

## Question: Are Human Beings Ultimately Affective?

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*This paper considers arguments for finding human beings to be centrally rational or basically affective. The former view, initiated by the predominant philosophers of antiquity, prevailed in the West until Spinoza and (among those after him) Heidegger made affectivity primary. The thesis is that this choice is not primarily psychological but ontological and that the question must be pursued metaphysically.*

### I. The psychic hierarchy

The question of the title is asked, in various ways, over and over in the philosophical and psychological tradition of the West. Or better, it is answered in various ways, often without being asked. It is inherent in the dominant model of the human soul of the Platonic-Aristotelian mainstream, a soul that has two chief parts, one of which is a-rational [*alogon*] while the other has reason [*logon echon*], as Aristotle says in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1102 a 29).<sup>1</sup> Both parts are subdivided in various ways that I will return to later, but the affects, or the passions, are always located in the a-rational part. “A-rational,” reasonless, does not mean “irrational,” unreasonable; only reasonable beings can be unreasonable, for only they can contravene their reason. Moreover, the a-rational part of the soul is regarded as having, in turn, parts amenable to reason, though not actively rational. Hence arises the question whether the passions are ultimately obedient, recalcitrant, or just indifferent to reason. And if they are in some mode or degree finally ungovernable by reason, then the question is whether they are so as mere, brute, indefeasible facts of our psychic constitution regarded as insuperably and ultimately non- or a-rational, or as evidence of a deficient or perverted rationality, or perhaps even as testimony to our ultimate, healthily in-

suppressible affectivity.

The Western tradition is quite routinely termed “rationalist.” If, however, the question proposed, “Are human beings ultimately affective?” is sometimes answered positively from within that tradition, we should perhaps reconsider that label.

I will begin with three preliminary observations about the early classical psychology, where by psychology, a word apparently not used by the Greeks and rare in English before the nineteenth century, I mean the theoretical soul-framework of human beings, the “account” [*logos*] of their psychic economy.

First, the account that assigns to the human soul two—subdividable—major parts is very persistent. It extends into modern theory; for instance, it appears in Freud’s elaborately worked out “topography” of the soul, which has broadly two locations, or systems, the Unconscious and the Conscious. Very interesting questions, to be considered a little later, arise in modernity—as in antiquity—about a third middle division, its subordination and function. So also in contemporary neurophysiology a division between the feelings, including emotion, and “higher order” cognition is an assumed working hypothesis, to be confirmed or modified.

These variously elaborated theories seem to rest on our ever-repeated experiences of an original opposition of psychic events. There is the physical sense that feelings take place in the heart or at the skin; thinking seems to exercise the head or brain. There is the experience that what my reason commands, another self resists: “For what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I” (Rom. 7.15). And, more particularly, there is the sense that it is the body which is the locus of a passive opposition: “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26.41).

Indeed, and this is the second observation, the lower part of the soul is usually thought of as more involved in the body. The body in time, as the receptor and conduit of the senses, is thought of as itself passive and as a source of passions in the soul, as well as a recalcitrant resister—resistant not by reason of activity but of passivity—to the legitimate commands of the soul’s reasoning part. The soul’s vulnerability to

passion, its capacity for suffering, is expressed in the root meaning of πάθος, the Greek word for “passion.” Its affectivity is, in this scheme, thought of as proportionate to its nearness to the body, its never quite perspicuous involvement with the flesh and its affections.

And third, this mainstream psychology represents the appropriation of the soul by the philosophers in this respect, that the part in which the passions are located is named as a privative of the rational part: without reason [*a-logon*] versus having reason [*logon echon*]. There are various ways to account for the priority of λόγος (reason and its articulate speech) in the traditional psychologies:

1. Whatever is reflected upon and expressed is *ipso facto* in the medium of rational speech, which is therefore inevitably the dominant capacity; whoever thinks about anything is, willy-nilly, first and last, in the apprehensive rather than the affective mode—doing rather than done to. Thus the primacy of reason in a psychology is simply inherent in the fact that it is a λόγος, an account. Those who like to give verbal accounts will think that reason is to be in charge just by reason of their métier. It will be a professional preference—or deformation.
2. Another cause for according reason a higher position might be a judgment that disciplined action, which is to say vigorous fulfillment of one’s capacities, is superior to supine receptivity, to being mere formable material, the subject of influences, be they of the external or internal senses—that to be moved is less fine than to move oneself.
3. Again, it might be that, just as experience at any age shows that the soul or consciousness is often at odds with itself, so experience in maturity teaches that if the effortfully analytic—I am tempted to use the term “digestive”—rational part is at work and ultimately in charge, the passions are transubstantiated into fuel for human activity and well-being. Here this psychology becomes an ethics—the ethics of reason as the guide to human good and goodness.

