**THE ROLE OF AFFECTIVE STATES IN PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY**

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**Abstract**

Affects have often been characterised as a hindrance to the rational thinker. In this paper I reconsider the role of affects in philosophical inquiry in the light of recent work on the emotions which suggests that affects play a role in framing the ways in which we experience the world. I explore affects as motivators and curtailers of philosophical inquiry drawing on work by Hookway (2002, 2003). I suggest that although Hookway is correct in identifying the motivating role of affects, his account is too sparse and does not take account of the wider role which affects play in philosophical inquiry. Drawing on phenomenological psychiatry I argue that affects play a pre-reflective role which enables successful ‘explicit’ reasoning to begin. Building on this I use accounts by de Sousa on emotions as salience providers (1980, 1987, 2004) and William James on the role of temperament in philosophical inquiry (1992) to supplement and fill the gaps left by Hookway’s account. Here I draw a distinction between sporadic and sustained affects, claiming that a full account of the role of affects in philosophy ought to take account of both. This paper ultimately provides an examination of how the recent work on emotions affects the way we may view philosophical inquiry.

**Introduction**

The recent popularity of philosophical examinations of ‘the emotions’ has thrown new light on the way we understand ourselves, others and, arguably, philosophical methodology. Such work deviates from a ‘traditional’ understanding of affects as hindering rational projects and inquiries. Instead it focuses on the cognitive role of emotions, suggesting that they play a constructive role in shaping our experience of
the world and the way we approach problems (Damasio 1995, 2000; de Sousa 1987; Solomon 1993, 2004, 2004(ed)). If these accounts are to be taken seriously, then there must be ramifications for our conceptions of ‘how we do philosophy’. In this paper I examine the effect this work has on the way we view philosophical inquiry by examining the relationship between affect and reasoning. I draw on three areas: affects as motivating\textsuperscript{1} and curtailing philosophical investigation (section 1); affects as salience bestowers (section 2); and affects as dissolving deadlocks which appeal to reason alone cannot achieve (section 3). In what follows I use to ‘affect’ to denote a cluster of phenomena which are felt states and which are prior to reasoning\textsuperscript{2}.

Following from these accounts I suggest that affects serve to ‘draw us into the world’ forming a tacit background from which successful reasoning must begin. Considerations from psychopathology highlight the fundamental role which affects play in healthy reasoning ability. I also consider the motivational influences of affects in philosophical inquiry, following Hookway’s (2002; 2003) discussion of the feelings of doubt and conviction. Although Hookway’s account provides an important discussion of affects as motivating inquiry, it fails to take account of how affects influence the course the inquiry takes. In light of this the paper moves on to consider ways in which affective states mould our philosophical inquiry through rendering certain features of the philosophical landscape salient. This leads into a brief examination of affective dispositions as what I term ‘marginalised influencers’. Affects here, though traditionally disregarded as playing an integral role in the rational thinker’s project\textsuperscript{3}, influence the inquirer’s choice of explanation and methodology. Here I draw largely on William James’s account of temperament and the role it plays in forming a kind of philosophical allegiance. Questions of

\textsuperscript{1} I use ‘motivation’ here in the restricted sense, that is, motivation of philosophical reasoning and not in terms of motivating action.

\textsuperscript{2} This term incorporates emotions, feelings, dispositions, predilections, temperament and moods.

\textsuperscript{3} See for example Descartes (1911a, p.291) in which he writes that ‘affections or passions … are confused thoughts’.
favouring one view over another without a ‘rational’ motivating reason shall feature here.

It shall become apparent that affects can be largely described as boundary producers, setting the limits of reasoning, encapsulating the field of reference to which we can refer in setting the bound of our enquiry. Affects, therefore, evoke a defined field of relevance in which inquiries are pursued, setting the reasonable excitation of doubt and curtailing it when we meet with conviction. Further, they have influence over the direction which we steer through the course of our inquiry.  

**Doubt and Conviction**

Hookway (2002; 2003) highlights how philosophical inquiry is motivated and curtailed by affects, in particular those of doubt and conviction. Doubt, as a felt bodily affect, induces the philosopher to begin their inquiry, whilst feelings of conviction act as a marker which curtails it (2002, p.256-259). In not only identifying, but in feeling the object of doubt to be ‘out of place’ the philosopher is motivated to question and examine further. It must be noted that in order to doubt something, background feelings of security or trust must first be in place; in order for something to feel ‘out of place’ there must first be a contentment or feeling of security which is compromised by the doubting. This feeling of security is tacit, forming the way we primarily occupy a philosophical stance; it is only revealed when an object of doubt causes feelings of unease.

