



# Affectivity in mental disorders: an enactive-simondonian approach

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## Abstract

Several enactive-phenomenological perspectives have pointed to affectivity as a central aspect of mental disorders. Indeed, from an enactive perspective, sense-making is an inherently affective process. A question remains on the role of different forms of affective experiences (i.e., existential feelings, atmospheres, moods, and emotions) in sense-making and, consequently, in mental disorders. This work elaborates on the enactive perspective on mental disorders by attending to the primordial role of affectivity in the self-individuation process. Inspired by Husserl's genetic methodology and Simondonian philosophy of individuation, sense-making is described as the process of progressive concretization and structuration of the self-world structures that support the intentionality of conscious experiences. Accordingly, affectivity is described as the force that anticipates a partial self-world coherence in sense-making. Structurally different types of affective experiences are integrated into the genetic picture and, on this basis, a reinterpretation and classification of certain mental disorders, such as schizophrenia, depression, and the anxiety spectrum, is provided. In this way, this work contributes to a phenomenologically informed enactive account of mental disorders as disorders of affectivity.

**Keywords** Enactive cognition · Mental disorders · Affectivity · Simondon · Genetic phenomenology

## 1 Introduction

Affectivity plays a pivotal role in the emergence, development and persistence of mental disorders (Aho, 2019; Boden et al., 2016; Bortolan, 2017; Brencio, 2018; Fuchs, 2020; Gaete & Fuchs, 2016; Kiverstein et al., 2020; Ratcliffe & Stephan, 2014). Indeed, certain disorders, such as depression, bipolar disorder or anxiety disorders, have been considered as proper mood disorders because they tend

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to reduce the wide variety of affective states to a few and fixed emotions (Fawcett, 2010). However, from a phenomenological and enactive perspective, affectivity is not restricted to particular qualities of our mental states, which flavor them as positive or negative. Instead, affectivity constitutes a structural invariant of consciousness and the condition of possibility of our mental world in the first place. Merleau-Ponty's 'erotic structure of consciousness' (1964/2013) or Heidegger's concept of *Befindlichkeit* (1927/1962) are formulations of this affective character of conscious experience.

Influenced by phenomenology, the enactive approach defines cognition as sense-making (Varela et al., 1991/2017), which refers to the affective and evaluative interaction of the organism with its environment. Accordingly, affectivity is not a contingent and eventual phenomenon that is intensely experienced, but it is a necessary and intrinsic force of mental processes in general (Colombetti, 2014). Living beings have a point of view and disclose a world of significance (*Umwelt*, von Uexküll, 2013) by virtue of being affected depending on their particular organization. This *primordial affectivity* does not refer to any episode or content of consciousness or quality that accompanies perceptual objects; rather, it is the expression of the primary purposefulness and concern that characterizes all living beings, that is, the very process of disclosing a world of significance (Colombetti, 2014). In this way, the enactive approach overcomes the cognitivist idea that cognition is a matter of processing abstract mental representations following logical rules, a view that relegated emotions to mere accidental qualities of those otherwise neutral representations.

Affectivity is of key importance when adopting a *genetic* rather than *static* perspective on conscious experience, that is, when looking at the dynamics of the flow of conscious experience in a concrete and situated subject (Lotz, 2007). Within phenomenology, the static/genetic distinction was originally proposed by Husserl in his later works, motivated by his analysis of the temporal structure of conscious experience (Husserl, 1905–1910/2019). While static phenomenology studies the formal structure of consciousness (i.e., intentionality, noetic–noematic correlation, and transitivity) and provides a synchronic description of those structures, genetic phenomenology studies the process through which these structures emerge in conscious experience as motivated by simpler structures or processes<sup>1</sup> (Sousa, 2014).

As I will show in this work, Colombetti (2014) implicitly shifts her perspective from the static to the genetic phenomenology of affects by describing how affectivity

<sup>1</sup> Jaspers in *General Psychopathology* (Jaspers, 1913/1997) made a similar distinction between static (descriptive psychopathology), genetic (developmental perspective of symptoms arising from more basic forms of personality) and hermeneutic (interpretative) phenomenological psychopathology (see Bürgy, 2016 for a threefold analysis of obsessive-compulsive disorders). Steinbock (1995) also refers to “generative phenomenology” to describe Husserl’s latter concerns about historicity, culture and intersubjectivity, which lead to Heidegger’s philosophical project (1927/1962). However, the definition of genetic phenomenology I am adopting here draws on Husserl’s definition and differs from Jasper’s in the sense that Husserl takes the genesis of intentional states in the temporal present as the primal source from where the developmental timescale is built. Husserl’s genetic phenomenology, thus, mediates between the ontogenetic-developmental scale of the constitution of the individual and the genesis of meanings within one’s own stream of experience. Merleau-Ponty’s (1964/2013) analysis of the lived body is also conceived as a continuation of Husserl’s incomplete genetic phenomenological project (López Sáenz, 2020).

is a prerequisite for any form of sense-making. But the idea of primordial affectivity does not by itself develop an account of affective dynamism that coherently integrates diverse types of affective experiences, such as emotions, moods, atmospheres, and existential feelings. Moreover, a general tendency in the 4E research on affects has been to focus on emotions as the paradigmatic cases of affective experience (Colombetti, 2010, 2014; Colombetti & Thompson, 2007; Frijda, 2004; Goldie, 2000; Gunther, 2004; Hutto, 2012; Krueger & Szanto, 2016; Stephan, 2013), often collapsing the wide variety of affective experiences under the umbrella term “emotion”. This tendency has emphasized the action-oriented character of affective experiences, sometimes overlooking the diversity of forms that affectivity adopts (e.g., atmospheres, moods, existential feelings), their different intentional structures, and their possible differential roles in sense-making. These structural differences, which have been extensively described in the phenomenological tradition (e.g. Fuchs, 2013a; Szanto & Landweer, 2020) need to be integrated into the enactive theory of cognition if we are to provide a phenomenologically informed enactive account of mental disorders.

This paper presents a possible route to articulate the affective character of mental disorders attending to the phenomenologically distinct forms of affective experiences. Building on recent proposals (Colombetti, 2012; de Haan, 2020; Maiese, 2022), I define mental disorders as disorders of affectivity. To do so, I adopt an (onto)genetic perspective, that is, a process perspective that defines mental disorders as disturbances in affectively individuating a coherent self-world structure in consciousness. I first introduce the genetic framework employing the terminology of Gilbert Somondon’s (1958/2020) philosophy of individuation. Simondon’s concepts of *individuation*, *metastability*, and *pre-individual* will serve to articulate the process and relational ontology that underlies the enactive concept of sense-making (Di Paolo, 2016). From this perspective I suggest, sense-making can be seen as a progressive concretization of the self–world transitive intentional structure. Then, I develop a genetic perspective on affects, that is, I describe affects as pre-individual forces that anticipate a self-world coherence in sense-making. I reformulate the primordially affective character of sense-making and distinguish the role of existential feelings, atmospheric feelings, moods, and emotions in the self-individuation process. Finally, I define mental disorders as affective disorders and classify them within this genetic framework as impairments in building a coherent self-world structure in the flow of consciousness.

