

## Durham Research Online

---

**Deposited in DRO:**

19 July 2016

**Version of attached file:**

Accepted Version

**Peer-review status of attached file:**

Peer-reviewed

**Citation for published item:**

Smith, Benedict (2012) 'Depression and motivation.', *Phenomenology and the cognitive sciences.*, 12 (4). pp. 615-635.

**Further information on publisher's website:**

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11097-012-9264-0>

**Publisher's copyright statement:**

The final publication is available at Springer via <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11097-012-9264-0>

**Additional information:**

---

**Use policy**

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

## Depression and Motivation

### Abstract

Among the characteristic features of depression is a diminishment in or lack of action and motivation. In this paper, I consider a dominant philosophical account which purports to explain this lack of action or motivation. This approach comes in different versions but a common theme is, I argue, an over reliance on psychologistic assumptions about action-explanation and the nature of motivation. As a corrective I consider an alternative view that gives a prominent place to the body in motivation. Central to the experience of depression are changes to how a person is motivated to act and, also as central, are changes to bodily feelings and capacities. I argue that broadly characterizing motivation in terms of bodily capacities can, in particular, provide a more compelling account of depressive motivational pathology.

**Key words** Action; Belief-Desire psychology; Body; Depression; Motivation

### Introduction

A striking aspect of depression is a marked diminishment in or lack of action and motivation. Amongst many other things, depression is a vivid case of agency- or action-undermining mental illness and characteristically involves a discord between a person's judgements, beliefs and utterances and what they do or fail to do. For instance, despite what a depressed person believes, understands and says about what they ought to do, they do not act in ways that accord with what they believe, understand and say. In this paper I consider a dominant philosophical account which purports to explain what is happening in cases such as these. This account emphasizes how a depressed person's 'belief-desire' profile undergoes changes such that the relevantly motivational propositional attitudes – desires – have dropped away. This is held to explain the lack or absence of motivation in depression. I also consider a modified version of this view, one which explains the lack of motivation not in terms of the diminishment of desires but of the 'interference' caused by a person's having a particular set of beliefs. These are beliefs that block or undermine motivation in virtue of their content.

The dominant view and its modified version have important differences although they both prioritize a depressed person's mental states in explaining motivational pathology. No-one ought to deny that mental states or psychological considerations are important in this context. But what should not be neglected is that a central feature of depression is also changes to a person's bodily feelings and capacities. In this paper I suggest that these changes are constitutively related to changes in motivation. Broadly stated, I propose an account according

to which the lack or absence of motivation in depression can be understood as changes to our bodily attitudes rather than exclusively in terms of changes to our propositional attitudes. I argue that the character of our bodily nature and not (or not just) our psychology is a basic feature of our agential capacities. I suggest that the absence or lack of motivation and action experienced as part of depression can be understood by attending to changes in how our bodies articulate and respond to meaningful features in the environment. These features incorporate aspects of the world which motivate us to act or, as is often the case in depression, may fail to do so.

### **Depression and loss of desire**

There are assumptions about agency and motivation that encourage employing the language of ‘alienation’ or ‘estrangement’ to describe cases in which the broad relation of someone’s thoughts to their actions is broken down (Hornsby, 2004). Cases include those in which a person knows and understands, say, that  $\phi$ -ing is what is required or called for, but they do not or cannot  $\phi$ , or cases in which a person experiences a compulsion that makes them act or fail to act despite their will or intentions. In such examples a person is said to be alienated from their agency in the sense that the relevant action or omission does not count as a case of authentic agency or “human action *par excellence*”, as Velleman puts it (Velleman 1992, 462).<sup>1</sup>

Providing an account of what this alienation amounts to is complex and controversial but it does seem to be a broad feature of our lives that there is sometimes a mismatch between what a person purports to know or think and what they then do or fail to do. We sometimes explain such cases by saying that a person has a ‘weak will’: S knows that eating a lot of chips is unhealthy although S’s desire for chips typically outweighs this knowledge and, despite what S knows, S eats a lot of chips. Other times we might explain similar phenomena by citing other characteristics such as obsessions, addiction, or forms of neurosis.<sup>2</sup> From one perspective depression involves some form of alienation since a depressed person understands that they ought to act in such and such a way but does not. We might suppose that a depressed person is not adequately motivated and thus they are prevented from enjoying authentic agency. For instance, it may be that a person has an overwhelming sense of worthlessness that impedes their acting in accord with a relevant judgement – perhaps the sort of “feelings of worthlessness” referred to in the diagnostic criteria for a major depressive episode for instance (American Psychiatric Association 2000, 356). More broadly we can appeal to philosophical accounts of

---

<sup>1</sup> See Hornsby (2004), for example, for a critical discussion of Velleman’s account the ‘problem of agency’ as described in Velleman (1992).

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of related issues see Nordenfelt (2007).

motivation in order to illuminate the nature of motivational pathology as experienced in depression. I will consider the standard account first.

What I take to be the standard and broadly Humean model of motivation appears to provide an account of why a depressed person is not motivated and thus why they do not act. Central to the standard account of motivation is belief-desire psychology. On one reading the model implies that the absence of action results from an absence of ‘desire’, a cardinal mental state that is principally responsible for motivation and thus, ideally, action. More specifically what explains the lack of action is the lack of motivation and, in turn, what explains the lack of motivation is the lack of desire. What is significant about this model is the rationale for explaining some supposedly objective event or state of affairs (lack of action) by citing the absence of or changes to some inner state or states; principally desire since, according to the standard view, no other psychological state has the right kind of essential connection to a human will.

On the standard view, in order to act or be motivated a person needs to possess relevant beliefs and desires the combination of which provide motivation. Desires present an agent with a goal and beliefs provide information about how to achieve it. In order to be motivated to act, a person needs to have both a relevant world-guided mental representation, a belief, and also a desire. For example, a person will be motivated to act in a particular way, eating some chips, say, if she has a desire to eat chips and a belief that there are some chips on the table. Thus, belief-desire psychology has an account of motivation that refers to two kinds of propositional attitude which cooperate to give rise to someone’s being motivated and, if all goes well, their acting in the world and achieving their practical goals.