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4 I wish to make it clear that in this article I restrict myself to highlighting the neglected role which affects play. In doing this I by no means wish to imply that philosophical reasoning can be reduced to, or invalidated by influence of affect. Instead, I merely emphasise that in philosophy the role and influence of affect has been neglected or largely cast in negative terms. This paper highlights this neglect by giving insight into how affects may **influence** philosophical reasoning in virtue of affects orienting us ‘in the world’ (either as salience providers, as de Sousa writes or in the form of temperaments as James claims). In using writers with differing account of emotion I show how, despite their different conceptions of emotion, these writers identify how affect and reasoning cannot be as easily polarised as has been assumed by much philosophical literature. Further, despite their difference, they recognise affects’ often central role in reasoning. Thus, my paper moves away from thought which opposes rational thought and affective influence, highlighting the ways they combine in philosophical reasoning and also, in everyday life.
In highlighting the role which doubt plays in motivating inquiry, Hookway attempts to show that affective states play a genuine role in philosophy. Philosophical inquiry is therefore underpinned by feelings of doubt and comfortableness with a philosophical system (2002, p.256-257). Doubt, for Hookway, is a feeling aligned with salience, whilst feelings of comfort allow things to retreat into a state of acceptability. He states: ‘real doubt involves some question or problem becoming salient’ (2003, p.93). Section 2 offers an account of the role of affects in conjunction with salience; for now, I wish to emphasise with Hookway that doubt serves to render certain features of a system as salient and thus as candidates for investigation. This may be easily seen on appeal to certain figures in philosophy, most notably Descartes.

Since Descartes famously asserted his method of doubt (1911a, p.219; 1998, p.18), doubting has been a key component within philosophical methodology. However Descartes, who rallied against the dangerous influences of ‘the passions’ for the rational thinker (1911b, p.425-427), failed to distinguish doubt as an affect. This suggests a more instrumental, less affective way of construing doubt. Doubt, in Descartes’ sense, becomes less of a motivating bodily feeling, and more of a methodological mindset utilised to arrive at foundational truths. With this in mind we may distinguish between ‘felt’ and ‘abstract’ doubt: that is doubt as feeling and doubt as mind-set which does not involve bodily feelings.

In his treatment of doubt as affect, Hookway fails to distinguish the ways in which doubt may indeed be ‘felt’. In his account doubt, and its related feeling of conviction, are very much felt in a bodily sense (2002, p.253); something is felt to be wrong, to be suspicious, to be treated with caution and, for Hookway, this feeling motivates closer philosophical scrutiny (2002, p.255-256). However, as we have seen, doubt constitutes a spectrum of states which might range from a spontaneous, felt bodily sensation to a mindset occupied in undertaking philosophy aimed at ‘foundational truths’. Although felt doubt might be the strongest instance of
doubting I contend that doubt may also be a mind-set providing an approach and methodology to our philosophical inquiries; thus Hookway fails to call into question whether a philosopher always physically feels doubt when they claim to doubt the external world around them or a set of propositions. Following these lines of thought, it is my contention that one may doubt without being assailed by the physical feeling of doubt. The philosopher may be provoked to begin inquiry through felt doubt, and yet may steer his way through the inquiry with ‘abstract doubt’. In this way the practice of philosophy involves both the abstract and felt modes of doubt at different stages in the inquiry. Hookway, then, needs to provide a subtler account of doubt which takes account of the spectrum of types of doubt involved in philosophy, in which felt doubt as motivator would feature.

This philosophical methodological doubt may be contrasted sharply with a very different kind of extreme felt doubt which features in many mental illnesses, notably schizophrenia. In many cases of schizophrenia the patient undergoes a loss of affect which impacts directly upon their reasoning abilities. The schizophrenic suffers from an affective disorder in which they lack the feeling of tacit security which normally reigns prior to doubt. This entails a loss of the framework of salience and security, procured by affects, which facilitates healthy reasoning. The feelings of security which orient us within the world give way and the sufferer occupies a constant and unrelenting felt doubt (Sass 2004, p.136).

Thus, whilst Hookway is correct to identify the important role which feelings of doubt and conviction play in respectively motivating and curtailing philosophical inquiry, the strength and breadth of the feelings associated with doubt form a wide

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spectrum; the strongest feelings and widest scope for doubt being symptomatic of certain psychotic illnesses. It might be convincingly argued therefore that a philosopher may doubt the veracity or soundness of a proposition without *feeling* the unrelenting doubt which marks the condition of schizophrenia\(^6\). However, alongside the spectrum of doubt which I have identified at play in philosophical inquiry, affective feelings play a different role in preventing the philosopher from feeling doubt in the same way as the schizophrenic\(^7\); in this case, the feeling of at-homeness or what I have called *security* underlies the philosophical exercising of doubt as an instrumental mind-set. It invokes a pre-reflective trust in the world and one’s place in it, facilitating an ability to ‘get on with things’. In this way, affects orient and draw us into the world, allowing feelings of ‘homeliness’ and preventing the radical sceptical doubt of disorders like schizophrenia.