## 2 Sense-making in terms of individuation

Cognition in the enactive framework is defined as sense-making, that is, as the evaluative interaction of the organism and the environment that discloses a world of significance for the organism (Varela et al., 1991/2017). Cognition is no longer defined in representational terms as static mental states, but it emerges in the process of ongoing engagement of the whole organism in relation to its environment. Sense-making involves a dynamic and historical endeavor of coping with changes in the organism-environment system (Di Paolo et al., 2022) and it has to be read

in the context of the self-regulation needs of an unfinished and ongoing process of human becoming (Di Paolo, 2021). This process perspective fits nicely with Gilbert Simondon's<sup>2</sup> (1958/2020) process and relational philosophical thought, which aims at explaining novelty and transformation rather than stability and identity in self-regulating systems. This underlying ontological compatibility has recently been highlighted, leading to a so-called "simondonian turn" within the enactive tradition (e.g., Derecenne, 2021; Di Paolo, 2021; Di Paolo et al., 2018; García & Arandia, 2022; James, 2020; Santacana, 2013).

It is worth clarifying that despite being Canguilhem's and Merleau-Ponty's student, Simondon is not a phenomenologist (Gómez, 2018) and he did not explicitly address the problem of health and disease. Indeed, the philosophy of individuation challenges two fundamental elements of phenomenological tradition, namely, the epistemic privilege of the individual subject as the starting point for the phenomenological analysis and the methodological principle of bracketing out any ontological claim about non-experiential reality. However, although apparently tensioned, both genetic phenomenology and the philosophy of individuation converge in the enactive approach (Pace Giannotta, 2020, 2021). Enactivism is concerned with how subjective experience emerges from dynamical properties of living systems (e.g., self-organization, autonomy, precariousness) and in this way, it promotes a mutual enlightenment between dynamic explanations and phenomenological descriptions of conscious experience (Gallagher, 1997). Simondon's philosophy, as it is presented here, contributes to this endeavor by describing how dynamical principles that rule physical and biological individuation (e.g., metastability, pre-individual, concretization) can describe the genesis of intentional structures in the experiential domain (what he calls, *psychic individuation*).<sup>3</sup>

Simondon invites us to think of the (onto)genetic process by which individuals come to being instead of focusing on finished, static, and constituted entities. He was interested in understanding the ontogenesis of individuals, that is, the process of co-emergence of particular entities – which encompass all categories of entities such as living beings, physical objects, mental states or collectivities – in relation to their particular milieu. In this sense, *becoming* genetically precedes an individual being, but it is at the same time an immanent principle of it. This implies that all beings or entities –either living organisms, thoughts, or memories – are temporally extended

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Simondon was Merleau-Ponty and Canguilhem's student. His doctoral thesis comprised two theses: (1) *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et de l'information* (1958) and (2) *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* (1958). While the latter was immediately published and received wide recognition in philosophy of technology, the former was published in 1964. This work, which constitutes his main thesis, has been translated into English in 2020 under the title "The individuation under the light of the notions of form and information" (1964/2020). His thought has been transmitted indirectly by Deleuze (1994), Massumi (1995), and Stiegler (De Boever, 2012; De Boever et al., 2012; Iliadis, 2013), but it is not until recently that we can find a thorough examination of his work in English-speaking academic spheres. For a general introduction to Simondon's work, I address the reader to Bardin (2015) and Scott (2014).

<sup>3</sup> To clarify, this does not mean that enactivism agrees with all the claims and consequences of Simondon's philosophy, but rather, I hold that the operational and dynamic terminology of his theoretical framework is particularly appropriate to articulate the genetic perspective on sense-making and affects.

entities. Simondon focused on the immanent principles of change and becoming in diverse domains of reality, which makes his conceptual framework highly adequate to describe the unfinished character of embodiment in the organic, sensorimotor, psychic and intersubjective dimensions (Di Paolo, 2021). In addition, Simondonian ontology is relational, which implies that relations are not mere accidental links between relata that have a previous independent existence, but relations are contemporary with the terms they relate and have, thus, status of being. Nothing exists concretely if not embedded in a network of relations that determine it. In this way, he moves away from substance ontology, which sees individuals and their environment as pre-existing abstract entities that are accidentally put into relationship, in favor of processual and relational ontology, which sees entities as metastable and temporary phenomena that emerge from dynamical constellations of relations.

Simondon used the term *metastability* to indicate the dynamics of individuation. A metastable state is a state of tension where the system holds inherently conflicting demands as it is pulled by internal forces in different directions. It is a state of critical tension or criticality (Werner, 2007). Metastable systems may seem relatively stable but they maintain a state of tension, where small perturbations can trigger abrupt changes and phase transitions<sup>4</sup>. In order to maintain metastability in a given system, a certain degree of internal tension is required, which implies harboring potentials that have contradictory tendencies and can even be effectively incompatible. This is a productive tension that allows for the continuous transformation of the system. Following complex systems theories, living beings are those that self-individuate by continuously renewing their potentialities so as to remain metastable and changeable. A living being is thus a tensioned system that holds the potential of a variety of actualizations and *concretizations*<sup>5</sup>. This perspective contrasts with views that emphasize the homeostatic character of living beings, for which the organism regulates itself in order to maintain a certain equilibrium. Instead, from the perspective of metastability, stable equilibrium implies death. In a nutshell, the perspective of metastability emphasizes change rather than stationarity and equilibrium.

With respect to mental disorders, we can distinguish a metastability-based adaptation-perspective from the homeostasis-based adaptivity-perspective (García & Arandia, 2022; Menatti et al., 2022). The adaptation- perspective privileges stability, balance, and homeostasis, and it presupposes an optimal state of equilibrium from which deviation would imply pathology. From this view, health and pathology

<sup>4</sup> The classical example of physical individuation is the process of the crystallization process. The supersaturated solution is a metastable state where small perturbations (e.g., dirt, temperature changes, or mechanical input) can trigger a phase transition from liquid to solid. The dynamics of an argument between a couple can also be seen as a metastable dynamic, where small interventions might lead the couple to split up, reach a partial consensus, or continue arguing (James, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Individuation, thus, does not take place by combination of free-floating elements, but entails a progressive process of structuration and concretization of an already self-organized individual. Concretization, in this context is a process of becoming of the individual as embedded within a network of relations, that is, its constitution as a relational system. It opposes abstraction, which refers to the process of decontextualization or isolation of the element from its relation with other elements (see Di Paolo et al., 2018, p. 92). Concretization is thus an operation of going from holistic, abstract, and blurred conceptions to identifiable networks and structures of concrete elements and relations.

are defined in terms of adaptation/maladaptation, where the regulatory task of the organism is to compensate for fluctuations of the external milieu, thus keeping a homeostatic balance. The adaptivity-perspective, instead, does not presuppose a pre-given environment to which the organism must adjust, but the organism and its associated milieu co-emerge and co-determine each other from their reciprocal causal relationships, forming subsequent metastable stages of coherence. In this way, we replace the criteria of adaptation with the criteria of adaptivity (Di Paolo, 2005), which refers to the ability to actively regulate the organism-environment coupling by anticipating potential trajectories of the system and reorganizing it accordingly. Adaptivity, in contrast to adaptation, is often realized by creating and modifying supportive environments rather than by just adjusting to them (Menatti et al., 2022). Adaptive regulation operates over virtualities by maintaining a certain degree of internal flexibility and patterns of coherence so as to anticipate and modify the field of potentialities of becoming (Maiese, 2022). From the adaptivity perspective, then, the criteria of health and pathology is not adaptation/maladaptation, but the capacity to maintain flexibility and coherence in the regulation of the organism-environment system so it keeps metastable and changeable. In sum, while homeostatic adaptation looks at the organism-environment system in its final and static conditions, metastable adaptivity looks at the characteristics of the dynamics of individuation of the system.