This framework has an important implication for accounting for the experience of depression. The Humean view holds that in cases of depression the relevant changes to a person’s psychological profile do not affect beliefs. We are told that it is “manifestly true” that depression undermines motivation but does so in a way that can leave a person’s capacity to possess and acquire beliefs unaffected (Smith 1994, 61). Given the assumed primacy of desire as the principal source of motivation, the standard view thus implies that a depressed person does not or need not experience any changes to their beliefs. For example, consider Mele’s example of a person suffering from clinical depression:

Seemingly, we can imagine that she retains certain of her beliefs about what she is morally required to do [but she is] utterly devoid of motivation to act accordingly. She has aided her ailing uncle for years, believing herself to be morally required to do so. Perhaps she continues to believe this, but now is utterly unmotivated to assist him (Mele 1996, 733).

So a depressed person can continue to possess beliefs understood as, say, truth-apt propositional attitudes and perhaps also to demonstrate sensitivity to the inferential relations between them. Any relevant changes to a person's mental states and capacities take place at the *independent* level of desire. This idea rests on a fundamental aspect of Humean psychology: the claim that beliefs and desires are 'distinct existences' (e.g., Smith 1994, 7). This is important since the standard view can appeal to the distinctness of belief from desire to account for the lack of motivation and action in depression. There is an apparently straightforward account that can cite changes in a person's set of desires at the same time as denying that there need be any changes in the set of beliefs. However, there are a number of reasons to reject this picture, some of which are provided by reflection on our experience.

### **Depression and mental interference**

In the context of depression Iain Law considers a Humean approach according to which one's belief profile remains unchanged whilst the independent motivating element has dropped away. However, as he writes:

My own experience of depression is not like this at all. In depression, everyday tasks take on an aspect of impossibility. I do not see, say, replying to an email, as an easy task that I am peculiarly lacking in motivation to perform. Rather, I see it as far more difficult than it actually is, or I see myself as not being up to the task ... in my case desire has not come apart from belief (Law 2009, 354).

This emphasizes how the way in which objects are perceived is changed. An 'aspect of impossibility' becomes part of the content of what is seen or considered. In such cases the extent to which one is motivated is not something that can be isolated from one's beliefs. Usually, one does not regard tasks such as replying to an email in some neutral way, and then also have some desire or favouring stance which is then adopted such that one is thereby moved to reply to an email. This is not obviously how things are in usual cases and it is not how things are in cases of motivational or behavioural pathology. The relevant task is regarded, considered or perceived as challenging or perhaps as something impossibly difficult. The experience of depression involves changes to how the world is perceived and what the world offers a person by way of opportunities for action.

There are two related ways in which a person's perception changes in this respect. On the one hand, descriptions of the experience of depression include how everyday objects and contexts are seen to as different to how they would otherwise appear. For instance, to a depressed person going to a coffee shop might no longer appear as an opportunity to relax and

meet friends but as a very threatening or intimidating prospect. On the other hand, a depressed person may perceive in the same way or have the same perceptions as someone who is not depressed although they also have other thoughts and feelings that interfere with the practical contexts and implications which are typically part of perceiving objects, events and contexts. For example, a person may be motivated to do something but have contrary and stronger motivations to do otherwise. As Law puts it:

I might see [along with a non-depressed person] the salient features of the situation that called for action on my part, but there may be interfering elements in my conception of the situation that prevented all other motives and reasons from being silenced. I think this may be what is going on in the case of depression (Law 2009, 358).<sup>3</sup>

Suppose that in seeing someone at a party who is shy and awkward a person is thereby drawn to go and talk to them.<sup>4</sup> In depression, a person may see the shyness and awkwardness but also have other beliefs and emotions that block the relevant actions coming to fruition, so to speak. Law suggests that the failure to act need not be because a depressed person does not perceive the same things as other people, but because of “additional thoughts or background beliefs that get in the way” (Law 2009, 358). In Law’s view, whilst the depressive and non-depressive might be aware of the same aspects of the world there are elements which interfere with the subsequent actions of a depressed person. For example, a depressed person may recognise someone as being shy and understand what behaviour ought to follow but they also may have the belief that nobody would want to talk to them in any case, a belief which undermines the otherwise motivating recognition of someone’s shyness.

For the present context, what distinguishes this view from the one considered in the previous section is that desires continue to be present. The failure to act is not accounted for by citing the *loss* of relevant propositional attitudes; it is instead the content of particular mental states and acts of reflection that block or undermine action. This alternative view, then, avoids construing motivation and its pathologies in quantitative terms according to which a depressed person retains beliefs but loses their desires, since motivation may continue to be present

---

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘silenced’ here refers to John McDowell’s idea that a virtuous agent does not deliberate about what the right thing to do is by weighing considerations for and against virtuous behaviour. Rather, being virtuous ‘silences’ considerations that might compete or conflict with what virtuous action requires. See McDowell 1998, Ch.1, 3 and 4.

<sup>4</sup> The example is Law’s (2009, 352).

although it is blocked, suppressed or undermined by other beliefs and thoughts.<sup>5</sup> It also demonstrates the error of inferring lack or absence of motivation from the lack or absence of action. Nevertheless, despite a different focus when compared to the orthodox Humean view this alternative account still relies on the nature and interplay of mental states as the basic explanatory materials. It is the proliferation and specific content of beliefs and thoughts that obstruct a depressed person's motivational states being realized on action. So despite differences in details between the two accounts, they both share a basic commitment to the primacy of psychology. This suggests the presence of a deep-seated philosophical pressure toward characterizing motivation and its pathologies in psychological terms. Thus by considering the 'Humean' and the 'non-Humean' views in more detail, we can understand more clearly and assess what this pressure amounts to.