From this, we may borrow from the work of certain phenomenologists, in conjunction with what psychopathology has to show to present how it is that affects, more precisely *moods* (Heidegger 1962, p.172-179) constitute an affective platform from which philosophical inquiry, or any type of successful reasoning must begin (Heidegger 1962, p.84; Husserl 1989, p.183)\(^8\). Here affects form a lens through which features of the world are filtered and presented in a certain light. Moods, for Heidegger, attune us to the world, structuring and disclosing it to us in a light corresponding to the particular mood. The effect of this may vary from producing ‘a way in which the world appears’ (Ratcliffe in press, p.1), or a general context within which reasoning is tinted; or more parochially, it may reveal certain features of the environment within which we operate as

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\(^6\) Doubt involved in schizophrenia is also of a greater breath. Whilst few objects appear as candidates for doubt to the philosopher, the schizophrenic doubts everything. Termed as ‘loss of self evidence’, it is due to the absence of an affective background feeling of *security*, or in phenomenological terms, the feeling of ‘everyday Being-in-the-world’ (Sass 1992, p.2-8, p.45; Stangellini 2004, p.112-115)

\(^7\) See Sass 1992b

\(^8\) For a non-phenomenological account see Damasio 1995, p.150.
salient, or conversely as something to be passed over due to its uncontentiveness or indifference to our projects. Numerous cases discussed by phenomenologist psychologists such as Sass (1992a, 1999, 2004), Stanghellini (2004, p.95-109), and Blankenburg (2002) show that loss of these affective filters correlates with a loss of practical reasoning. They argue further that loss of affect is responsible for the phenomenological changes the schizophrenic undergoes in experience; the schizophrenic cannot constrain the field of reference in inquiry. Unlike the philosopher, the schizophrenic does not know when to stop doubting.

**Salience**

From phenomenological writers we have begun to see how affective states orient us in the world. In this section the idea of how affective states may do this within philosophical inquiry will be pursued. Two areas will be examined forming a wide and narrow focus. The wide looks at the role of affective states in producing what de Sousa terms ‘patterns of salience’ which configure the way we broadly view the world (in line with the Heideggerian idea of moods above) and more intricately, of how we view problems or inquiries. This supplements and fills in the gaps of Hookway’s account (2002, 2003) which focus primarily on the methodological importance of feelings of doubt and certainty for philosophic inquiry. I go further than Hookway suggesting that these ‘feelings’ are key in not only beginning and ending the route of philosophical inquiry, but that they play a more active role in framing and landscaping the course our philosophical inquiry takes. As we have seen, for Hookway, doubt and conviction are instrumental in beginning and ending inquiry; however salience provided by affective states steers a way though, proffering certain routes more readily than others, and flavouring the journey our enquiry makes due to the more general sense in which affective states may be said to attune us to the world.
Ronald de Sousa states that ‘[e]motions are determinate patterns of salience among objects of attention, lines of inquiry, and inferential strategies’ (1980, p.137). de Sousa is primarily concerned with the rational value of emotions, turning away from caricatures of emotions as divorced from reason and a hindrance to rationality. de Sousa works against this conception to show how affective states ‘underlie’ the process of reasoning (1980, p.141). Although his work is primarily concerned with how affective states affect cognition in general, I will draw on his work to illuminate and expose implicit assumptions of ‘how we do philosophy’. I shall issue a cautionary warning before I properly begin: although I am speaking largely of ‘positive’ roles of affective states on philosophical methodology, this by no means equates to a wholesale unreflective promotion of affective states in philosophy. There are affective states which may hamper a philosophical project; for example, those leading to dogmatism (Hookway 2002, p.256; James 1956, p.82) – such as pride in one’s own system or contempt for others and so on may serve to close off the openness to new ideas which challenge ones already held, which is (supposedly) integral to the spirit of philosophising. However, as already stated, it is my purpose to highlight the manner in which recent literature on emotions might be brought to bear on assumptions made on how philosophy is done.