Another key concept to understand the process of individuation as a dynamic process is the *pre-individual*, which refers to the tensioned field of incompatible forces that precedes the emergence of more stable structures in a system. The pre-individual is potential rather than actual, an excess of potential energy or excitability of a system that allows for reorganization and transformation. Since the individual is never fully constituted but is in a transitory phase in its individuation process, an excess of potentiality for change transcends and extends it. The pre-individual is the ontogenetic condition of the possibility of the emergence of any individual in the first place as well as what drives its change. One of the consequences is that the pre-individual is not yet part of the structured being and cannot yet be described in reference to a fully constituted individual. This degree of tension and instability can be understood as pre-individual potentialities inherent to individuation, that is, what maintains the system's flexibility and adaptability. Let us consider some examples: the free-floating molecules in a supersaturated solution constitute the potentialities of a crystal but they are not yet the crystal; the caloric potential of food constitutes the potentialities of the organic structure of the organism, but they are not yet the organism; the affective forces constitute the potentialities of certain thoughts and acts, but they are not yet thoughts or acts. The pre-individual is more than dispositional, because they are not just properties of entities, but potentials that will eventually constitute those entities. In this sense, the living organism holds an excess of potential energy that is not yet internal or external to the organism, but is available to generate the organizational boundary that determines what the organism and its associated milieu are in relation to each other<sup>6</sup>. Accordingly, individuation will be

<sup>6</sup> Notice that the term boundary in this context does not necessarily refer to a physical boundary (like the skin, or the cell wall), but to an organizational boundary, as in the case of operationally closed systems (Di Paolo & Thompson, 2014). In the phenomenological sense, instead, this boundary is an expe-

seen as a progressive process of partial disambiguation or pre-individual tension. Since the pre-individual is a not-yet-structured and potential state, it can be seen as non-definable in terms of internal–external, objective–subjective, and self-world. The pre-individual is the relation of the individual with its own potentialities where those polarities do not apply yet. Indeed, the pre-individual is not a concrete thing but a relationship between potentialities and actualities. It is a virtuality of multiple (sometimes mutually exclusive) tendencies that will be concretized in an actual action or expression. In Massumi’s words (1995), it is an *intension* that is ready to become an *extension*. Indeed, etymologically, *sub-jectum* and *ob-jectum* refer to the product of an action of being thrown to two different domains of reality, which implies an action that precedes them. This action is the individuation of the living being.

Following the perspective of individuation, the enactive concept of sense-making can be reformulated as the genesis of the intentional structure of consciousness that re-enacts both the world and the self in an ongoing process of mutual co-specification. The self is continuously “actualized” through embodied and situated interaction of the organism with the sociomaterial environment. Experience emerges in this chiasm between self and world, where neither self or world are *a priori* constituted entities, but are rather emergent poles of the sense-making process<sup>7</sup>. As a consequence, in the psychological domain, the self-world and subject–object polarities are not prior transcendental conditions of conscious experience, but also “products” of sense-making, so to speak, which entails not only making sense of the world but also building up the intentional structural frameworks from which the world can be experienced. In this way, the organism “lays down the path by walking” (Varela et al., 1991/2017) as sense-making is not conceived as a mere activity of an already constituted individual, but it is a living process of unfolding structured patterns of self-world relatedness. As Wrbouschek and Slunecko (2021a) nicely put it, “the psychic individuation is basically the (temporary) resolution of pre-individual tensions (conflicting impulses, distant orders of magnitude) through establishing an experiential polarity of an (sensitive, emotive, and mobile) individual oriented toward its associated milieu” (p. 51). In other words, sense-making does not only give rise to a meaningful world, but it also gives rise to the sense of self that accompanies those experiences. It is the process of progressive transformation of one “mental state” to another by changing also the intentional and transitive structures (e.g., self-world, subject–object, noetic–noematic polarities) that underpin those mental states in

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Footnote 6 (continued)

riential chiasm that distinguishes the self and the world. Here, I use the term “organism-environment” or “organism-milieu” to refer to the system as described from a third-person perspective, leaving “self-world” to the system as experienced from a first-person standpoint.

<sup>7</sup> The notion of self I manage here is an open and dynamical process-structure system where multiple descriptions and states are simultaneously possible (see also Marks-Tarlow, 1999). Rather than a linear succession of stable states, consciousness is seen as a fluid and dynamic process of continuous stabilization of multiple affective forces. The self boundaries, thus, are also fluid and ever changing that are continually reconstructed on the basis of local affective dynamics that take place at multiple phases or dimensions of interaction with the environment.



the first place. Here, against the background of the individuation of the subject, the inherent affective character of sense-making comes into play in a decisive manner (Husserl, 1917/1998).

### 3 A genetic perspective on affectivity

Phenomenological approximations of affective experience have generally focused on the static and structural aspects of affects (Goldie, 2002; Gunther, 2004; Montague, 2009). From a static perspective, affects – and more particularly emotions – have been described as relational phenomena with bidirectional intentionality: they are not only bodily experiences of the world but also experiences of ourselves; that is, they have an outward and inward expression (Fuchs & Koch, 2014; James, 1922; Scherer, 2000). This inherent self-referentiality and self-affection of emotions underpins the pre-reflective self-awareness, constituting the basic form of self-understanding and attunement to the world (Colombetti, 2011; Lotz, 2007; Slaby, 2008, 2014). However, beyond static-structural descriptions of intentionality of emotions, a genetic perspective raises the question of how these bidirectional intentional structures are processually and temporally unfolded. Having defined sense-making in genetic terms as a progressive reenactment of a transitive self-world intentional structure, we are now in a position to understand the central role of affectivity in this process.

From a genetic perspective, affects operate over pre-individual potentials for change and becoming, and thus they mediate in the transition from pre-individual to individuated reality, from potentialities to actualities, or in Massumi's (1995) terms, from "recursive resonance" to "transitive linearity". Affective resonance is what orders and organizes the divergent pre-individual processes and potentialities in an interior–exterior polar axis, providing a primordial orientation to the individual with respect to their associated milieu (Heredia, 2012; Massumi, 1995; Simondon, 1958/2020; Tucker, 2013, 2018). It is the felt gradient of individuation that mediates between two moments of the individuation process, namely the pre-individual and the actual individual, thus anticipating a partial coherence in the becoming individual (Wrbuschek & Slunecko, 2021b). Affects are functions that order a multiplicity of disparate pre-individual forces and tendencies into the emotive pole of pleasant–unpleasant, also bringing forth senses of interior-exterior to lived experience. Many tendencies, values, norms, and intentions coexist in the individual, which create a pre-individual tension that is not yet actualized. But it is through sense-making that those potentialities are structured into concrete Gestalt patterns, where certain aspects become salient while others remain in the background of the attentional sphere. This actual selective attention is achieved due to a process of affectively framing those potential tendencies (Maiese, 2022). Affectivity allows gauging between different values, norms, interests, and tendencies that traverse the individual –see for instance Damasio's (1994) theory of 'somatic markers'. Affectivity, thus, orients the organism in a particular way, establishing a concrete self-world structure in a given moment in time, discarding other possible meanings the situation could take. Consider the example of existential grief (e.g., due to the loss of a



beloved one). Grief orientates the person towards the future possibilities in a specific way, often tinging the world with an aura of transcendence and a constant sense of finitude. This background feeling highly constrains the potential future meanings events adopt (e.g., small clashes at work might not be as significant as otherwise), and the dimensionality of everyday decisions. Indeed, affects may have an anticipatory or regressive character, they open up expectations of becoming and leave traces of the just lived experience, so they certainly predispose us to certain future interactions and behaviors (Bower & Gallagher, 2013). What affectivity shows is that the environment is meaningful to us not only in virtue of its actual configuration, but due to potential possibilities or threads that charge situations and events with certain affective qualities (Fuchs, 2022). Indeed, although our potential experiences cannot be perceived like actual experiences are, they are affectively prefigured. Affects are thus embodiments of potentialities.