The chief proponent of this identity known to us and the first full-fledged psychologist in the sense given above is Plato's Socrates, speaking in the dialogue *Republic*, where he gives the psycho-ontological rationale for his notorious claim that to know and to be good are the same. This position can fairly be said to establish a tradition, already expressed more aphoristically among the Presocratics, of aggression by reason toward the affects and their poetic expression. When Socrates introduces his no-quarter-given critique of emotive poetry by referring to "that ancient difference between philosophy and poetry" (*Republic* 607b), he must surely have puzzled Homer in Hades sorely, for the bard had sung of no such battle; moreover, he must have driven Aristophanes in Athens to a sarcastic pursing of the month, since the comic poet thought—witness the *Clouds*—that philosophers, a tribe to him indistinguishable from sophists, were a nasty novelty. However, when Socrates says "ancient" [*palaios*], he probably means it figuratively for "fundamental," "close to the human roots." Thus, ever since, in the main tradition, reason has been prosecutorial toward the passions in life and in literature, while they have been mutely persistent.

But, of course, the tradition being essentially dialectical, the privation of rationality, the "a-rational" part of the soul, is upheld from time to time in a positive mode—a fancy way of saying that the opposition mounts a deliberate defense of the passions as more basic to human nature than reason. I know of no such explicit initiative in antiquity. Homer and the tragedians, Socrates' antagonists (albeit well-loved and well-known by him), don't argue back; they simply, as I said, exist and persist. But in modern times such reaction sometimes takes the form of dry realism, as when Hume says, famously, in the *Treatise of Human Nature*, "Reason is, and ought to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (Hume 1960, 2.3.3). At other times it appears as romanticism, the philosophically knowledgeable revolt of the poets in behalf of the emotion-infused imagination. Thus Shelley, in his "Defense of Poetry," which ends with the announcement that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," claims in the beginning that "reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow

to the substance,” and that “poetry is connate with the origin of man.” As “Romantic reaction” is a descriptive term for the particular romantic movement (c. 1780–1850) that followed the enlightenment of the *philosophes* and the formalism of Classical artists, so, in general the vindication of emotion seems to be a reactive in the life of ideas—while in the life of people the reverse takes place: The affective life is given; rationality is imposed.

Finally the reestablishment of the emotions is a more recent initiative in “emotion studies.” It appears as a “New Romanticism,” an attempt “to return the passions to their central and defining role in our lives that they have so long and persistently been denied, to limit the pretensions of ‘objectivity’ and self-demeaning reason which have exclusively ruled Western philosophy, religion, and science since the days of Socrates,” and to do this, curiously enough, by showing that the emotions “have a ‘logic’ of their own.” These quotations are taken from the preface to Robert C. Solomon’s influential book, *The Passions* (1976, xvi, 14). Since then, neuroscience in particular has turned to the long-neglected study of emotions. The brain mechanisms subserving the emotions are apparently all subcortical, which means they are evolutionarily older than the “higher,” that is, more recent, brain functions and correspondingly more basic to survival. Some of these findings are set out for lay readers in Antonio Damasio’s *The Feeling of What Happens* (1999).

## II. The terms of the question

To shape a question about the siting of affects in the psychic economy is curiously difficult. I have chosen to ask whether they are ultimate, from a sense that something about their primacy or finality is worth finding out, but without quite knowing what I am looking for.

For example, an answer that is not satisfying is the evolutionary one: Ultimately, that is to say, first in our species’ development, long before we became animals having reason, our ancestors were animals having emotions. The emotionality of animals, particularly of the primates that do not have fully developed verbal rationality is currently undoubted by evolutionists and animal ethnologists; it was certainly Darwin’s nec-

essary central assumption in his recently revived book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1998 [1872], Ch. 1).