### **A Dilemma?**

John Roberts has argued, like Law, that the standard view fails to provide a persuasive account of the experience of depression (Roberts, 2001). The idea that depression does not affect person's beliefs but removes motivation by eroding non-cognitive propositional attitudes is not convincing. But in elaborating the failure of the standard view Roberts focuses on different aspects. Roberts defends this claim by explaining how depression "leaves one's evaluative outlook intact" (Roberts 2001, 43). Having an evaluative outlook implies possessing values which are conceptually connected to adopting 'favourable attitudes' (Roberts 2001, 44). This conceptual relation between valuing and favouring allegedly shows that values cannot be beliefs since beliefs do not favour or disfavour anything; only a desire is the right kind of state to favour or disfavour something.<sup>6</sup> If this is right, then the presence of values entails the presence of desires. But, since desires are the primary motivational force, this leaves entirely unexplained why it is that a depressed person does not act. Since desires and beliefs are present in episodes of depression, the question as to why it is that a depressed person does not act or reports loss of motivation remains simply unanswered on the Humean account.

Roberts considers a non-Humean alternative according to which our mental economy, alongside beliefs and desires as distinct propositional attitudes, includes a different kind of composite mental state. This state incorporates the motivational role conventionally assigned to

---

<sup>5</sup> A complimentary view emphasizes how a depressed person's psychology can be described as hyperactive or "on overdrive" rather than as 'deficient', particularly in cases of moral evaluations. See O'Connor *et al* (2007).

<sup>6</sup> In the context Roberts draws on David Lewis (1989) to help show that values cannot merely be beliefs.

desires into a certain class of belief: so-called ‘normative beliefs’ (Roberts 2001, 44). These would be, for example, beliefs about what one ought to. Believing that one ought to  $\varphi$  is constitutively apt to motivate an agent who has that belief. Such beliefs, without the need of a distinct desire, are sufficient to produce motivation and action (Roberts, 2001: 45). The alternative non-Humean view considered by Roberts blends together cognition and affect such that there is a kind of belief that is intrinsically motivating and which thus needs no supplement by way of a non-cognitive or affective mental state.<sup>7</sup> But this poses a problem of its own, since people with depression often or even typically retain normative beliefs or beliefs about what they ought to do. Although the ‘output’ of such motivating beliefs is blocked or defeated such that a person with depression does not act, the continuing presence of such beliefs (in part) explains the feelings of guilt that are often reported in the experience of depression; a depressed person does not do what they believe they ought to do (Roberts 2001, 47; see also Ratcliffe 2010). So, again, what is again left completely unexplained is the lack of action or motivation itself since the depressed person seems to possess the right kind of mental state, just as in the Humean account. So there is an apparent dilemma. As Roberts puts it:

We can follow the Humean and be in a position to explain why depressives are not motivated to act. But this comes at the cost of not being able to explain the continued presence of their values. On the other hand, we can follow the non-Humean and be able to explain the depressives’ continued identification with their values, but only at the cost of not being able to explain their lack of action ... Neither view ... appears to be able to accommodate the facts about depressive behavioural pathology, and so neither can be considered adequate (Roberts 2001, 45-46).

Roberts suggests a way out of the dilemma by proposing modifications to the Humean view, but I will not consider those here. I have sketched the problem Roberts highlights in order to emphasize what I take to be a common factor shared by both elements in the dilemma: the tacit commitment to a mentalistic characterization of motivation in depression.

Both sides of the dilemma involve characterizing the relevant motivational pathology in terms of mental states; one by emphasizing the presence of desires, and the other by emphasizing a special kind of belief-desire alloy or some hybrid state that unites the affective and the cognitive components of what would otherwise be distinct propositional attitudes. So Roberts’s characterization of the dilemma is informed by a broad psychological approach. The

---

<sup>7</sup> This characterization of moral judgement is thus a form of ‘internalism’ with regard to motivation. For a helpful recent attempt to assess the credentials of motivational internalism with regard to depression, see Cholbi (2011).



way the experience of depression is portrayed and the approaches to motivation so far considered are driven by a pervasive assumption that the *explanandum* – motivational pathology – and the *explanans* can be adequately described in psychological terms. The origins of this pervasive assumption are in its metaphysical underpinnings. Once these are dislodged it makes possible a quite different approach to motivation and one that can afford a more compelling account of the experience of depression.

### **Metaphysics and Projection**

The psychological accounts of motivation are supported by a wider conception about what the world contains and what we can genuinely have experience of. For example, broadly speaking Humean metaphysics implies that even though our experience purports to be genuinely responsive to the nature of the world, in many cases it is not. Part of our experience, for instance, seems to be of an independent and value-laden world and Hume tried to make sense of this without appealing to properties or states of affairs that would contravene a naturalistic world view. He supposed that, on reflection, our evaluative experience cannot really be what it seems to be – it cannot be that there really is an external world which contains evaluative properties to which we respond. Hume accounted for the phenomenology by citing a “productive faculty” of our minds (Hume 1975, 294). For example, he thought that values are ‘projected’ in such a way as to make it seem as though they are genuinely part of the world, and that we are genuinely responsive to some independently constituted evaluative reality which motivates us to think and act in various ways. When projecting in this way we ‘gild and stain’ the natural world “with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment” (Hume 1975, 294). In the context of explaining the lack or absence of motivation in depression Humean projectivism is, along with the belief-desire psychology, a function of metaphysical commitments.

Once we have embraced the idea that the world we confront, the world we find ourselves in, is in itself simply bereft of meaning and thus without intrinsic motivational potency, our psychological activity takes on a considerable explanatory burden. In Hume’s case our psychological operations are notoriously far-reaching since they are responsible even for our basic beliefs about causal relations that we take to hold between events in the world. We mistakenly think that our ideas of causal relations are the product of experience when in fact they are the product of the mind’s tendency to “spread itself on external objects” (Hume 1978, 167); Hume is a projectivist about causation as well as about values (Stroud 1993; Beebe 2007). Hume’s austere naturalism about what the world contains, or at least what we are licensed in saying that it contains, has a direct relevance for how we are to understand the ‘location’ of motivation, both in cases of ‘human action *par excellence*’ in Velleman’s sense and in cases of motivational pathology such as depression. If we project values onto the world,

values which subsequently play the role of being features, properties and states of affairs to which we then respond, perhaps we can say that a depressed person's faculty of projection has been diminished, eroded, or that the right kind of values are not being projected. On such a view the depressive's failure to be motivated could be explained as a failure to project on to the world.