The Simondonian account of affectivity resonates strongly with that of Varela's (1999; Varela & Depraz, 2005). Varela and Depraz draw on Husserl's (1905–1910/2019) analysis of time consciousness<sup>8</sup>, which describes the flow of phenomenal present in a threefold structure, comprising *primal impressions*, *protentions*, and *retentions* and aptly described affectivity as inherent to the experience of temporality, which is manifested in the structural asymmetry between protention and retention. Unlike physical time –also called objective time–, which is symmetric with respect to past and future, lived time holds an asymmetry: while retention can be structured in a continuum of events, such sequentiality cannot be applied to the protentional field. In other words, while retention implies concrete, actual and determined events; protention, being the experience of “about-to-be”, entails potentiality, indeterminacy, and a degree of abstraction (Fuchs, 2022). Varela understood affectivity as configuring the protentional field and pre-structuring the potentialities of becoming. His proposal places affectivity playing a crucial role in modulating the conscious flow, leading its folds and unfolds so it explains the dynamical changes in the flow of conscious experience. Indeed, mental disorders typically exhibit alterations in the formal structure of temporal experience (Fuchs, 2013b). In the maniac pole, for instance, there is a general acceleration of events, a lack of assimilation, and excessive openness in the flow of lived experience. Since there is a structural tendency to protention, every event is experienced as new, exciting, and overwhelming (Fuchs, 2013b; Moskalewicz & Schwartz, 2020). In the depressive pole, by contrast, lived time has a longer cadence (Lenzo & Gallagher, 2020). Time flow becomes dense, there is a lack of openness to the future and a diminishment of potentialities in the experience of the present (Fuchs, 2013b). Temporality, thus, is a structural invariant of conscious experience, which is mediated by affectivity, and might be altered in mental disorders.

<sup>8</sup> This phenomenological analysis of temporality of experience marks the beginning of the genetic project. However, Husserl himself, in the later works acknowledged that this approximation is too abstract and static and that we need to address the individual as constituted by its lived-body, habits, affection and life history to really account for the dynamicity of conscious experiences (Husserl, 1917/1998).

Both Simondon and Varela placed affectivity at the emergence of conscious experience as what opens the field of potentialities for novelty, change, and transformation. A key distinction, however, is that while Varela took the affective poles of pleasant–unpleasant or positive–negative valences as pre-established by the organizational autonomy of the individual, Simondon considered the emergence of the pleasant–unpleasant axis a *product* of individuation rather than a primary principle of change. The reason is that the pleasant–unpleasant axis is defined in terms of attraction–repulsion, which already presupposes a constituted individual–world boundary to which distal and proximal dimensions can be ascribed. For Simondon, however, pre-individual potentialities are multidirectional, multifocal, and multidimensional and their structuration into a pleasant–unpleasant affective pole is a manifestation of the ongoing self-world structuration process. Massumi (1995) also endorses this perspective of affectivity as operating over a multiplicity of pathways and trajectories that are later linearized into pleasant-unpleasant linear forms of expressions.

These two perspectives, I believe, are complementary rather than opposite ways of looking at sense-making as an individuation process. Affects are the processual counterparts of structured selves and, thus, they are ontogenetically simultaneous to the process of subjectivation. They relate us to our becoming, that is, to what-is-not-yet-us (Keating, 2019). From the ontogenetic perspective, there is no prior fully constituted subject that undergoes affective experiences, but the movement of orientation and integration of affects makes the self-world polarity emerge in experience. This, however, does not imply that affects occur in the vacuum. Affectivity and subjectivation go together, so to speak. This goes in line with previously mentioned phenomenological accounts of self-affection as a condition of the possibility of self-awareness. Affectivity is not a mere companion of mental states, but it is the precondition for any form of intentional experience. As Michel Henry would claim (1965/1975, see also De Jaeger, 2015), the tension of the living is the source of self-affection. The tension of the living can be understood as the dephase between the constituted individual and its becoming, that is, its potentialities for change. Affectivity, thus, is affection and affectability at the same time, an activity that extends in time as a force of reaffirmation and re-structuration of the self. Understanding the genetic role of affect as mediating in the individuation process rather than just modulating the potential landscape reveals new ways of understanding how affectivity is involved in mental disorders. As I hold, mental disorders do not just imply a reduction of varieties of emotional states available, but they involve disturbances of the self-world structure that is mediated by affectivity.

Lastly, a way of understanding this genetic aspect of affects and the dynamic normativity they involve is what Maiese (2022) has recently called “affective framing”. Affective framings refer to the particular way of attending, gauging, and discriminating relevant information from the environment. This selective attention structures experience in coherent ways while conferring the individual a certain style of interacting, which in turn shapes her idiosyncratic character. Affective framing mechanisms serve to discriminate the relevant information in a situation, which makes it flexible while conferring a certain coherence and stability to the character of the self. It is relevant to note that affective framings

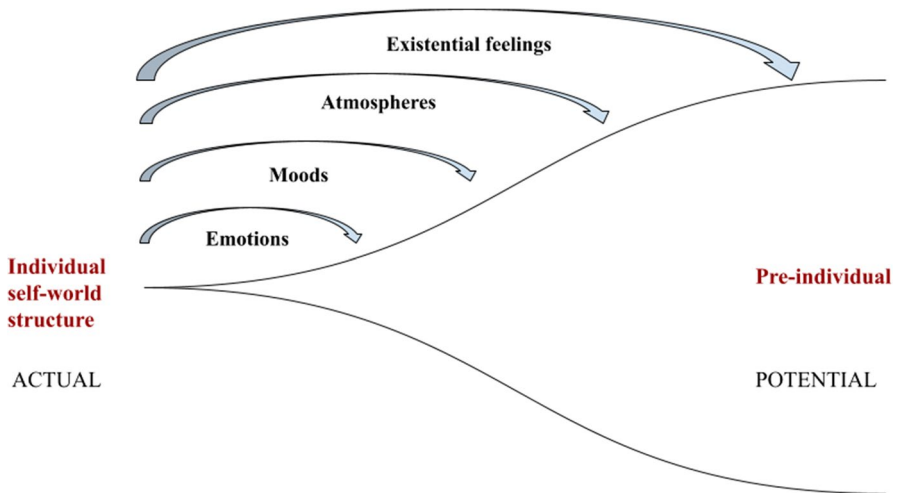
in the enactive framework involves the management of tensions among different habits, norms, and regional identities that coexist within the individual (Di Paolo et al., 2017; García & Arandia, 2022) –sometimes, but not only, promoted by participation in different social groups and roles. A certain degree of flexibility and reconfigurations in affective framings are necessary to deal with internal inconsistencies and tensions among habits and regional identities. Affects thus may open or close the ontogenetic landscape that constantly modifies the self-world relationship.

The genetic perspective I adopt here agrees with Maiese's proposal of placing affectivity at the center of what endows the self with certain coherence or incoherence, consistency or inconsistency, order and disorder. In mental disorders, the lack of coherence in the self-world structure leads to a destabilization of potentialities and tensions that do not find a metastable state of coherence to adapt to changing situations. In the sections below, I elaborate further on this idea by integrating the different roles played by different forms of affects.