Yet temporal priority cannot simply determine present hierarchy; how a species evolved cannot definitively tell what an individual really is. Thus, in the case of the emotions, to say that they are subserved by a primitive brain structure does not necessarily imply that they are primary in our psychic constitution or that they ought to be given primacy in our conduct of life. In fact, it might be taken to mean the opposite: “primitive” is not necessarily an honorific.

If biological primitiveness, that is, our evolutionary past, doesn't fill the bill, perhaps the inquiry should turn to the possible primacy of the passions in the present human condition. Should we rehabilitate the passions from being the privation, the a-logical aspect of our human being, and accord them the honor of firstness in our evolved humanity? That seems to be something we would want to think out, since it affects first our self-management and then, as an immediate consequence, our conduct toward others. But even attention to the Stoic preoccupation with that issue as well as a lot of reading of the romantic rebels convinces me that it is a question satisfactorily answerable only on the basis of an even prior problem. Is our affectivity ultimate in the sense of being irreducible—irreducible to, that is radically independent of, our rational being?

Should readers think this is a curiously unlikely perplexity, I must remind them that what was the most widespread, inclusive, long-lasting and modernity-anticipating movement of antiquity, Stoicism, held just the opposite opinion: that the passions in fact ultimately come under λόγος, that they are λέκτα (utterances), as they said, namely propositions. Thus they held that the passions were judgments, albeit mistaken ones: the appraisal of an event or circumstance as mattering when it doesn't. This view turns out to be extremely sophisticated, although it is reductively physicalist. To reduce a complex story to a few words, the mainstream Stoics think that some external incidents cause a kind of upset or upheaval, a blip of turbulence in the wave-like medium [*pneuma*] that organizes and animates bodies and *is* the network of rationality carrying information to and decisions from a command

center [*hegemonikon*] located in the heart.<sup>2</sup> If this upset is accepted, that is, allowed to resonate undamped, a passion state takes place. Neo-stoicism, the claim that emotions are ultimately rational appraisals of our particular condition, is a current movement; its chief proponent is Martha Nussbaum in *Upheavals of Thought* (2001).

Stoic theory then gives a clear answer to the question of the ultimacy of affectivity. It is not basic: propositional rationality is. It is not clear to me that either the old or the new Stoics succeed in this rationalist reduction. Somewhere a moment of pure disturbance, what the Old Stoics themselves called a pre-passion [*propatheia*], steps in. But even if, or especially if, this difficulty is set aside, there remains something counterintuitive in the Stoic position. It seems to reduce to one side, that of a final rationality, our (or at least my) sense that human feeling is indeed indefeasibly suffused by thought—and the converse.

An opposite alternative is the claim that human beings are ultimately affective. The great—and somewhat abstruse—proponent of this position is Spinoza. The difference between him and the “romantics” is that, in the *Ethics* (1843 [1675]), he sites the ultimacy of the affective human mind in a daring metaphysics. Again, abbreviating unconscionably: God and nature are identical, and human beings are one of God’s ways of being, his “modes.” Human beings are desire; “Desire [an affect] is the very essence of man...” (Part III, “Definitions of the Affects,” no. 1). It is the conscious appetite for remaining in being, for active, productive persistence, and in this it is indeed a way of being God, who *is* nature in all its drive toward self-maintenance. Therefore, affect (Spinoza’s term: *affectus*) is absolutely ultimate. But it is not passive; the affects turn into passions when inadequately comprehended. For Spinoza “inadequate” means “unclear and non-comprehensive.” Thus passions are turned into actions through being adequately, that is clearly and comprehensively understood. Therefore, virtue is knowledge, and the *Ethics* is a guide to adequate knowledge. Yet even passions comprehended and so turned into virtues are first and last affects. It is no wonder that Spinoza was highly regarded by the Romantics.

My opening question was about the standing of affect in the human constitution. So, then, what is meant by “affect”?