Humean naturalism denies that the world can contain properties and states of affairs that are intrinsically motivating; that is, intrinsically such that to experience or be acquainted with these properties or states of affairs is thereby to be moved to pursue them. If there were such inherently motivating properties or states of affairs then they would have, in one famous way of putting it, "to-be-pursuedness" somehow built into them (Mackie 1979, 40). Like Hume, Mackie rejected any appeal to the allegedly mysterious idea that something could be genuinely part of the world and, because of its constitution, could also motivate simply by being noticed by someone, or at least by someone who is not depressed. In other words motivation cannot be a matter of picking up on saliences that are partly constitutive of the external world but is instead generated wholly from within subjectivity or, more precisely, from within our mental lives. As I have emphasized, this kind of metaphysical picture lends plausibility to the idea that behavioural or motivational pathologies can be accounted for by the absence or dysfunction of mental states. Overall, Humean psychology and its metaphysical foundations support the view that human beings are motivated by acquiring the appropriate type of psychological states. This view has thus been interpreted as form of 'subjectivism' although there is considerable disagreement as to what this amounts to (e.g., Mackie 1977, 17-18; Wiggins 1998). Subjectivism about values and motivation need not be simply a thesis about our 'inner lives' cut off from the outer external world. In fact depression might provide a case which directly challenges the idea that the character of motivation can be made intelligible without taking account of the nature of the perceived world.

For instance, Jennifer Church has suggested that the phenomenology of what it is like to be depressed "must take account of [a] correspondence between *what* is ... felt and *what* is ... perceived" (Church 2009, 175). This 'correspondence' is a way of expressing the idea that there is an essential relation between felt experience and the objects of experience – broadly speaking, between self and world. Consider these first-person descriptions from people who received a diagnosis of depression, and were writing in response to the question 'Does the world look different when you're depressed?':<sup>8</sup>

*Yes. Everything seems grey. It's like there's no colour to anything.*

---

<sup>8</sup> Extracts from depression questionnaire conducted by AUTHOR + colleagues (2011).

*Yes. Everything is grey, flat and joyless. However there are many shades of grey ... leading into the blackness.*

*Yes. the world looks very different when I am depressed, because everything looks dark/black and bleak. To me it looks like the colour and joy has been sucked out of the world and that the world looks completely dull.*

*The world looks less colourful – it's grey. It looks less interesting. I can see beautiful things like plants and nature and the seasons and know that I would normally be thrilled by them, and it hurts me that I don't have these feelings any more.*

People with depression often describe how the world looks thin, dry, mean and grey – corresponding to the ways in which a person feels about the world. This correspondence, as Church points out, can be interpreted in a number of ways. One way is that the correspondence is the function of a person caring less about the world; depression results in *noticing* less of the world because a person is *caring* less about it. But this would not take account of how, in depression, the objects of attention are often described as changed as are the wider structural features of experience.<sup>9</sup>

For instance, depressed people describe how everyday situations, objects and opportunities are experienced in ways quite different from how they ordinarily are. Seeing the laptop over there might usually elicit a range of habitual actions; opening some email messages and replying to them, checking the opening times of shops, and so on. For a depressed person seeing the laptop might give rise to an explicit and distressing sense of alienation from these everyday activities; the opportunities that would otherwise be represented become closed-off or perhaps seen as impossibly difficult. As one autobiographical account of depression describes:

The objects in a room have a stronger will than your own [...] I'd look around the room and be almost scared by how solid the furniture seemed, how assertive the wallpaper. The folds in the curtain had authority (Lewis 2006, p.xiii; p.79).

---

<sup>9</sup> Changes to temporal experience are often reported in depression, sometimes in quite radical changes. As Andrew Solomon writes: “When you are depressed, the past and the future are absorbed entirely by the present moment, as in the world of a three-year-old ... Being upset, even profoundly upset, is a temporal experience, while depression is a-temporal.” (Solomon 2001, 55). See Fuchs (2001; 2005b; 2010) and Ratcliffe (*forthcoming*).

In such cases aspects of the world and objects of perception have not somehow decreased in number as it were, as if depression simply reduces the numerical diversity of experiential objects. Rather, objects of perception are changed in terms of what they elicit, what they mean and represent and in terms of what they make possible for a person to do. In depression, Church suggests, there is a direct explanatory link between what is felt and what is perceived and as George Graham puts it: “grayness and meanness appear in the world outside the depressed person. To feel depressed is (in part) to perceive the world as mean and gray.” (Graham 2010, 33).<sup>10</sup> This suggests a different approach to a purely psychological model by drawing together the corresponding role of ‘internal’ feelings and ‘external’ aspects of the world. Nevertheless, it may still be possible to account for the changes in experience as arising from correlative changes to what is projected; that is, changes to our ‘internal sentiments’. If the ‘colours borrowed from internal sentiment’ are mean, grey and flat, then it would not be surprising that the world seems mean, grey and flat; if that is how we gild and stain it then that is how it is bound to look. But projectivism fails to take account of what ‘correspondence’ can mean in this context.

