

The Phenomenology of Depression: A Workshop

**26th to 29th March 2012, University of Osnabrück, Seminarstraße 20
University building 15, Room 130 – “Alter Senatssitzungssaal”**

**AHRC/DFG-Funded Project “Emotional Experience in Depression: A Philosophical Study”
PIs: Matthew Ratcliffe (Durham University) and Achim Stephan (University of Osnabrück)**

Monday 26th March – Philosophical Analysis and empirical data

09.00 – 09.20 Arrival and coffee

09.20 – 09.30 Welcome and Introduction – **Matthew Ratcliffe & Achim Stephan**

09.30 – 10.45

Benedict Smith and **Hannah Shand** (Durham University, UK)

First results from the Durham depression questionnaire

Coffee break

11.15 – 12.30

Outi Benson, Susanne Gibson and **Sarah Brand** (SANE, London, UK)

Themes from a study of suicidal feelings

Lunch break

14.00 – 15.00

Philip Powell (University of Sheffield)

The revolting self: The role of disgust in depression

15.00 – 15.45

Birgit Weyel and **Annette Haußmann** (University of Tübingen, Germany)

Church-based support and depression: An outline on the effect of social and spiritual support with regard to depression

Coffee break

16.15 – 17.00

Kerrin Jacobs (University of Osnabrück, Germany)

Experience of inability in depression

17.00 – 18.30

Matthew Ratcliffe (University of Durham, UK):

When the honey no longer tastes sweet

Tuesday 27th March – Depression in Socio-Cultural Context

09.00 – 09.30 Arrival and coffee

09.30 – 10.45

Tom Csordas (University of California San Diego, USA)

Biographical coherence in the narratives of depressed adolescents

Coffee break

11.15 – 12.30

Christian Postert (University of Münster, Germany)

Emotion in cultural context: Toward a social phenomenology of depressed mood in exchange

Lunch break

14.00 – 14.30

Michael Roth (Alsbach/Bergstr., Germany)

How is it, applied criminology can relate to a phenomenological approach to depression?

14.30 – 15.30

Renata Kokanovic (Monash University, Australia)

The 'Recovery' of the Self through Depression

Coffee break

16.00 – 17.00

Angela Woods (Durham, UK)

Structures of Depressive Experience in Lars von Trier's Antichrist and Melancholia

17.00 – 18.30

Alain Ehrenberg (Paris, France)

What brings a dose of sociology to the philosophy of emotions?

Wednesday 28th March – Psychiatric issues

09.00 – 09.30 Arrival and coffee

09.30 – 10.45

Markus Pawelzik (Münster, Germany)

Depression is not what psychiatrists think it is – Arguments for a new paradigm for depression research

Coffee break

11.15 – 12.30

Henrik Walter (Charité, Berlin, Germany)

Chronic Depression – a disorder sui generis? Psychopathology, neurobiological foundations and therapy

Lunch break

14.00 – 15.15

Anna Buchheim (Innsbruck, Austria)

Psychoanalysis and depression

15.15 – 16.15

Somogy Varga (Kopenhagen/Osnabrück, Denmark/Germany)

Does CBT fit to our understanding of emotion in depression?

Coffee break

16.45 – 18.00

Jan Slaby, Achim Stephan, and Asena Paskaleva (FU Berlin / University of Osnabrück, Germany)

Enactive Emotion and Impaired Agency in Depression

Thursday 29th March – Epistemic issues

09.00 – 09.30 Arrival and coffee

09.30 – 10.45

Dirk Koppelberg (FU Berlin, Germany)

Melancholic epistemology reconsidered – Depression from an epistemic point of view

Coffee break

11.15 – 12.30

Outlook on further activities

End of conference

Abstracts:

Biographical Coherence in the Narratives of Depressed Adolescents

Thomas J. Csordas

In two previous presentations to this working group, I introduced the study Southwest Youth and the Experience of Psychiatric Treatment in which depression was a major factor among the adolescent psychiatric inpatients with whom we worked, and examined the responses of these depressed youth to open-ended ethnographic interviews to determine what could be inferred about the experiential immediacy of their afflictions. In this presentation I take another step in the analysis by focusing on the experience of four of our young participants chosen because of the centrality of depression and absence of comorbid diagnoses in their lives. I examine the degree to which biographical coherence can be attributed to what they say, either despite or because of the prominence of depression as a feature of their developmental trajectories

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What brings a dose of sociology to the philosophy of emotions?

Alain Ehrenberg

It will be about the relations between values and norms of autonomy, and the rise of the concern about emotions and affects in contemporary social life. I'd like to link together changes in the spirit of action, gathered by the concept of autonomy, and changes in the ways of being affected, gathered by the concept of psychic suffering.