*Affectus* for Spinoza (usually rendered “emotion”) is an *affectio* (usually rendered “modification”) of the body as it is represented in the mind (*Ethics*, Part III, definition 3). It is the idea of an impingement, external or internal, that increases or diminishes the body’s power. Thus the affections are “doings to” [*ad-facere*] the body and the affects are “done to” us. So they are in the first instance, that is, until mastered by the mind, passivities or passions. Eventually, in the eighteenth century, the affects came to be generally called “emotions,” “out-movings” or displacements of the soul. The term recognizes the fact that affects are experienced as—or rather that they are the experience of—some sort of turbulence, which usually, though not exclusively, originates in an external affection of the senses and resonates in an internal sensibility. Moreover, though Spinoza’s metaphysical theory of the fundamental affectivity of all Being can scarcely be mainstreamed, there is something that rings very true to human experience in the basic notion of emotion as being definable as a sense of expansion or contraction, of the well-being or dis-ease of consciousness. To me the deepest difficulty in getting hold of affect, feeling, passion, emotion, sentiment—the heap of terms gathering together the whole gamut of connotations—is to understand how being in the passive mode can be experienced as vigorously animating us and as being the voucher for our being alive. I believe that Spinoza was preoccupied with this very problem in looking for a way to turn passive affect active and thereby passion into virtue, in the primary Latin sense of *virtus*: efficacy, power.

So now, with some meaning accrued, are we ultimately affective? Stoics define us as animals having reason who assent to propositions evaluating their physical turbulences; Spinoza understands us as beings whose essence is desire, the longing to persist productively. The mainstream opinion is that we are animals with ultimately split natures. We are schizophrenic at root: passionate and thoughtful, emotional and rational, passively affected, actively controlling. It is within this dual nature that my question arises most clearly and that the answer is of the greatest consequence.

### III. The psychic constitution

The thought that of the two roots of our nature neither one is ulti-



mately reducible to the other is not the same as the notion of their mutual interaction or suffusion. No single word displays this truth better than the name of reason's—as the Germans say—"ownmost" activity: philosophy. For that word combines a passion term and a thought term: *philos*, "loving friend" and *sophia*, "skilled wisdom." So from its first use by Heraclitus, who together with his accomplice-adversary Parmenides, co-founded the enterprise so named and started it on its dialectical way, philosophy was understood as passionate to the core: the longing for genuine Being and the desire to capture it in words.

As thought is moved by affect so, conversely, human feeling, the passive yet vital movement of the soul, is shot through with reason, at least in human beings. That fact shows itself above all in the most apparent structure of the emotions, their "intentionality." In its modern use this term refers to the directedness or "aboutness" of acts of consciousness: We think this or that and of or about this and that. Emotions too seem to be intentional: We love or hate this and that, are in fear of or feel bold about this and that. It is this feature of emotions that we express quite easily. Getting the "feel" of the feeling is much harder. Moreover, the Stoics say that every emotion is a proposition *misguidedly* assented to. We claim, wrongly: "I am afraid of losing my child—and so I ought to be." The Stoics, in contrast, actually argue that grief for a lost child is a mistake. Whether or not that is really *all* such an emotion is—a very counterintuitive claim—it surely is part of most feeling that we are positively or negatively inclined to it. For example, Goethe's Faust makes his salvation or damnation depend on his ability to reject present contentment. May I perish, he says, "Were I to say to just one moment / Oh, stay awhile, thou art so fair" (Goethe 1949, Part 1, 1702). And so it is with all emotions. We receive or reject them by a mental motion of assent which appears to be separable from the pleasure or pain attendant on the emotion.

Furthermore, the emotions have a taxonomy, an ordered interrelation, about which there is, to be sure, no agreement, for writers about the emotions are fertile in personal schemes. Nevertheless, such ordering would not be feasible if the affects were not amenable to rational analysis.

But the most interesting application of reason to emotion, the thorniest theoretically and most consequence-laden practically, is that of control and rectification. Both Plato and Aristotle think that parts of the a-rational soul are amenable to reason, though not as actively reasoning but rather as accepting reason's rule. Aristotle says in the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

But perhaps nonetheless there is in the soul something that must be regarded as besides reason that opposes and goes counter to it...But this also seems to have a part in reason...for it obeys the rule of reason... (1102 b).