The correspondence between what is perceived and what is felt can be characterized as an interdependence between the normative features of the world and our sentiments. Generally speaking, neo-Humeans emphasize how the evaluative features of the world are the ‘children’ of our sentiments in contrast to anti-Humeans who regard the relevant aspects of the world as the ‘parents’ of our sentiments (Blackburn 1981, 165). But there is a different ‘no-priority’ view which regards the relation between our sentiments and the features of the world to which they respond as more like that between ‘siblings’ (McDowell, 1998a 159). Less metaphorically, the correspondence between what is felt and what is perceived can be interpreted to mark how both sentiments and features of the world, what is perceived and our responses, are inextricably linked (AUTHOR; McDowell 1998a, 151–66; Wiggins 1998, 197; Goldie 2000, 28–37). The no-priority view about the relation between features of the world and our responses suggests a way to avoid lapsing into a form of psychologism about motivation. By acknowledging the interdependence between features of the world and our responses we can avoid characterizing motivation in exclusively mentalistic terms. The idea that sentiments play an important role in motivation may still be granted, but according to a no-priority interpretation we cannot fully

---

<sup>10</sup> A notable theme in the questionnaire responses (see n.8) as in other accounts of depression is how people describe the world as looking ‘grey’ (or ‘dark’ or ‘black’) and use numerous other references to colour. Recent empirical research has suggested that such descriptions may have a physiological basis since studies on retinal response purport to show a “reduced sensitivity of subjective contrast perception in depressed patients” and thus how “depression can be measured in the eye of the diseased”. See Bubl *et al* (2010).

grasp the nature of motivation without characterizing the interdependence or correspondence between what is felt and what is perceived as Church puts it.

On a broadly Humean view, our conative attitudes constitute the primary motivational force for action and are among the things that we project out on to a supposedly blank and neutral external world. In contrast to this, we can understand such attitudes as not just responses to a pre-given and indifferent world but as partly constitutive of our experience in the first place. Daniel Jacobsen describes the kind of affective perception made possible by some form of no-priority view as “seeing by feeling” (Jacobson 2005) and others (e.g., Goldie 2007) have emphasised how “[a] way of seeing a situation may itself be a way of caring or feeling” (McNaughton 1988, 113). According to this model, a motivational element is partly constitutive of our experience of the world not supplied by some independent and isolable inner mental state such as a ‘desire’. In short, we can be motivated directly by the world which we experience and, in seeking to identify or assess a motivational element we do not need just to consult our inner mental lives.

Some philosophers have developed this idea and suggested that the source of motivation is properly thought of as located in the world and not produced or generated by internal states. For instance, according to Jonathan Dancy we should say that what motivates us is “not a state of ourselves at all, but rather the nature of the situation”; we thus need “to look through the believings to the things believed if we are to find the real source of motivation” (Dancy 2000, 77). For instance, the fact that the person needs help is what motivates my helping, not that I am motivated because I *believe* that the person needs help. Likewise, apparent lack or deficiencies in motivation can at least partly be accounted for in terms of the things believed or desired – that is, in terms of features of the world. This suggests a different sort of account about the source and nature of motivation and an alternative characterization of the place of motivation in the experience of depression.

Recall that the accounts thus far considered have, to different degrees, proposed that we understand motivation and its pathologies in terms of the nature and role of relevant mental states. The metaphysical underpinning to the psychological approach contrasts with what is presented by the cluster of views just outlined: the idea that affect is not as such independent from our experience of the world and that the source of motivation need not be thought of as exclusively internal to our mental lives. The view I now want to consider holds that the nature of a situation and its role in motivation is configured through the character of our bodily existence, and thus it presents a positive account of what a non-psychological approach to motivation consists in.

## **Motivation and the Body**

The central role of bodily changes in cases of depression is emphasised in recent work in philosophical psychopathology, for example by Thomas Fuchs. Fuchs claims that in the ordinary case:

Subjectivity is embedded in the world ... [and usually] ... the body becomes transparent to the world we are living in and allows us to act in it. The meaning of this *transparency of the body* should be noted carefully: It implies that consciousness is not the final link of a chain of deanimated physical processes as Descartes thought it to be (Fuchs 2005a, 95).

Usually there is a “tacit knowledge or knowing-how of the body” which incorporates the ways in which “our body repertoires, habits, and dispositions” continuously shape our situations (Fuchs 2005a, 97). In cases of depression, however, this bodily transparency is replaced by forms of opacity. The body becomes a distinctive (and sometimes literally painful) aspect of one’s experience. Thus, in depression:

Instead of being transparent, the body may, as it were, regain its materiality and turn into an obstacle ... a corporealization of the lived body. [In such a case] the relation of the subject to the world is deprived of its immediacy, leading to a fundamental alienation of the self (Fuchs 2005a, 95).

Alterations to bodily ‘know-how’ and its role in articulating structures of meaning, lead to an alienation of the self which distorts our relation to the world. According to Fuchs depression can involve a fundamental change in body-world relations:

[In depression] the *conative dimension* of the body, that is, its seeking and striving for satisfaction, is missing. Normally, it is this dimension that opens up the peripersonal space as a realm of possibilities, “affordances”, and goals for action. In depressive patients, however, drive, impulse, appetite, and libido are reduced or lost, no more capable of disclosing potential sources of pleasure and satisfaction. As a result, the patient’s imagination, the sense of the possible, fails to generate future goals and plans, leaving the self confined to the present state of pure bodily restriction. Thus the depressive person cannot transcend her body any more ... which is what we normally do when the body serves as the medium for our intentions and actions (Fuchs 2005a, 99).

Two aspects are important here. Firstly, failures in what are usually considered psychological capacities such as imagination are explained as consequences of changes in bodily openness to the world; an openness that partly constitutes the ‘realm of possibilities’. A depressed person

may experience a sense of bodily restriction, a result of a ‘corporealization’, which produces a felt separation of body from the world where the body no longer gives access to the world in the usual ways (Fuchs 2005a, 99). The second aspect is how the body itself is characterized as having a conative dimension. In the conceptual framework assumed by psychological accounts of motivation conation is closely associated with desires; those states of mind that provide the basic impulse for action and the primary driving force of motivation. In contrast, this alternative view interprets conation as an aspect of our bodily character. Under Fuchs’s interpretation conative attitudes are not simply one style of propositional attitudes in contrast to cognitive propositional attitudes. Conation is not the exclusive responsibility of any kind of mental state at all. Rather, our bodies possess a conative dimension through the ways that our bodies partly constitute how we actively engage meaningfully in the world. In cases where the conative dimension of our bodies is compromised or reduced, as in cases of depression, the correlative structures of meaning, the ‘realm of possibilities’, are affected.