Prof. Dr. Alain Ehrenberg
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The 'Recovery' of the Self through Depression

Renata Kokanovic

Depression has become a vital point for arguments about the legitimacy of various categories of mental illness. Consequently, Western societies, and increasingly the rest of the world, have been the supposed beneficiaries of a proliferation of knowledge, expertise and types of discourse on depression that emerged through the fields of psychiatry, biomedicine, psychology, and social science and has been apparent in government policy documents, 'consumer' guides, web sites, and media reports. This proliferation has made depression one of the most debated "health" issues in the public arena today. Depression can be conceptualized across the entire lay/medical spectrum, from the 'normal' highs and lows of the human condition to its inclusion within the dominant DSM classificatory system, as a form of Serious Mental Illness. In this context, a better understanding of peoples' emotional experiences of depression, and in particular, how people conceptualize a possibility of getting better ('recovering') from

depression is needed. This paper draws on narrative interviews with men in Australia conducted in 2010-2011, which was part of a larger project on experiences of depression. The paper outlines preliminary findings and considers how men narrate a continuous process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of selves, while negotiating their everyday life in a context of experiencing depression.

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Melancholic Epistemology Reconsidered – Depression from an Epistemic Point of View

Dirk Koppelberg

What is the relation between depression and cognition? This apparently straightforward question does not admit an easy answer. Why not? The general formulation covers at least three different questions. First, does depression have any specific *cognitive* causes? If it has, what are these causes? Second, does depression fulfill any specific *intellectual* functions? If it does, what are these functions? And third, does depression satisfy any specific *epistemic* conditions? If it does, what are these conditions? These are the basic questions I'm going to discuss and which I will try to answer in my talk. I will ask how these questions hang together and I will show in which way my answers to them are related. I will close with a look on the prospects and on further projects of melancholic epistemology.

Dirk Koppelberg
Freie Universität Berlin

Depression is not what psychiatrists think it is – Arguments for a new paradigm for depression research

Markus R. Pawelzik

The psychiatric approach in depression research is trapped in a narrow and shallow conception of mental disorders. It's search for causal determinants tends to exclude contextual and developmental factors. The resulting causal domains remain separated and their relationship is unclear. And no integrative, synthetic theory of the depressed mind/brain is in sight.

I will try to make two points in this context: (i) The established (although mostly implicit) paradigm of depression research is doomed to failure because of several systematic reasons: Depression is a heterogeneous class of mind/brain states; the depressive syndrome is not generally maladaptive; interpersonal programming of the „social brain“ is a strong predictor of depression, etc. Taken together the slow and non-cumulative progress in depression research seems to be indicative of a „degenerate research program“ that fails to focus on the main pathogenetic processes that determine depressive states. (ii) To find a better alternative for depression research, we have to ask broader questions like: What is the mind/brain made for? How does the mind/brain develop vulnerability or resilience? What determines different adaptive strategies? What is the difference between break-down patterns, inter-individual variability and functional adaptations? Etc. - In my opinion the social brain perspective offers a more fruitful perspective to study stress-related mental disorders like depression.

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Emotion in cultural context: Toward a social phenomenology of depressed mood in exchange

Christian Postert

The connections between emotions and social exchange in non-Western communities still remain largely uncharted. Postert conducted long-term anthropological fieldwork on the dynamics of depressed mood in exchange cycles from 2000 to 2002 in Hmong highland villages in the Province of Luang Phabang, Laos. Hmong gift and commodity exchanges embody diametrically opposed values and different social configurations. Hmong depressed mood (tu siab) emerges as a regulatory device at the tension laden intersection of these opposing spheres of social exchange. Hmong depressed mood is part of a bidirectional coregulative process connecting the individual and social realm. These data provide evidence of the deep embeddedness of Hmong depressed mood (tu siab) in a specific cultural context challenging universalizing and psychopathologizing approaches to cross-cultural research on emotions.

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The revolting self: the role of disgust in depression

Philip Powell

The emotion of disgust has been implicated in morality and a range of psychological disorders, such as specific phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and eating disorders. It's involvement in depression has been hypothesized, but is currently associated with inconsistent results. This inconsistency may be explained by a traditional research focus on external disgust elicitors, while depression may be better characterized by self-directed disgust. Initial self-report studies suggest that levels of self-disgust positively correlate with levels of depressive symptoms. Furthermore, reported self-disgust has been found to predict depressive symptoms over time, but not the reverse. Nevertheless, despite these promising findings, the construct of self-disgust itself has yet to be empirically defined and its phenomenology remains particularly enigmatic. The present study aimed to explore the phenomenon of self-disgust in-depth in individuals with clinically-relevant depressive symptoms. Nine female participants completed semi-structured interviews about their understanding and experiences of self-disgust. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the data revealed five interlinked themes: 'the consuming nature of self-disgust'; 'temporal fluctuations in the experience of self-disgust'; 'difficulty cleansing the disgusting self'; 'the role of others'; and 'the relationship with other emotional states'. This research provides vital insight into the hitherto ambiguous concept of self-disgust and how it may be subjectively experienced in individuals with depression.