## 4 Integrating affective forms

The genetic perspective on affectivity allows us to make differences between different forms of affectivity, their role in sense-making, and may also contribute to our understanding of mental disorders. Noticeably, the study of affectivity presents certain conceptual difficulties, since affective phenomena are difficult to distinguish and easy to conflate. However, affective experiences vary in intensity, duration, and more relevantly, in their intentional structure, thus contributing in different forms to the moment by moment restructuring of the self-world relationship. Following Fuchs (2013a), I suggest distinguishing between emotions, moods, atmospheric feelings and existential feelings. Although in the enactive-ecological literature all these terms tend to be used almost interchangeably, drawing these distinctions is important to develop an account of sense-making and mental disorders that is phenomenologically informed.

As already stated, I describe affectivity in genetic terms as what anticipates a partial metastable coherence in the self-world structure, allowing for framing of the situation, that is, concretizing a wide landscape of potential meanings into an actual self-world relationship. But the range, scope, and effect of each form of affectivity in this process is certainly different. Therefore, we should understand each type of affective form as connecting the individual with a differential pre-individual range of potentialities, that is, with a different phase in the emergence of the self-world polarity (Fig. 1). Indeed, not only static differences can be made in the intentional structure of each affective form, but also genetic differences in their contribution to the dynamics of individuation. In this way, sense-making involves multiple and nested dimensions of affective resonance that mutually influence each other and can only be conceptually distinguished as relating to phases of individuation.



**Fig. 1** Schema of individuation and affects. Psychic individuation (or sense-making) is represented as the progressive process of actualization of a wide field of pre-individual potentialities into a concrete self-world structure. The upper part of the figure represents different affective forms relating the individual with a different phase of its own individuation process

#### 4.1 Existential feelings

Existential feelings refer to the basic and tacit form of subject–world relatedness (Ratcliffe, 2008) being the basic attitude from which the world discloses to us, being what makes possible any other form of intentional attitudes and feelings. They are world-constitutive phenomena that open up a world of significance. Because I relate to the world, I can experience it, but my experience of being related to the world remains in the background of all experiences. According to Ratcliffe (2008), existential feelings encompass feelings of familiarity, trust in reality, certainty, freedom, openness, situatedness, locatedness, and connectedness. Existential feelings differ from moods and emotions in that they are not regarded as episodic nor are they event-like affective states. Although moods, emotions, and atmospheric affects can present different forms of intentionality, duration, and intensity, existential feelings are ubiquitous and pre-intentional. Being the horizon that pre-structures the experience of the world, they are not described in terms of world-directedness or *aboutness*, nor are, strictly speaking, *subjective* experiences.

Although existential feelings generally operate in the background of our experience, they come to the foreground in particular situations, such as in near-death situations (Greyson, 2000), transformative experiences (Markovic, 2021; Tietjen, 2017), mystical experiences (D’isanto, 2008; McGinn, 2008), deep grief (Ratcliffe, 2019), meditation (Guenther, 1972), and psychedelic experiences (Letheby, 2021). In such situations, the whole existence of the organism is questioned. There is a feeling of transcendence, that is, of becoming *one* with the environment and with other beings. Existential feelings have been described as “oceanic feelings” (Saarinen, 2014), in which the psychological and sensory boundaries of the self dissolve and a feeling of

unity and openness invades experience. Moreover, there is a feeling of losing one's self-centeredness in favor of a feeling of belonging to something larger than the self (Woollacott et al., 2020). Mystical experiences, for instance, have been described as relating to a meta-ontological "pure experience" that transcends the common self-world structure in terms of temporality, spatiality, situatedness, and relatedness (Parnas & Henriksen, 2016). These existential experiences, however, are salient forms of existential feelings that, most of the time, operate on the pre-reflective and pre-intentional background of experience.

From a genetic perspective, existential feelings can be related to the experience of the widest field of potentialities and possibilities. Feelings of vitality, for instance, open the affective space for all other kinds of intentional states available for the subject. Imagine also the impact of the so-called "existential crisis", where the subject loses familiarity with the world and herself. Although existential experiences are mainly inconspicuous, they modulate our frame of potentialities for action, expression, and meaning making in a broad and profound way. As a result, existential feelings relate the individual with the vast diffuse variety of pre-individual potentialities for change. For instance, feelings of openness unfold the sense of future and virtuality, existential anguish faces us with an abyss of impotence, feelings of vitality give us the sense of life as extended in time, and so on. These are fundamental feelings on which other intentional attitudes are built and organize the self-world structure. In sum, existential feelings relate the individual with a pre-individual phase where self-world polarity is not yet constituted or structured, bringing to the foreground the possibility of the disintegration and dissolution of the self in the vastness of the world.

## 4.2 Atmospheric feelings

Atmospheric feelings are holistic affective qualities of experience that integrate disparate expressive features into a unitary, still ambivalent *gestalt* (Anderson, 2009; Fuchs, 2013a; Griffero, 2016). Atmospheres are affective qualities of situations that are experienced in a holistic, blurred, and pathic manner. Although certain situations may be considered paradigmatic examples of atmospheres (e.g., a church, the environment at the workplace, a rock concert), atmospheres should not be considered as mere entities or relations in the world but a genuine way of disclosing the world which is characterized by a pre-subjective affective participation (Schmitz et al., 2011). They are affective experiences that do not belong (only) to the subject experiencing them. Some feelings are felt as alterations, tensions, movements, or gradients, which are not necessarily experienced as *my* feelings but as affective climates of the situation in which I am immersed.<sup>9</sup> The affective movements in a given

<sup>9</sup> Imagine for instance the following scenario: I enter a room where two people have been arguing. I can perceive a tense atmosphere through the tension in myself, however, if I say "I am tense" I would be missing a great part of my experience because I don't experience the tension as belonging only to me. If I say "you are tense", that would not represent what I am feeling either nor the statement "we all are tensed". The appropriate expression would be an impersonal "there is tension here". Only later I can ascribe a concrete emotion of embarrassment or anger to myself or to others, not only by reflecting on what has happened in that room, but by the proper process of disambiguation and structuration of the affective ambiguity.

situation are felt as an imbalance, a systemic need, or a demand of the situation that cannot be ascribed to individual affective experiences. Atmospheric feelings thus can be said to shape the self-world relationship in a pathic and general way, subtly modulating the landscape of potentialities that a given situation affords (Griffero, 2016).

From a genetic perspective, atmospheric feelings can be viewed as relating the individual with a non-differentiated pre-individual phase in which there is a self-world phenomenological boundary (e.g., we can distinguish between our internal affective states and those of atmospheres), but this boundary is still highly permeable. Atmospheres are those potentialities of the pre-individual that resonate with the lived body in the form of an indefinite something that is felt as a sort of transpersonal intensity or aura. Still, their intentional structure is more concrete and they are dimensionally more structured than existential feelings because they relate us to relatively delimited situations rather than with the vast and wide spectrum of potentialities. Indeed, atmospheres are spatially and temporally located, being particularly salient in natural or architectural landscapes and in interpersonal situations (Slaby, 2014). Yet, atmospheric affects are more diffuse, contradictory, and paradoxical than moods holding sometimes ambivalent, diverse, and mutually exclusive potential meanings (e.g., the uncanny atmosphere in Fuchs, 2019, see also Anderson, 2009). This intrinsically ambiguous character is a manifestation of the pre-individual potentialities that comprise atmospheric feelings.