In his examination of the rational role of affective states, de Sousa describes how it is that affective states are intrinsically linked to saliencies (2004, p.66-67). For him they are salience bestowers. This concept is important and is one that has hitherto been neglected by philosophy, which traditionally construes itself as working apart from the influence of affects. The question of what forms the field of our inquiries must be important to any philosopher, and is one that has not been adequately pursued. It impacts directly on methodological assumptions in philosophy which

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9 See also de Sousa 1987.
10 See de Sousa 1980 for further information.
have previously not been questioned. It is, therefore, a question which will impact not only on theorising, but on the structure of philosophical theorising, that is how we are disposed to approach and work through problems identified by philosophy. The identification of philosophical problems hinges upon what the philosopher takes to be questionable either through doubt or through the particular way their experience is structured by affects as touched upon in the previous section. Thus the issue of what the philosopher takes for granted depends largely on what appears as salient to him, and more importantly, what does not appear as salient, or questionable.

In his work de Sousa argues that affects highlight certain features of experiences (1980, p.136); this might be because it is useful to our projects, or fearful or so on. The point here for de Sousa, is that affects define a field of reference within which we operate or in this case, within which we do philosophy. Affects limit what we have to take into consideration in our inquiries, by making contentious propositions salient (as with doubt), or by more generally evoking a field of what we may comfortably trust, or take for granted (1980, p.136). Involved in this field is an implicit consideration of the stance which we take in doing philosophy. The stance to which we are aligned and in which we work will undoubtedly flavour the nature of our enquiries and further our conclusions.\(^{11}\) Such stances provide a further orientation in the way which we approach philosophical problems. However, for the purposes of this paper, I shall continue to focus on affective states.

Affective states as salience prescribers therefore have a direct impact on the ways in which we approach philosophy.\(^ {12}\) In highlighting certain elements of our systems or inquiries, affective states perform pre-theoretical roles, which according to the phenomenological psychiatrists mentioned earlier, must be in place before healthy

\(^{11}\) For further reading on the centrality of stances in philosophical investigation see Van Fraassen (2002) and Ratcliffe (forthcoming).

\(^{12}\) For arguments surrounding this see Damasio 1995, de Sousa 1980; 1987.
explicit reasoning begins: affective states prepare an arena in prescribing the bounds within which the inquiry may take place, something which, as de Sousa remarks, cannot be performed by reason alone. He writes:

Despite their reputation for motivating bad behaviour, emotions are essentially implicated in our capacity to live a coherent and reasonably well-regulated life. (2004, p.65)

There must be some standard in virtue of which the terms on which we inquire are set. As we may see from Blankenburg’s example of the schizophrenic woman who could not constrain a field of reference in which to place her inquiry as to which dress she ought to wear that day (2002, p.309), reason standing apart from any other function cannot readily or immediately recommend a course of action (see also Damasio 1995, p.70). Instead she took into account every small, trivial and irrelevant detail, most of which would not be entertained by someone with healthy reasoning abilities. This, as Blankenburg identifies, is the problem of ‘overinclusiveness’ (2002, p.307-309). Thus, if we place de Sousa’s arguments for affective states as salience providers, and lessons learned from descriptions of certain psychotic illnesses, we find that one ‘function of emotions is to fill gaps left by … “pure reason” in the determination of action and belief’ (de Sousa 1980, p.136).

Following from de Sousa’s considerations, and the ones we have previously gleamed from phenomenology it seems reasonable to suggest that affective states perform ‘behind the scenes work’ in philosophical inquiry, forming predilections and spotlighting features of the world which are beneficial, dangerous or somehow worthy of attention. I have so far spoken in broad terms of affective states, but now I shall move on to consider the role which specific affects provide in guiding and colouring philosophical inquiry.
Affects as Marginalised Influencers

As already stated, Hookway (2002, 2003) examines and promotes the methodological roles the feelings of doubt, and following from this, conviction play in philosophical inquiry. He unearths the roles that these two feelings play in both beginning and ending philosophical inquiry. However, in looking only at doubt and conviction as the beginning and end of philosophical inquiry, his account misses out a great deal. Hookway focuses primarily on that which appears salient through doubt, and its resolution through conviction. Just as important as these considerations is an account of the role of more subtle affective states, in the guise of temperamental dispositions which favour one course of explanation over another, or to tend to look at a problem in a certain light. James famously characterises such philosophical allegiances and how they shape an individual’s philosophical inquiry in conjunction with his work on feeling in *Pragmatism*13. ‘Feeling’ for James becomes that which forms a background to all our endeavours, producing an individuality of method. As Carroll Izard writes, for James:

> [F]eelings are the roots of personality or individuality and the best means of explaining the events and behaviours of everyday life. (1990, p.631)