Philip Powell

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When the honey no longer tastes sweet

Matthew Ratcliffe

The title of my talk refers to a passage in Tolstoy's "A Confession", where he compares the human predicament to that of hanging onto a twig in a well, with a beast at the top and a dragon at the bottom. Two mice, one black and the other white, gnaw at the twig, while we seek distraction and solace by licking honey off a leaf. His depression, he says, arose when: "I tried to lick the honey which formerly consoled me; but the honey no longer gave me pleasure, and the white and black mice of day and night gnawed at the branch by which I hung. I saw the dragon clearly, and the honey no longer tasted sweet. I only saw the unescapable dragon and the mice, and I could not tear my gaze from them. And this is not a fable, but the real unanswerable truth intelligible to all." I will address whether this really is the structure of most or all human lives, where depression clears away superficial distractions and thus makes explicit a way of being that was already there, lurking in the background.

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How is it, applied criminology can relate to a phenomenological approach to depression?

Michael Roth

Phenomenological criminology is a dose of sociology to mainstream nomothetic-statistical psychological and psychiatric approaches to prognoses. As a criminologist I am dealing with a majority of 'multicultural' clients. Depressive mood and more is relevant to the actual situation (*Lebenswelt*) of a person imprisoned. Autonomy is at stake and psychic suffering is an issue there. Applied criminology ('MIVEA') is focusing on narratives – rather than just extracting files and applying criteria-checklists to files and interviews and is so considered the alternative to clinical prognosis. Coherence is a major thing regards to the narrative interviews of convicted criminals. It is judged against the background of files, the 'social / institutional facts' stated by jurisdiction and other official sources and used to check the plausibility of criminality becoming a part of the individual's way of life. Descriptions of social behavior are very much systematized (thru ideal-types), while basic intentions with respect to 'objects, spaces and persons' (*Grundintentionen*) are not. A more systematic approach to elementary existential feelings could help as well as a multifaceted phenomenological approach to depression.

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Enactive Emotion and Impaired Agency in Depression

Jan Slaby, Achim Stephan, and Asena Paskaleva

We propose to conceive of emotions as the various modifications of a basic form of goal-oriented striving characteristic of all animal life. Emotions come in view as appetitive orientations: pursuits of the good, avoidances of the bad. Thus, emotions are not truly distinct from, let alone opposed to actions – as erroneously suggested by the classical understanding of emotions as “passions”. In the present paper, we will outline and defend this broadly enactive approach and motivate its main claims by contrasting it with some assumptions often made by other approaches in philosophical emotion theory. Our proposal gains plausibility from a literature- and interview-based investigation of emotional changes characteristic of clinical depression. Much narrative evidence from patient reports points towards the conclusion that many of those changes might result from a catastrophic alteration of the basic form of goal-pursuit at the root of emotional experience. The experience of profound depression could in this respect be a kind of inverted image of non-pathological emotionality – a highly unnatural passivity giving rise to a profound – and quite horrifying – sense of incapacity.

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First results from the Durham depression questionnaire

Benedict Smith and Hannah Shand

An on-line depression questionnaire, hosted by Durham University, was open to participants during 2011. In this presentation we describe and explain the questionnaire and critically appraise the responses we have received. We will draw together and assess some key aspects of the results and outline implications for future research.

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Church-based Support and Depression: An outline on the effect of social and spiritual support with regard to depression.

Birgit Weyel

Based on the assumption that parishes provide low-threshold services and social support with an explicitly religious focus, the purpose of this study is to survey the experiences of persons affected by depression, relatives, volunteers and protestant clergy. The main focus is on the clergy's spiritual counseling. The empirical methods applied are interviews and an online-questionnaire.

Prof. Dr. Birgit Weyel

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Structures of Depressive Experience in Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* and *Melancholia*

Angela Woods

Lars von Trier is variously regarded as one of Europe's most provocative and most brilliant filmmakers. This paper offers a close comparative reading of his two most recent films, *Antichrist* (2009) and *Melancholia* (2011). Although von Trier has been open in discussing the films' relationship to his own experiences of severe depression, I do not propose to read either text as psychobiography or catharsis, or to assess their fidelity to standard clinical accounts of psychic suffering. Instead, drawing on the work of contemporary phenomenological and psychoanalytic philosophers, I will discuss the exploration of grief, self-loathing, anxiety, erotic agitation, loss, extreme lethargy, despair and cruelty in *Antichrist* and *Melancholia*, arguing that that these films together constitute a highly sophisticated study in the lived experience of depression.

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