How it is possible that what is not-reason should hear reason is a perplexity. This much is clear, however: that though there is perhaps some mutuality, the relation is conceived asymmetrically, since it is reason that is to rule, and passion, of course located in the a-rational [*alogon*] part of the soul, that is to be ruled. Passion may blind-side, blank out, *deform* reason, but reason *informs* the feelings, which are after all, conceived as affects, passivities. Moreover, it isn't clear that the affect that suffuses, as I said, the higher power is not perhaps specific to, even located within, that power, a conception that complicates the understanding of the nature of λόγος but maintains its immunity to lower emotional contagion. In the Platonic *Symposium*, for example, Pausanias distinguishes between a Heavenly and a Popular Aphrodite (180 d), and in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates assigns to the soul, in the figure of a chariot whose charioteer represents reason, two horses, which represent the impulsive parts of the soul. One of these is by nature close to reason while the other can be subdued but only by reason becoming forcible (246 b). And, of course, the ancients knew all about spoiled reason, the quibbling tricks of a logical cunning that is in the service of gain and power. The practitioners of this manipulative reason appear in the Platonic dialogues as Socrates' opponents and in Aristophantic comedy as Socrates himself. They are the "wisdom-mongers," the sophists, as opposed to the "wisdom-seekers," the philosophers.

Neither the interaction nor the subordination of the parts of the soul gives a determinate answer to the question of the ultimacy of one element or to the prior question, whether the parts are indeed finally in

some sense autonomous.

Before the passage quoted above, Aristotle says that it scarcely matters whether the parts [*moria*] of the soul are real and the soul is “partable” [*meriston*] in the way that a body or any whole is, or whether these distinctions exist only in thought, as convexity is distinguishable from concavity. According to him, all this is of no importance for distinguishing the thoughtful from the thought-less part of the soul.

Indeed, introspective experience is the guide here; a first phenomenological description of our psychic economy has to be, and is even for contemporary neuroscience, experiential. For how would the brain scientist know what physical structure or event to look for without soul-like terms to guide the investigation? That said, however, it does turn out that the different “parts” of the soul, above all the emotive and the reasonable parts, are locally, structurally, and functionally distinct: Very grossly, the limbic system on the border between the brain stem and forebrain (containing among other structures the hypothalamus and amygdala) is associated with emotional life, and the forebrain, in particular the cerebral cortex, with rational functions (see Raius 2002, 202–38). Brain science thus appears to give a physical warrant to talk about the “parts” (or later, the “faculties”) of the soul, be they taken an emergent epiphenomena of the brain or non-physical entities subserved by neurophysiological structures.

It seems to me, therefore, that the grand figure which underlies Plato’s *Republic*, assigning to the soul a constitution which, when writ large resembles a polity, has plausibility and usefulness. It suggests that we may appropriately ask: Who or what rules, serves, provides, and *is* what we ultimately are? But those questions require that the two main parts of the soul be somewhat more differentiated.

#### IV. The psychic parts

From Plato to Freud the soul or psyche has been conceived, recall, as double in the basic sense of having two parts, a-rational [*alogon*] and having reason [*logon echon*], but, on closer inspection, as having three, and thence, in later authors, through division or addition on to many. Thus a count of the sub-parts of the soul used by Thomas Aquinas in

his *Summa Theologiae*<sup>3</sup> yields a dozen, even leaving out the lowest rung of distinctions, although even this multiplicity is fundamentally tripartite. Freud, at least in his “topography” of the psyche, laid out in the essay “The Unconscious” (1915), distinguishes the Unconscious (Ucs), the Preconscious (Pcs), and the Conscious (Cs), again a triple.

Thus the schema that seems to underlie all psychology, whether by way of adoption, adaptation, or counterproposals, are the triple partitions of Plato and Aristotle. The parts of the Platonic soul-structure, its “forms or dispositions” [*eide kai ethe*], are set out in the *Republic* (435 d). They comprise the rational part [*logistikon*] and the non-rational part, which is divided in two, the spirited [*thymos*] and the appetitive [*epithymetikon*, 439 d-e]. Of these the lowest, desirous part is specifically called a-rational; the middle part, which includes feelings of shame and pride, is shown to be particularly responsive to reason, but is not itself reason. One might say it is reasonable but not rational. There is, in the tradition, some argument whether desire and appetite, the low-grade affects comprising the lowest part, are to be counted among the passions proper. But the motions of the soul belonging to the middle part are surely emotions; in fact one translator, Raymond Larson, renders *thymoumetha*, “we show spirit,” forthrightly as “we feel emotions”: “We learn with one, feel emotions with another and desire the pleasures of nourishment, procreation, and so forth with a third part” (436 b). I cite this—I believe acceptable—translation because it points up what will become the mainstream view: The passions or emotions occupy the central location in the constitution of the soul.