### 4.3 Moods

Moods are general, bodily felt affective tones (Fuchs, 2013a), which are felt as individual feelings. Yet, they do not show the permeability of atmospheres. While atmospheres are ascribed to a wide variety of entities, such as situations, people, events, and so on, moods are ascribed to living beings. Being linked to certain vitality of movements, bodily expressions, and pre-reflective bodily arousal (Maiese, 2014), moods are ordered along a pleasant–unpleasant axis and do not show the degree of ambivalence we find in atmospheric feelings, which are felt in and out. Unlike existential feelings and atmospheres, which harbor divergent affective forces, moods have a higher internal coherence, which makes them identifiable. Although they impregnate the internal and external milieu –when one is in a sad mood, the world appears gloomy, for instance– they are felt as belonging to an individual more clearly than in atmospheric experiences. Moreover, moods differ from emotions in their temporality and intentional structure. Moods are less intense and more extended in time than emotions, and their form of intentionality is not object-directed but world-directed in a more general sense (e.g., anxiety as objectless fear; DeLancey, 2006). In certain moods, some concrete emotions are more likely to emerge than others. For instance, if one is in a melancholic mood, it is more likely that a commentary, an event, or just a gaze will trigger the emotions of sadness, anger, or mistrust. In sum, moods can be seen as the background from which emotions are concretized, but they are not yet emotions.

In genetic terms, moods provide the individual with an intermediate range of potentialities for change, which is narrower than of atmospheres but wider than of emotions. A sign of this is that they are felt as individual feelings, but they have a long cadence and their effects are extended beyond the immediate future. Unlike emotions, which are more intense and transitory, moods constitute an individual's habitual affective patterns, shaping the affective style or the character of the individual. The background moods determine habitual ways of relating with the world, narrowing the landscape of future possibilities for change for the individual. An irascible person does not always feel angry, but he/she has a background tension that makes anger more likely to emerge than other emotions. In this way, the dynamicity of moods can be seen as a manifestation of the pre-individual tensions that represent themselves in the individual, which shape the landscape of perceptions, attention patterns, actions, and emotions that are available to him/her. Moods, therefore, have an intentional or world-directed structure where a self–world demarcation is already constituted, but is not restricted to responses to immediate events and objects, so they are not yet describable in object-directed terms. This indicates that they are related to a phase of individuation in which the self-world distinction is already in place but not yet describable in terms of object-directedness.

#### 4.4 Emotions

Lastly, emotions are the most studied affective forms and have often been considered the standard affective phenomena (Damasio, 1994; Frijda, 1986; Izard, 1977; James, 1922). They are episodic experiences, more intense and temporally bounded than moods, and they entail a feeling of bodily arousal and action readiness. Emotions have a relatively coherent internal structure, some internal resonance, and temporal consistency, thus being more easily classified into categories. They are constituted by feedback cycles between affection as resonance, emotional perception, and action readiness (Fuchs, 2013a; Fuchs & Koch, 2014). Their intentionality is not only world-directed but also object-directed. Indeed, emotions are directed toward individual entities, events, and objects in the world. We can relatively easily identify the object—reason—of our anger, pride, laughter, or jealousy when we are in an intense emotion. Therefore, in emotional states, the intentional subject–object structure is more clearly defined than in moods, atmospheres, or existential feelings. The intentionality of emotions is twofold: they are directed at the world and at oneself, combining a pathic/centripetal and an e-motive/centrifugal force (Fuchs & Koch, 2014). Moreover, they entail a cognitive evaluation of the organism in relation to its own normativity (i.e., an appraisal of a given situation) as well as bodily directedness and bodily arousal (Maiese, 2014). Emotions, unlike moods and atmospheres, have an inherent action tendency (an e-motion) and can be defined as dispositions to action or action readiness (Frijda, 2004; Fuchs & Koch, 2014; Varela & Depraz, 2005). Indeed, the term emotion has its origin in the Latin *emovere*, which literally means *to move out*.

From a genetic perspective, I suggest that emotions connect the individual with a concrete and actual aspect in the world. They have an already constituted



**Table 1** Classification of affective forms in terms of self-world structure, intentionality and individuation

	<b>Structure</b>	<b>Intentionality</b>	<b>Aspects of individuation</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Existential Feelings</b>	basic form of world disclosing	pre-intentional	background experience of the wide field of pre-individual	openness familiarity sense of reality sense of being alive
<b>Atmospheric feelings</b>	blurred, mutually permeating self-world boundary	resonance-based intentionality, pathic affection	potentiality ↑ ↓ concretization ↓ ↑ potentialities +	oppressive/inclusive institution, atmosphere of inclusion/exclusion, uncanny atmosphere
<b>Moods</b>	constituted self-world boundary	world-directed but not contentful		apathy excitement laziness anxiety
<b>Emotions</b>	constituted subject-object transitive structure	object-directed and self-directed		episodic experiences with narrow potentiality for change

subject-object intentional structure, so they can be considered proper subjective phenomena. Even if the emotion entails some virtual or potential event (e.g., the fear of the death of a beloved one), this emotion is a response to a concrete and determined event. Emotions, thus, require the integration and coherence of disparate affective forces to give a unitary and integrated response to that event. They involve the alignment of different habitual affective tendencies into a very salient attentional and behavioral pattern (e.g., laughter, crying, blushing, ...). Accordingly, they open up a relatively narrow and transitory range of potentialities for resignification of the world and oneself. Emotional experiences are less self-transforming than other types of affective states. Their effects are spatially and temporally accurate, being episodic experiences of little transcendence, so to speak. For this reason, in emotions, the self-boundaries are not so permeable and blurred, but we experience them as belonging to an already constituted subject. Indeed, they are frequently representations of what the individual likes or dislikes, resulting in a degree of self-confirmation.

In the proposed classification (see Table 1), the intentional structure of different forms of affects is seen from a dimensional rather than a categorical perspective, which implies that their degree of transitivity is gradually concretized from existential feelings to emotions. While existential feelings open up the widest range of potentialities for changing the way of relating to the world, emotions are bound to dispositions to concrete actions and have shorter-term effects. Despite being conceived in dimensional terms, the more basic forms of affectivity set the background from which more concrete forms of affectivity can emerge. Existential feelings, for example, create the conditions for more sophisticated and structured forms of affective experiences. In turn, atmospheres set the context from which certain moods and emotions are more likely to emerge than others. It is crucial to note that these phases in the individuation process should not be seen as linear causal processes where

lower levels bootstrap higher levels. Instead, all affective forms are simultaneously present in the individual. One can have an existential background feeling of strangeness – e.g., for being in a foreign country–, while being in a sad mood –e.g., because he/she tends to melancholy– and being suddenly struck by a fearful situation –e.g., being almost run over by a car. The basic self-world openness is not modified by episodic emotions alone; there is always a renewal of pre-individual potentialities that maintain a degree of existential openness. In consequence, these phases in the individuation process are not sequential but occur at once in sense-making, and they can only be conceptually distinguished as phases.

## 5 Mental disorders as disorders of affectivity

From an enactive perspective, mental disorders are defined as disorders of sense-making (de Haan, 2020; Maiese, 2022). If we assume the affective character of sense-making, then the claim that mental disorders are disorders of affectivity follows almost straightforwardly. Although certain disorders, such as depression, mania, and bipolar disorder, have traditionally been categorized as affective disorders, I claim that the affective character is rather general and applies to what we refer to as “mental” in mental disorders. However, the statement that mental disorders are disorders of affectivity by itself is not very informative unless we are able to make novel distinctions. In this section, I will provide a tentative definition of mental disorders as disorders of affectivity and a brief classification of them.