This realm is constituted by a variety of aspects. Part of losing the transparency of the body in Fuchs’s sense is a loss of “emotional resonance” with features in the world and with other people (Fuchs 2005a, 100).<sup>11</sup> Thus the immediate access to the world which the body usually provides is blocked not only in terms of action-possibilities but also in terms of affect-possibilities. The affective relations with other people and features in the environment become diminished or lost. In melancholic depression, according to Fuchs, people “are no longer capable of being moved and affected by things or persons; the attractive and sympathetic qualities of their surroundings have vanished” (Fuchs 2005a, 100). The current sense of bodily restriction, then, accounts for changes in the structure of motivation since those things, persons and qualities of surroundings that would otherwise move a person to act are drained of their motivational power. This is not primarily because someone with depression has lost some of their mental states, or that they have additional mental states that block or interfere with others. Lack of motivation is thus characterized a result of changes to a person’s “bodily resonance” to the world and other people (Fuchs 2005a, 100).

The bodily restriction that Fuchs alludes to is vindicated by first-person descriptions of depression in which people often describe the bodily characteristics of the experience. For example, consider these responses to the question ‘How does your body feel when you’re depressed?’:<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Such emotional resonance can be understood as wide-scope, involving changes in the structure of interpersonal relations and self-understanding. As Graham puts it: “Depression ... is not just a mood disorder or specific to feeling or affect. It also is a disorder of care and emotional commitment as well as, oftentimes, of self-comprehension” (Graham 2010, 47).

<sup>12</sup> See n.8.



*It often felt as though I literally had a broken heart and that my chest was tight.*

*Physically low, really really 'heavy', it's like there's a physical weight pulling you down.*

*My body feels like it isn't my own, that it is controlled by the depression.*

*Slow, heavy, lethargic and painful ... Everything feels 1000 times harder to do. To get out of bed, hold a cup of tea, it's all such an effort. My entire body aches and feels like it is going to break.*

*Tired, heavy, unresponsive. I carry a lot of tension in my shoulders, and there's a constant ache in my temples and behind my eyes, like an excess of emotion is simmering beneath, waiting to erupt. My chest often feels tight, heart rate increases, stabbing pains in my chest. If it's particularly bad my limbs go numb and I become convinced that I might physically fall to pieces.*

*Depression for me is a heavyness, a weight that I carry that manifests physically in my shoulders or on my chest. I can feel it as if it were more than a metaphorical illness, as though it were tangible. Breathing is difficult at times, I feel the pain in my chest and I can't breathe ... It feels hard to breathe and then as if you have to fight for breath.*

These bodily aspects of the experience of depression are often not just descriptions of changes on the level of physical properties and characteristics. The changes affect how a person inhabits the realm of possibilities and, in particular, these incorporate changes in motivation: “*It's like someone turns your motivation switch off*”. Diminishment in the conative dimension of the body, then, can have a dramatic affect on how and even whether a person is motivated to act. These first-person descriptions seem to support the idea that a regular feature of depression is a form of corporealization in which the immediacy that ordinarily characterizes the relation between self and world is disrupted.

Fuchs's account of corporealization in depression presupposes a broader account of the constitutive role of the body in articulating our meaningful relations to the world some of which can be understood motivational in a sense to be explained in a moment. A central principle of this broader account of the body, one articulated and defended at length by Merleau-Ponty, is that our bodies are not merely the vehicles through which our inner psychological states are realized in physical form. This is particularly relevant in the present context because, in contrast



to psychologistic accounts, changes to motivation can be understood in terms of changes at the level of how our bodies articulate our relation to the world not in terms of changes at the level of mental states.

Merleau-Ponty has characterizes our subjectivity and intentionality more widely in terms of motility and practical orientations to the world and what it offers by of possibilities for action (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 158-9). Consciousness and subjectivity is fundamentally articulated in practical terms; “not a matter of ‘I think’ but of ‘I can’” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 159). One’s body constitutes one’s ‘point of view’ on the world central to which are the “intentional threads” that connect the body to our surroundings, and which “attach us to the world” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 15, 121). According to Merleau-Ponty the bodily nature of subjectivity is reflected in features of our environment. Our subjectivity is partly constitutive of the world and having a body, as he puts it, is to be “intervolved with a definite environment” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 94). One’s body does not simply occupy some spatial location or position; rather, bodily spatiality is one of “situation” where being situated in the relevant sense is shaped by “our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological, and moral situation” (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 115; 157).<sup>13</sup> As I understand it, situation involves how one is directed towards the world in ways that, quite literally, embody our intentions. Merleau-Ponty rejects the idea that our actions manifest or are guided by our intentions where these are mental representations of states of the world, formulable in propositional terms, with conditions that our actions try to satisfy. Instead, features in the world “offer themselves to ... action” in ways that needs no representational mental intermediary (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 122). Situations are configured by what they provide by way of possibilities for acting; they “call for ... a certain kind of work” that directly reflect bodily capacities. Accordingly, changes to the character of how our bodily capacities configure the realm of possibilities will bring changes to how a person is motivated. Merleau-Ponty suggests that motivation cannot be properly understood without attending to the cooperative relationship between body and world; a relationship that is largely ignored by the broadly psychological accounts of motivation.

By elucidating the bodily character of motivation Merleau-Ponty provides an alternative to two dominant approaches both of which falsify the motivational relationships that hold between a subject and the world (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 424; 520).<sup>14</sup> One approach interprets motivation and intentional action in terms of the operation of rationality, where this involves an agent’s being responsive to and being able to provide reasons. The other approach couches motivation in causal terms; motivation and action can be ultimately understood in a mechanistic

---

<sup>13</sup> What unites these aspects is an ‘intentional arc’ which, in illness “‘goes limp’”, as he puts it (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 157).

<sup>14</sup> See also Wrathall (2005).

way, with the relations between a person and the world are reduced to stimulus-response processes – a version of what McDowell terms “quasi-hydraulic” action explanations (McDowell 1998, 213).

