. Simply put, artistic work need not merely aim at producing artworks; it can also involve the conscious reorganization of one’s existential orientation. In this sense changes in existential feeling may lead to a wider artistic process of self-transformation, i.e., to a restructuring of one’s fundamental relations with oneself, others, and the world.

Viewed in this light, the oceanic feeling presents itself as a rather special phenomenon. As a sudden and significant shift in existential feeling, it tends to have a momentous impact on one’s overall take on reality. Indeed, many artists have voiced the transformative effect it has had on both their creative abilities and their overall existential orientations. Consider, for example, psychoanalyst and artist Marion Milner’s first-person recollection of her oceanic experience:

[I] had discovered in painting a bit of experience that made all other occupations unimportant by comparison. It was the discovery that when painting something from nature there occurred, at least sometimes, a fusion into a never-before-known

wholeness; not only were the object and oneself no longer felt to be separate, but neither were thought and sensation and feeling and action. All one's visual perceptions of colour, shape, texture, weight, as well as thought and memory, ideas about the object and action towards it, the movement of one's hand together with the feeling of delight in the "thusness" of the thing, they all seemed fused into a wholeness of being which was different from anything else that had ever happened to me.²⁴

Milner tellingly describes her experience as "a discovery of a different way of being," and asks, "[W]as it not also possible that this different sense of self that grew out of creative concentration had bearings upon one's relation to the whole mass of other selves that one was in contact with?"²⁵

In the same vein, Michael Krausz has noted how the oceanic experience can be "an ingredient of a creative life journey, a part of a larger project of self-transformation."²⁶ He elaborates: "As a consequence of my nondualistic experience... I now experience more clearly, more expansively, more richly, more perspicuously. Such changes in my ways of experiencing in turn affect what I produce. What I produce has affected my ways of experiencing. I think of my art-making as a process in which who I am is enriched and transformed. In short, my art-production fosters my self-transformation, and my self-transformation fosters my art-production."²⁷

In conclusion, it appears that oceanic feelings can play an important role in enhancing artistic creativity, and in a more general sense, creative living. I presume this is largely due to their ability to emancipate the artist from habitual, common sense ways of experiencing self-other boundaries. Moreover, they may provide us with a brief yet alluring glimpse into a more flexible reality, and thus confront us with fundamental existential questions of what is inner/outer, self/not-self, and body/world. Embracing these questions creatively may well become the work of a lifetime.²⁸

¹ That emotions are intentional states is commonly accepted in contemporary philosophy of emotion. What accounts for their intentionality is a more contested issue. Whether moods and bodily feelings are also intentional states is another topic of active debate. For argumentative purposes, I will adopt the view that emotions, moods, and bodily feelings (in the sense presented here) are indeed intentional states. For further discussion see, for example, Peter Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: OUP, 2000); Jesse Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion* (Oxford: OUP, 2004); Aaron Ben Ze'ev, "The Thing Called Emotion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*, ed. Peter Goldie (Oxford: OUP, 2010), pp. 41-62.

² Stephen Newton, *Art and Ritual: A Painter's Journey* (London: Ziggurat, 2008), p. 50.

³ Michael Krausz, "Creativity and Self-Transformation", in *Philosophy of History and Culture*, vol. 28: *The Idea of Creativity*, eds. Michael Krausz, Denis Dutton and Karen Bardsley (Boston: Brill, 2009), pp. 191–203; ref. on p. 191.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁵ In addition to the works of Krausz and Newton (cited above), see for example: Marion Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1957); Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Perception* (London: Phoenix Press, 1967); Adrian Stokes, *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes, Vol. III, 1955–1967* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978); Arthur Koestler, "The Three Domains of Creativity," in *The Concept of Creativity in Science and Art*, eds. Denis Dutton and Michael Krausz (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981), pp. 1-17; David Maclagan, *Psychological Aesthetics: Painting, Feeling and Making Sense* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001); Marlene Goldsmith, "Frida Kahlo: Abjection, Psychic Deadness, and the Creative Impulse," *Psychoanalytic Review*, 91, 6 (2004), 723-758; Barnaby Nelson and David Rawlings, "Its Own Reward: A Phenomenological Study of Artistic Creativity," *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 38 (2007), 217-255; Caroline Rooney, "What is the Oceanic?," *Angelaki – Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 12 (2007), 19-32.

⁶ Krausz, "Creativity and Self-Transformation," p. 194.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁸ For a detailed account of the history and semantics of the concept of oceanic feeling, see William B. Parsons, *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism* (New York: OUP, 1999).

⁹ In self-referential emotions, the subject and the intentional object of the emotion are identical. See Alexandra Zinck, "Self-referential emotions," *Consciousness and Cognition*, 17 (2008), 496-505.

¹⁰ Peter Goldie, "Freud and the Oceanic Feeling," in *Religious Emotions: Some Philosophical Explorations*, eds. Willem Lemmens and Walter Van Herck (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), pp. 219-229.
2008.

¹¹ Ratcliffe has also called states of this kind "deep moods", but has specifically promulgated the term "existential feeling" to distinguish them from intentional affective states. See Matthew Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being. Phenomenology, Psychiatry and the Sense of Reality* (Oxford: OUP, 2008); "The Phenomenology of Mood and the Meaning of Life," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*, ed. Peter Goldie (Oxford: OUP, 2010), pp. 349-371; "The Phenomenology of Existential Feeling", in *Feelings of Being Alive*, eds. Joerg Fingerhut and Sabine Marienberg (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), pp. 23-54.

¹² Ratcliffe, "The Phenomenology of Existential Feeling"; see also Colombetti & Ratcliffe, "Bodily Feeling in Depersonalization: A Phenomenological Account," *Emotion Review*, 4, 2 (2012), 145-150.

¹³ Ratcliffe, "The Phenomenology of Mood and the Meaning of Life," p. 365.

¹⁴ For further discussion on how bodily feelings can have world-directed intentionality, see for example Peter Goldie, *The Emotions*, and "Emotions, Feelings and Intentionality," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 1 (2002), 235-254; Jesse Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A*

Perceptual Theory of Emotions; Jan Slaby, "Affective Intentionality and the Feeling Body," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 7, 4 (2008), 429-444.

¹⁵ I have modeled this scenario on Peter Goldie's example of bodily feelings that are felt towards an intractable philosophical problem. See Goldie, *The Emotions*, pp. 56-57.

¹⁶ Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, pp. 107-108.

¹⁷ For a developmental account of depressive existential feeling, see Somogy Varga & Joel Krueger, "Background Emotions, Proximity and Distributed Emotion Regulation," *The Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 4 (2013), 271-292.

¹⁸ Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, p. 219.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

²⁰ André Comte-Sponville, *The Book of Atheist Spirituality* (London: Bantam Press, 2008), p. 155.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

²² Newton, *Art and Ritual*, p. 47.

²³ Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art*, p. 119.

²⁴ Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint*, p. 142.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

²⁶ Krausz, "Creativity and Self-Transformation," p. 197.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

²⁸ Although I have discussed the oceanic feeling in the specific context of painterly creativity, it is evident that it can and does occur in other forms of creativity as well. Whether the degree and type of bodily engagement in the creative activity plays a role in facilitating or suppressing the emergence of the feeling is an interesting question for further study. It is also worthy of note that oceanic feelings may arise in situations that do not specifically aim at producing creative products, e.g. in mystical/aesthetic encounters with nature or works of art. I believe such experiences may indirectly inspire and inform one's personal creative activities. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for calling attention to these pertinent points.