From the genetic perspective I have drawn here, mental disorders can be seen as a lack of coherence in bringing forth a self-world intentional structure. Indeed, in mental disorders, the co-emergence of the self-world boundary takes place in a way that the self becomes alien and the world is experienced as “unhomelike” (Svenaeus, 2011; Tyreman, 2011). Moreover, mental disorders may be characterized by a reduction of potentialities for self-individuation. The capacity to deal with incompatibilities and tensions by reframing them into a coherent self-world structure may become impaired, and thus, unresolved tensions accumulate. The system gets stuck in a metastable state, unable to reorganize itself according to new situations. In other words, the capacity to renew potentialities for further change may be hampered, resulting in a breakdown in the process of disclosing the world of significance. This may be manifested as a reduction in possibilities for action, a hampering of agency, and reduction of the affordances available for the individual (Dings, 2020; Gallagher, 2018; Maiese, 2022). The disordered sense-making in this context implies that not only the process of bringing forth a world of significance goes astray, but also the sense of self that accompanies those experiences.

In this regard, different pre-individual phases and degrees of disorganized self-world patterns can be distinguished. As introduced in the previous section, each affective type of experience influences a phase in this process, which is manifested in the intentional structure of each affective experience. Accordingly, mental disorders can be classified as disorders of affectivity attending to the self-world organization they manifest. In the following paragraphs, I sketch a classification of a general

spectrum of mental disorders based on the schema of affectivity presented in this work:

First, according to the so-called “ipseity-disturbance model” (Nelson et al., 2014) in schizophrenia spectrum disorders, ipseity or the basic I-world structure is disordered (Hoening, 1983; Sass & Parnas, 2003). Trait features of schizophrenia are anomalous self-experiences (Parnas & Sass, 2001) or delusional moods (Fuchs, 2005b) and disorders of pre-reflective self-awareness (particularly in prodromal phases). Delusions in schizophrenia do not only present a breakdown in the meaning-making of the external environment but also a loss in the minimal self; that is, the ego-centrality or “zero point” basic orientation of experience, the basic mineness of experience that is mediated and realized by the body. The self–world boundary is unstable, which results in a disorder in basic structures of consciousness, such as temporality (Fuchs & Van Duppen, 2017), embodiment (Fuchs, 2005a), spatiality (Krueger & Aiken, 2016), agency, and intersubjectivity (Fuchs & Röhrich, 2017). We can relate schizophrenia with an existential phase in the sense that the self–world relationship is not yet constituted or it is too flexible. While in non-pathological states existential feelings, such as the sense of reality, vitality, openness, or familiarity are tacit and unquestioned, in schizophrenic disorders these existential feelings are at the forefront of experience in an unstable and disorganized manner. Feelings of becoming alien to oneself, of unreality of the world, and diminishment of self-affection are characteristic of schizophrenic patients (Fuchs, 2013a). We can explain this state as the self-boundary of the patient getting stuck in the pre-intentional and pre-individual state of non-differentiation. The patient lives in potentialities, namely possibilities that are perceived as actualities in hallucinations and delusions. A patient’s words “I can start thinking of things that aren’t even really existing or are not even there [and then, in my mind, they become real].” (Jones et al., 2016, p. 328). The simultaneity of incoherencies and disparities are not resolved by the structuration process of individuation. The patient is anchored in the existential phase, fused with the world and others and unable to distinguish him/herself by building self-boundaries. Patients often used descriptions such as “I lost myself” and “I wasn’t myself”. A patient reports: “the environment seemed like strange and dangerous and I was constantly on edge” (Connell et al., 2015). As a result, individuals lose not only their sense of self but also the feeling of being present and embedded in the world. The disturbance of the existential feelings also implies a loss in self-affection, which leads to hyper-reflexivity and hyper-pathicity, that is, an excessive reliance on an external third-person perspective to situate and locate oneself in relation to the world. Anchored in the undifferentiated, incoherent, and blurry fields of pre-individual potentialities, the schizophrenic patient is bound to a metastable state of ambiguity and simultaneity of disparate affective trajectories that cannot be structured into a coherent self-world relationship.

Depression, instead, can be regarded as a disorder at the atmospheric level. The capacity of the lived body to be affected is disturbed, which is manifested in the diminishment of resonance with others and the moods available. Depression is characterized not by a sad or depressed mood but by an atmosphere of affective indifference where nothing is saliently meaningful (Svenaesus, 2013). The body is objectified or “corporealized” (Fuchs, 2005a), resulting in a rigidity in the felt body that

makes it unable to resonate with the world. There is a loss of potentiality of the body, since it cannot self-affect (Doerr-Zegers et al., 2017). The patient is in a static atmosphere that diminishes the range of alternatives for self-interpretation and individuation (Aho, 2019). Basic structures such as temporality are also disturbed, particularly the future-directed structure of affective intentionality, resulting in a lack of appreciation of novelty (Ratcliffe, 2012; Stanghellini et al., 2017). The patient is enclosed to becoming. However, although depressed patients are rigidified into a concrete, gloomy, and sad atmosphere and do not present the usual mood fluctuations, their self-world boundary is slightly more defined than in schizophrenic patients.<sup>10</sup> They maintain a sense of reality, familiarity, situatedness, and a sense of self. What characterizes depression, instead, is a lack of attunement with different situational affective qualities, that is, an homogeneity of the atmosphere one resonates with, reducing also the field of relevant affordances perceived by the patient (de Haan et al., 2013; Ratcliffe, 2012). This is particularly evident in interpersonal situations interacting with a depressed patient, where the whole relational field may be absorbed by the depressed atmosphere (Francesetti & Roubal, 2020). In terms of the self-boundary, both internal and external milieus are conflated for the depressed patient. Consequently, there is a lack of permeability of the self-world boundary, a rigidity that does not allow patients to resonate with novelties and changes in the situation, resulting in a lack of affective attunement that isolates the individual from the intersubjectively shared world. The main characteristic of depression, thus, is not only being in a sad mood, but an apathy that makes the patient not being permeable to changing atmospheres, which results in a lack of fluctuations in moods (Aho, 2019).

The anxiety spectrum, which encompasses anxiety disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCD), and phobias, presents a different structural organization to depression and schizophrenia. In anxiety, there is a strong and rigid sense of self-world distinction, with hypersensibility exhibited to perturbations to that boundary. The urge to self-preservation is a characteristic of anxiety disorders (Glas, 2020), where there is a constant fear of dissolution, depersonalization, and incompleteness (Bürgy, 2019a, b; Fischer, 1991). In contrast to schizophrenia, where there is an actual experience of self-dissolution, in anxiety, there is a fixed fear of dissolution. The self-world structure is constructed, but there is an imbalance where the self is left powerless, deficient, and lacking. This is experienced as fear of death and permanent danger. Attempts are made to safeguard the self-structure through resorting to defensive mechanisms, which result in actions, thoughts, and feelings that are never “completed” and satisfactory. This enhances the sense of incompleteness, resulting in a feedback loop of imbalance and fear (Bürgy, 2019a, b; Ecker & Gönner, 2008). This vicious circle gives rise to repetitive behavior, which manifests in OCD patients as compulsive cleaning, fear of death, fear of touching and contamination, washing compulsions, and collecting and ordering compulsions. Unlike

<sup>10</sup> Except for some rare cases of depersonalized depression, where the very existence of the world and oneself is put into question (Sedman & Reed, 1963), in depression the basic access and openness to the world is not impaired.

psychotic experiences, there is a sense of an individualized self and structured world, but the structural rigidity does not allow it to renew potentials and to individuate in a novel way. There is a reduction of effective potentialities as a result of structure and stability being maintained. The disparate affective feelings are ordered in a rigid mood of fear. In anxiety disorders, fear is a general mood that is not concretized into an object, but the world threatens in a vague and indeterminate manner. In OCD, by contrast, the vagueness of fear is filled with different and arbitrary contents (e.g., microbes, dirt, and collected objects) that do not mitigate anxiety. OCD can thus be seen as a disorder at the *emotional* level. The reason is that the intentionality of the OCD experience is object-directed and implies a disposition to action that is manifested in compulsive behaviors and a monopolizing salience in the field of relevant affordances perceived (de Haan et al., 2013). In OCD, thus, emotional intentionality is disturbed, namely the level of action readiness. Similarly, phobias can be regarded as disturbances at the emotional level that have a clear subject–object intentional structure. Eating disorders may also be included as forms of emotional disorder, since they imply an excessive control to preserve and shape the self boundary and a compulsion towards (or against) a concrete object (e.g., food).