According to Merleau-Ponty’s approach, motivation is not as such part of the realm of reason or rationality and neither is it explicable in terms of mechanistic processes or at the level of causes. Rationalism in the current sense characterizes being motivated as a function of how the objects or features of a situation which motivate conform to a relevant class of goals and intentions of the agent. The meaning of the features which motivate are thus shaped by an agent’s propositional attitudes. On the other hand, empiricism construes motivation as reducible to the mechanistic response of a person to features of the environment. Merleau-Ponty’s view pursues an alternative which emphasizes our inhabitation of the ‘space of motivations’ as Dreyfus puts it (Dreyfus, 2005: 57). This space supplements the distinction some philosophers have drawn between the so-called ‘space of reasons’ and ‘the space of causes’ – that is, the space of rational conceptual thought on the one hand and the framework of law-like generalities through which we characterize the casual relationships of brute natural matter.<sup>15</sup> In broad outline, the distinction is used to draw a contrast between ways in which we understand phenomena; one through acknowledging the irreducibly normative characteristics of, say, knowledge claims and the justificatory relations between beliefs, concepts and judgements, and the other by invoking the explanatory framework taken to be central to the natural sciences. As I understand it, the ‘space of motivations’ is intended to provide a different way in which we make things intelligible, an alternative to what appears to be (as Merleau-Ponty would have seen it) just another version of the problematic dualism between rationalism and empiricism.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> This distinction and the terminology employed to mark it is controversial. Wilfrid Sellars coined the term ‘space of reasons’ to refer to how we ought to characterize someone’s having *knowledge* – by “placing it in the logical space of reasons” (Sellars 1997, 76). McDowell has contrasted the space of reasons with what he calls the ‘realm of law’ and regards the ‘space of causes’ as a misleading contrast to the space of reasons (McDowell 1996, 71 n.2). Nevertheless, for present purposes I will employ the space of reasons/space of causes contrast. See Wrathall (2005, 125) for a discussion of how McDowell’s account of causal and rational relations bears on Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of motivation.

<sup>16</sup> One consideration in favour of resisting the space of reasons/space of causes contrast is that, as McDowell emphasises, sometimes reasons can be causes (McDowell 1996, 71 n.2). Thus McDowell wants to preserve the possibility that articulating phenomena or some “area of discourse” by placing it in the realm of law is not thereby to show that such phenomena is external to the space of reasons. If this can be defended it would show that McDowell is not a dualist in the relevant sense.

Merleau-Ponty proposes that we reject the rationalist/empiricist dichotomy which, as he says in a slightly different context, would otherwise force us to treat motivations as *either* phenomena in the “realm of reasons” *or* as occurrences in the “realm of causes” (Merleau-Ponty 1974, 105).<sup>17</sup> The dichotomy prevents our recognizing that a “phenomenological notion of motivation” is available and one that places our bodily openness to the world as central (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 57). To understand motivation and its pathologies we need to acknowledge the foundational status and role of our bodies and our bodily agency. The space of motivations is a way of characterizing how we are moved by the world, not in some purely mechanistic or purely intellectual sense, but moved by the structures of meanings that reflect our bodily capacities and body-world relations. According to Merleau-Ponty, then, being motivated is not simply a state of mind or some combination of propositional attitudes, neither is it a state of will or a state of the world as such; rather, “the flow of motivations bear me along in the [world]” and thus is an achievement of our active and open-ended practical orientations which are inextricably linked to our experience of the world (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 344).

I have characterized the space of motivations as one way that we make things intelligible, specifically the ways that the world moves us to act or fails to. But making intelligible does not just mean bringing to the level of conceptual thought. The space of motivations also refers to the way that objects and states of affairs can motivate whether or not we are aware of them, and whether or not we can, *via* some deliberative act, come to explicitly conceptualize such motives as ‘reasons’ (Wrathall 2005, 121). For instance, Merleau-Ponty regards conceptualizing motives as reasons as a form of reduction; to translate into rational thought what constitutes the ‘flow of motivations’ inevitably involves some kind of distortion of the phenomena, and whatever succeeds in being conceptualized will be only a slender portion of what is a highly complex and multifarious web of motivating features. In cases where we do come to treat a motive as a reason, we “crystallize an indefinite collection of motives” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 345; Wrathall 2005, 119). In doing so we become *aware* of what is motivating and treat it as a reason for acting or thinking in a certain way. But, the suggestion is, thinking of motivation in terms of reasons is only one way in which motivations figure in our lives. Merleau-Ponty’s positive claim is that motivation can be understood in terms of body-world reciprocity, a non-conceptual but non-mechanistic meaningful relation between subjectivity and the world. More specifically

---

<sup>17</sup> The slightly different context is a discussion of how to characterize the meaning of speech. Again, Merleau-Ponty suggests an alternative to what he characterizes as intellectualist and empiricist accounts and one that builds on the approach to the body being here considered. See Baldwin (2007 p.88 and n.2) for a warning not to run Merleau-Ponty’s ‘realm of reasons’ and Sellars’s ‘space of reasons’ together – although there is some affinity. See also Charles Taylor (2005).

for the purposes of this paper, it provides a way to develop an alternative to the psychologicistic models of motivation that have been thus far dominant. I suggest that it is this motivational relation or reciprocity which is disturbed in forms of depression. In such cases subjectivity may still be structured by essentially practical orientations, although the bodily changes experienced as part of depression articulate that orientation more in terms of ‘I cannot’ rather than ‘I can’. Furthermore, this relationship or reciprocity is one way in which we can appreciate Church’s claim that a phenomenology of depression must take into account the ‘correspondences’ between self and world, the correspondences between what is felt and what is experienced. We are now in a better position to see that the relevant correspondences can also refer to relations of motivation understood in terms of our bodily agency. This provides the beginnings of how to understand the ways that motivation is affected in depression without conceding to a psychologicistic account. In addition, by emphasizing the nature and role of the body in motivation it provides an account that accords directly with first person descriptions of the experience of depression.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Considerations about the role of the body in motivation as such, and especially in the experience of depression, suggest that the orthodox psychological approach is inadequate. As outlined in this paper, the received psychologicistic accounts do not attend to the constitutive role of the body in how we relate to the world and, in particular, they cannot account for the changes in that relation as they are experienced in depression. In depression, the reciprocity or correspondence between self and world that typically embody motivational relationships fragments. The relevant kinds of motivation and agency cannot be properly understood simply in terms of diminishing mental states or in terms the undermining effect that some mental states might have with regard to others. So our debates in this context can be advanced by considering the alternative account of motivation which considers the status and role of the body as central to our subjectivity and to core features of the experience of depression.