Although James’s discussion is framed in terms of feelings, in alignment with his wider work, I believe that we can take feeling as a subset or type of affective state14. The important thing to note about James’s work is the frank acknowledgement of the role of affective states as what I call marginalised influencers. That is, affective states dispose us to a certain philosophical outlook or methodology. In the first essay of *Pragmatism* James opens by boldly declaring:

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13 For example see his discussion of the ‘tough headed empiricists’ and the ‘tender minded rationalists’ (1992, p.23ff).
14 See Ratcliffe 2005 for a reinterpretation of William James, emotion and feeling.
The history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments. Undignified as such a treatment may seem to some of my colleagues, I shall have to take account of this clash and explain a good many of the divergences of philosophers by it. (James 1992, p.22)

This bringing to the fore of the role of temperament may shed a great deal of light upon philosophical methodology. James goes so far as to claim that an appeal to temperament ‘explains a good many of the divergences of philosophers’ and this may be so, but I believe that room is available to appeal to a related concept which draws directly from considerations of the role of temperament; that is what I call affective predilection.

Affective predilection works in a different way to affects in conjunction with salience. Instead of highlighting certain things as relevant or problematic, affective predilection instead disposes us to unreflectively favour one methodology over another, or frames the types of question we are likely to ask. As de Sousa (1980, p.140) writes: ‘emotion can be clearly seen as a disposition to ask certain questions’. Affective states may in this case be seen as that which may break or avoid a deadlock which rational means alone could not. Here, we arrive again at a consideration of a situation which reason may not single-handedly dissolve. A Burden’s ass scenario can easily be imagined involving two philosophical models of exactly equal rational integrity pertaining to examine the same puzzle; the question arises of how you chose your philosophical allegiance when there seems no strictly rational reason or consideration to opt for one position over another. An answer which follows from the discussion so far is that our affective orientations predispose us to be more sympathetic to one system or methodology than another. This is a point to which de Sousa is sympathetic when he writes:
The same goes for choices of strategies in the light of existing desires: there are choices that no rational calculation can make, because they are between alternatives that on rational calculation turn out the same. (de Sousa 1980, p.136)

In this way James’s discussion emphasises the sustained role of affect in philosophy. In doing so it differs from Hookway’s, whose exposé of the role of doubt uses a notion of sporadic doubt linked with salience. James thus fills in the gaps of Hookway’s account, showing how affects are at work in inquiry in the background; steering the philosopher through the inquiry according to their tacit predilections.

Doubt, for Hookway, is a specific state which reveals certain propositions as candidates for investigation through their questionability, thus rendering them salient (2003, p.93). However, his accounts focuses primarily on what might be termed as sporadic affective states in terms of doubt and the corresponding resolution of doubt, and equally on conviction. These affective states are relatively short term. This forms a contrast with James’s account which shows how affects play a sustained role in our enquiries. As was emphasised in the first section of this paper, a condition of a healthy reasoning and mind is that we do not constantly doubt, we feel a sense of familiarity in relation to our background environment, enabling anything untoward to become salient.

Hookway’s account is lacking in that it only scratches the surface of the impact of affective states on reasoning, focusing only on the sporadic ones. James, on the other hand, in attempting to call attention to something which had gone unnoticed or unspoken of in philosophy, emphasises the manner in which long term or ‘consistent’ affective dispositions impact on the ways in which we go about doing philosophy.

15 See also: James 1956, p.92: ‘Why does [x] believe [y]? Simply because, like every human being of the slightest mental originality, he is peculiarly sensitive to evidence that bears in some one direction. It is utterly hopeless to try to exorcise such sensitiveness by calling it the disturbing subjective factor, and branding it as the root of all evil.’
In this way, his account reveals that which is usually tacit in our philosophical methodologies; that which is, according to traditional standards ‘unphilosophical’ according to the ideals of ‘detached and coolly rational’ inquiry, untainted by base influences of mood, temperament or other such ‘subjective’ things. In uniting Hookway’s account of ‘sporadic’ affects with James’s a more encompassing account of the role which affects play in philosophical inquiry might be arrived at; allowing us to rethink the way in which we have conceived of ‘how we do philosophy’.

**Conclusion**

In highlighting the ways in which affects may be said to impact on philosophical inquiry I have worked against a longstanding conception of affects as mere disruptors of successful rational thought. I have shown that affects play an active role in both motivating and moulding the course of our inquiries, and further, that an encompassing account should discuss both of these roles. Throughout this work I have attempted to show how assumptions which hold that philosophical inquiry is carried out apart from the influences of affective states ought to be reviewed. This paper ultimately offered a re-examination of how we have viewed the relationship between philosophy and affect in light of the recent work on emotion; and, in doing so, has called for attention to be given on how affective states inform and prepare us for philosophical investigation.

**References**