This classification is not meant to be exhaustive and could ideally incorporate other mental disorders such as borderline personality disorder, bipolar disorder, depersonalization, and others. Noticeably, this classification does not imply that OCD patients do not feel atmospheres or that only psychotic patients have existential issues. Indeed, in a way, every illness can be seen as an existential condition (Svenaesus, 2022). What it highlights is the fact that we can find similarities in the flexibility of the self-world structure in different psychopathologies and intentional features of different affective forms. In this way, affective disorders are not necessarily defined in terms of positive and negative affect valences, as reflected in the classical categorization of depression, mania and bipolar disorder (e.g., Paykel, 1992). Rather, I suggest focusing on the stability of the self-world boundary as the counterpart of impairments in forms of affective experiences. The malleability of the self–world structure and affective resonance are, from this perspective, two sides of the same coin. In this way, when we define mental disorders as disorders of sense-making and, consequently, as disorders of affectivity, we can make distinctions and account for the diversity of mental disorders.

One common characteristic that results from impairments in affectivity and involves most forms of psychopathology is the diminishment of potentialities for sense-making. Sense-making becomes biased and rigidified, not necessarily in virtue of being stuck in a mood or emotion, but in virtue of not being able to affectively frame the situation otherwise. In other words, healthy experience is the capacity to cope with novelty, in the sense of being able to change one's perspective on the world; that is, the capacity for organizing and structuring the self-world relationship in novel, adaptive, and flexible ways. From the genetic perspective, the pre-individual state is a state of tension and disparate affective forces that pull the system in different directions. Thus, the pre-individual state is a state of high flexibility. Individuation is a process of re-organization and progressive stabilization of the self-world structure. Now, this process does not occur at once, but it is a recurrent process of regaining potentialities for future individuation and change. Thus, sense-making is

a process of ongoing ordering and disordering the system, so to speak. This is why both flexibility and rigidity are necessary for maintaining the system in a state of effective potential for change. Indeed, as dynamical systems theory postulates, a degree of disorder and instability enables the cognitive system to maintain a metastable state of readiness, keeping highly responsive and sensitive to subtle changes.

In this regard, several authors have suggested looking at flexibility criteria to assess the degree of *disorderliness* (e.g., de Haan, 2020; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010; Uddin, 2021). However, the self-world structure of a person can be either too rigid or too flexible. Consider, for instance, borderline personality disorders or schizophrenia, where the minimal self-awareness is too loose and unstable. Not only rigidity, but also excessive flexibility is a source of disorder and diminishment of effective potentialities for sense-making. Psychotic symptoms such as delusions or hallucinations can be seen as an excess of flexibility in sense-making. A patient reports: “It feels like everything is amplified. Like, if I was in a really significant point in an episode, that would just be sticking out, like the rug behind you, or in addition to the ticking of the clock or in addition to the blue of the wall” (Pienkos, 2014, p.11). The world appears too meaningful, so to speak. As a consequence, although health has traditionally been understood as flexibility to adapt to changes in the environment, we should consider both flexibility and rigidity, spontaneity and structure, order and disorder as necessary to maintain metastability, adaptivity, and efficient potentialities for change.

As a consequence, I suggest that a conception of health requires a second-order flexibility or *meta-flexibility*, which provides a measurement of the level of management of order and disorder of a system (as already proposed by Pincus & Metten, 2010). Meta-flexibility refers to the capacity of the organism to change its own structures in order to make it more flexible or more rigid, but without getting too loose or disintegrating. This is mediated, I suggest, by the ability to take advantage of interrelated processes for regulating and integrating diverse pre-individual tendencies in certain situations. Meta-flexibility should be understood as the capacity to reorganize affective framings by becoming more or less structured, more or less flexible, so as to integrate tensions generated by processes with incompatible regulatory demands. It is what makes a system resilient, that is, capable of recovering from adversity by modifying its own structural properties. It gives us a grip on the level of integration of the system and the capacity to manage tensions by generating certain structures and regaining potentialities for further changes. Meta-flexibility is thus a measurement of the balance between structure and process, individual and pre-individual, order and disorder.

## 6 Conclusion

The present work offers a reinterpretation of phenomenological descriptions of certain mental disorders attending to a genetic perspective of affectivity and sense-making. Inspired by Simondon’s process and relational ontology, I have described sense-making as the process that brings forth the self-world or subject-object structure in consciousness, that is, an ongoing process of

concretization and structuration of pre-individual disparate potentialities. As a consequence, under the lens of individuation, mental disorders may be seen, not only as impairments in bringing forth a meaningful world, but as a lack of coherence in bringing forth the self-world intentional structures that underpin an individual's interactions with the environment. Looking at the meta-flexibility and concreteness of the self-world structure allows us to place affectivity, not as a quality of conscious experiences, but as the primary force that leads the folds and unfolds of consciousness, by anticipating a partial coherence in becoming. For this reason, I suggest looking at affectivity as a fundamental dimension of consciousness that is disturbed in mental disorders in general.

The proposal of this article builds on existing enactive perspectives on health and pathology (de Haan, 2020; Maiese, 2022). The enactive perspective on health and pathology thus does not refer to a pre-established, internalist, and discrete dysfunction, but it involves the co-emergence of the self and the world through the organism's interaction with the environment. The aim is to provide a naturalized but not reductive account of mental disorders, one that integrates the varieties of biological, sensorimotor, intersubjective and existential dimensions. This article contributes by elaborating on the affective dimension of the mind, which has not received much attention in certain enactive formulations of mental disorders (e.g., de Haan, 2020; Nielsen, 2020). This approach goes along with dynamical system's perspectives that see mental disorders in terms of a grip of attractor states that prevent the system from metastability and change. Affects are the anticipation of potentialities of finding oneself in the world, constituting the primary way the individual orients himself toward the future. Mental disorders thus are conceived as affective forms of being-in-the-world, where the general precariousness and vulnerability of life is manifested and brought to the foreground of experience (Martinsen & Solbakk, 2012; Ratcliffe & Broome, 2012; Svenaeus, 2011).

As a final note, the theoretical framework presented here resonates with process perspectives in philosophy (e.g., Whitehead, 1929/2010; Seibt, 2013). It aims at overcoming the substantialist assumptions of looking at mental states and disorders as static, uniform, thing-like entities towards a perspective of living phenomena as processes that extend and develop in time (Dupré, 2020). Process perspectives, thus, emphasize change rather than persistence. This idea goes along with the enactive conception of life for which individual persistence is dependent on doing things, that is, self-maintenance and self-distinction as mediated and realized by structural changes. Adopting a process perspective on mental phenomena and mental disorders allows us to move away from the reification of psychopathological categories towards a perspective on mental disorders as multileveled and hierarchically nested processes. Such a dynamical perspective may be relevant for understanding the time-course of the emergence, persistence, and decay of certain psychopathologies, as well as for identifying the interconnection between micro- and macro- changes in therapeutic processes.

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