## Acknowledgements

\*

## References

- American Psychiatric Association (2000). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Fourth Edition), Text Revision*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press.
- AUTHOR.
- AUTHOR + depression research project colleagues.
- Baldwin, T. (Ed.) (2007). *Reading Merleau-Ponty: On Phenomenology of Perception*. Abingdon, Oxford: Routledge
- Beebe, H. (2007). ‘Hume on Causation: A Projectivist Interpretation’. In R. Corry and H. Price (Eds.). *Causation, Physics and the Constitution of Reality: Russell’s Republic Revisited* (pp. 224-49). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Blackburn, S. (1981). ‘Rule Following and Moral Realism’. In S. Holtzman and C. Leich (Eds.). *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule* (pp. 163-187). London: Routledge.
- Paul, B., Kern, E., Ebert, D., Bach, M. and van Elst, L.T. (2010). ‘Seeing Gray When Feeling Blue? Depression Can Be Measured in the Eye of the Diseased’. *Biological Psychiatry*, 68, 205–208.
- Cholbi, M. (2011). ‘Depression, Listlessness, and Moral Motivation’. *Ratio*, 24, 28–45.
- Church, J. (2003). ‘Depression, depth and the imagination’. In J. Phillips and J. Morley (Eds.), *Imagination and Its Pathologies* (pp. 335-360). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Dancy, J. (2000). *Practical Reality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Dreyfus, H. (2005). ‘Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers Can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise’. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 79(2), 47-65.
- Fuchs, T. (2001). ‘Melancholia as a desynchronization: Towards a psychopathology of interpersonal time’. *Psychopathology*, 34, 179-186.
- Fuchs, T. (2005a). ‘Corporealized and Disembodied Minds: A Phenomenological View of the Body in Melancholia and Schizophrenia’. *Philosophy, Psychiatry & Psychology*, 12(2), 95-107.
- Fuchs, T. (2005b). ‘Implicit and explicit temporality’. *Philosophy, Psychiatry & Psychology*, Volume 12 (Number 3). 195-198.
- Fuchs, T. (2010). Temporality and psychopathology, *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Science*, OnlineFirst, <http://www.springerlink.com/content/1568-7759/?k=temporality+>.
- Goldie, P. (2000). *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Goldie, P. (2007). ‘Seeing What is the Kind Thing to Do: Perception and Emotion in Morality’. *Dialectica*, 61(3), 347-361.
- Graham, G. (2010). *The Disordered Mind*. Abingdon, Oxford: Routledge.

- Hornsby, J. (2004) ‘Alienated Agents’. In M. De Caro and D. Macarthur (Eds.), *Naturalism in Question*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (pp. 173–87).
- Hume, D. (1975). *Enquiries Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hume, D. (1978). *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Law, I. (2009). ‘Motivation, Depression and Character’. In M. Broome and L. Bortolotti (Eds.), *Psychiatry as Cognitive Neuroscience: Philosophical Perspectives* (pp. 351-364). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, D. (1989) ‘Dispositional Theories of Value’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, (Suppl.), 63, 113–37.
- Lewis, G. (2006). *Sunbathing in the Rain*. London: Harper Perennial.
- Mackie, J.L. (1977). *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. London: Penguin.
- McDowell, J. (1996). *Mind and World*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- McDowell, J. (1998). ‘Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following’. In J. McDowell *Mind, Value and Reality* (pp.98–218). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press
- McNaughton, D. (1988). *Moral Vision*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Mele, A. (1996). ‘Internalist Moral Cognitivism and Listlessness’. *Ethics*, 106(4), 727-753.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1974). *Prose of the World*. London. Heinemann.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002). *Phenomenology of Perception*. (London: Routledge).
- Nordenfelt, L. (2007). *Rationality and Compulsion: Applying Action Theory to Psychiatry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- O’Conner, L.E., Barry, J. W., Lewis, T., Mulherin, K. and Crisostomo, P.S. (2007). ‘Empathy and Depression: The Moral System on Overdrive.’ In T. Farrow and P. Woodruff (Eds.). *Empathy in Mental Illness* (pp.49-75). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ratcliffe, M. (2010). ‘Depression, Guilt and Emotional Depth’. *Inquiry* 53(6), 602-626.
- Ratcliffe, M. (forthcoming). ‘Varieties of Temporal Experience in Depression’. *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*.
- Roberts, R. (2001). ‘Mental Illness, Motivation and Moral Commitment’. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 51(202), 41-59.
- Sellars, W. (1997). *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Smith, M. (1994). *The Moral Problem*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Solomon, A. (2001). *The Noonday Demon: an Atlas of Depression*. London: Vintage Books.
- Taylor, C. (2005). ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture’. In *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*. T. Carman and M. Hansen (Eds.), (pp. 26-49). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stroud, B. (1993). ‘“Gilding or Staining” the World with “Sentiments” and “Phantasms”’. *Hume Studies*, 19(2) 253-72.

- Velleman, D. (1992). 'What Happens When Someone Acts?'. *Mind*, 101(403), 461-481.
- Wiggins, D. (1998). 'A Sensible Subjectivism?'. In D. Wiggins *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value* (pp. 185-214). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wrathall, M. (2005). 'Motives, Reasons, and Causes'. *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*. T. Carman and M. Hansen (Eds.), (pp. 111-128). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.