They do so even more unequivocally when Aristotle adds a lowest part, the “vegetative” or “natural” [*physikon*] part which is common to all living things. To it he assigns life functions like nourishment and procreation (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1102 b). The middle part is the aforementioned—still a-rational—part capable of being obedient to reason; here the virtues are to be found together with the passions. It is no accident that the first *pathos* Aristotle takes up in his treatment of the passions in the *Rhetoric* (Book II) is anger, aroused by a slight to honor, which is certainly a “thymotic” passion.

Thomas Aquinas amalgamates these schemata into one enormous

plan, in which, once again, the passions have a topographically central place in a tripartite soul consisting of an “intellectual,” a “sensitive” and a “vegetative” part. The middle, the sensitive, soul includes, toward the bodily side, the senses, divided into the internal senses such as imagination, and the external senses such as sight. Toward the intellectual side we find the passions, divided into the desirously receptive ones such as love and the strenuously aggressive ones such as pride. These subdivisions are, of course, adaptations of Socrates’ epithymotic and thymotic parts. Note that in all psychic “topographies” (the word is Freud’s) location has significance, one end being higher in dignity and dominance. What, however, does it mean to be central?

For central is what the passions are by position. This is true even in Freud’s schema. For, although emotions are at home in the infernal Unconscious (Freud’s epigraph for *The Interpretation of Dreams* is a line from the *Aeneid*: “If I can’t bend the gods above I will move the gods below,” 7.312), they come close to consciousness and dominate the fantasy life of the Preconscious.

So in what sense are the affects in general and the passions in particular central? Just insofar, one might say, as they are crucial to human being but not ultimate. The human center is passionate; the passions are what we gladly suffer, with gladness and suffering in about equal proportion, and the passions are what we strenuously battle, with victory and defeat about equally the issue. In the ancient formula for a human being as a “living thing having reason” [*zoon logon echon*], the passions belong to the living, the animal or animated side. Those who think that a part of the soul is separable from the embodied living being and is capable of separate survival, as Socrates, perhaps speaking mythically, intimates in the *Phaedo* and Aristotle surmises in *On the Soul* (408 b), mean the rational part. Its dignity is for this, along with other reasons, greater even in its incarnate phase. Of the mainstream ancients one must therefore say: The human being is centrally but not ultimately affective.

But that is not the end of it, for the ancients or the moderns. Both Plato and Aristotle subdivide the rational soul into a part that discursively “thinks things through” [*dia-noia*] and a higher part that sees

directly, intuitively [*noesis*]. This latter part is understood, very explicitly by Aristotle in *On the Soul* (429 a), to be in one aspect receptive. Indeed, its peculiar passivity is analogous to that of sense-perception, though, on the other hand, it is also nothing like it, for it is bodiless. Thus its faculty, the intellect [*nous*], is passive insofar as in receiving the knowable forms of all things it is said to *become* them, though its passive receptivity is also an active fulfillment. This analogy of intuition to feeling is what Pascal means when he says that “the heart has its reasons that the reason does not know”—not that the heart is a-rational, but that it gets things directly, receptively.

So now we might be allowed to say that in this understanding of a two-tier rationality (still maintained by Thomas but denied by Kant),<sup>4</sup> we are ultimately affective, meaning receptively open to being touched and entered by intelligible being. But that affectivity is a far cry from passionate affectivity, from the bodily feelings, the sensory affections, and the intentional feelings called passions or emotions. Yet this high affectivity, the receptivity to being, is a human capacity that must be considered in this context since it is, at one point at least, transmuted back into what is ordinarily called a feeling. Moreover, the claim is made that it is in fact only *that* feeling which opens us to meta-physical intimations.

This function of the metaphysical affect is set out most explicitly by Heidegger in the essay “What is Metaphysics?” (1998). He means to reclaim affectivity as ultimate in human existence. The affect he turns to is not an emotion but a *mood*. “Mood,” in its narrow signification, is distinguished from emotion by its non-intentional character. Love and hate, bold confidence and fear, pride and shame are “about” something, that is, about the objects of love or fear or the reasons for confidence and shame. A mood, on the other hand, is about nothing. It is a diffuse, unfocused feeling. Who could doubt that human beings have been moody through the ages? Yet the curious fact is that the ancients, at least until late in antiquity, made no great point of being subject to such intentionless affects or of analyzing them. Their interest, particularly that of the Stoics, the most purposeful students of the passions, lay precisely in the “intentional object” of an affect, for it was

through its appraisal that they sought relief. To be sure, there was the long-lasting humoral theory which included in its four states melancholia, a depressive mood, but it was recorded as a medical category. In medieval theology *acedia*, a slothful disgust with the spiritual life, was only one of several moodlike conditions of the religious life. It was, however, regarded not primarily as an affect but as one of the seven capital theological sins. In modern times the Romantics were certainly preoccupied with diffuse feelings of searching longing and pleasurable reminiscence.

But it was only in 1844, when Kierkegaard published *The Concept of Anxiety*, that the intentionlessness of mood was made explicit and put to philosophical use. This anxiety would in the twentieth century become what might be called its paradigm mood. Kierkegaard, observing that the concept of anxiety is ignored in psychology, says that “it is altogether different from fear and similar concepts that referred to something definite, whereas anxiety is freedom’s actuality as the possibility of a possibility” (1980 [1844] 1.15). “Freedom’s actuality” describes a presentiment of a capability—an as yet unfixed sense of a freedom to be free. This was Adam’s condition before the Fall, a “dreaming” state of innocence, before he knew the difference between good and evil. In that dream state of uneasy repose, Adam has “indeed nothing against which to strive.” At this point Kierkegaard has recourse to the verbal trick that will have great consequences in Existential philosophy: The “nothing” which Adam has to strive against in the mood of dreaming anxiety turns into an intentional object. “But what effect does nothing have?” Kierkegaard asks. “It begets anxiety.” Thus the inherited sinfulness of the human race originating in Adam’s fall is conditioned not, as in the tradition, on the perversion of the will, the *rational* faculty of desire, but on a mood, an *affective* sense of the freedom to be possibly bad (41–46).

Heidegger adapts for his essay this Kierkegaardian transmutation of the nothing that anxiety “is about” into a meta-physical Nothing. The mood (in German *Stimmung*, “attunement”) of anxiety opens the human being to Nothing. In their uncanny alienated indifference to existence, beings as a whole distance themselves from us. The human

foothold in existence is gone. Anxiety is revealingly about the Nothing that environs existence. Thus anxiety becomes our access to the wonder of beings. We realize, we feel, that they are something and not nothing: Anxiety is the fundamental metaphysical feeling (Heidegger 1998, 102).

That Heidegger is, in this perennial duality of the Western tradition, on the side of ultimate affectivity, is confirmed by comparing *Being and Time* (1927) with the somewhat later “What is Metaphysics?” (originally published 1929, postscript added in 1943, introduction in 1949). In the book anxiety had functioned almost oppositely to its role in the essay: Instead of taking *Dasein*, a human existence, *beyond* the beings that constitute its world, it arose from *Dasein*’s sense of having been cast *into* its world (Heidegger 1927, 134 ff., 184 ff.). What seems to me remarkable is that in this vacillation about the role of anxiety, one factor remains firm: that a mood—*anxiety in particular and attunement, mood, in general*—is ontologically fundamental to human existence. For not only do all the features that characterize human existence in ordinary terms—emotions and understanding—eventuate from this affectivity as ground, but it itself is the defining mode of existence: openness to the world. I know of no more unsentimentally positive answer to the question, “Are human beings ultimately affective?”

Is that the last word? Has the question been answered once and for all? Of course not. Each hierarchical placement, topographical setting, human valuation of the passions depends not only on a psychology but on an ontology. Hence to accept one or another view of the ultimacy of the passionate part of human nature is to accept—explicitly or implicitly—a view of the world and of being itself. To realize that is the first firm outcome of an inquiry such as this.

## Endnotes

1. References to classical texts are to the standard paginations. Most translations are by the author.
2. Zeno of Citium (b. 334) and Chrysippus (280–207) were the founders of Stoicism whose doctrines dominated all later discussions. The Stoic system,

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gleaned from their fragments, is set out by Julia E. Annas in *Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind* (1992), part III.

3. For the parts involved in the passions, see *Summa Theologiae*, First Part of the Second Part, qu. 22, art. 2.
4. See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1963 [1781], B 170).

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