Temporality and affectivity in depression and schizophrenia: Commentary on Lenzo and Gallagher

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1. Introduction

Temporality is a foundational topic in phenomenological psychopathology, and it plays an especially important role in its analysis of depression and melancholia (e.g., Fuchs, 2001; Fuchs, 2013; Gallagher, 2012; Ratcliffe, 2015). An intuitive strategy is to explain abnormal experiences of time by appealing to a fundamental disruption of the temporal structure of consciousness, yet Lenzo and Gallagher (this volume) highlight that this strategy is problematic. Let us consider the following autobiographical account of time experience in depression, which is cited as a paradigmatic example by Ratcliffe (2012):

> I am in a time-locked place, where the moment I am in will stretch on, agonizingly, for ever. There is no possibility of redemption or hope. It is a final giving up on everything. It is death. (Lott, 1996, p. 247)

It is tempting to hypothesize that the structure of time consciousness underlying this kind of abnormal experience is similarly abnormal, i.e. dominated by the past without any forward-looking element. In a separate context Gallagher (2017b, p. 97) imagines that kind of situation as follows: "If there were only retentions, everything I experience would already have just happened; we would be pure witnesses without the potential to engage." This hypothetical experience does capture key aspects of the phenomenology of depression, but there are reasons for concern.

Specifically, it seems more accurate to identify the moment when only retentions remain in someone's stream of consciousness with the moment that stream comes to an end. In other words, it is the onset of death, and we therefore have reached a basic limit of thought experimentation. As Shakespeare once pointed out, we simply do not know what dreams – if any – may come. To be fair, as exemplified by the autobiographical quote above, people with severe depression often report being trapped inside a dying body (Fuchs, 2005). And yet they continue to live and to experience, which means that they did not suffer a total disintegration of the diachronic structure of temporality (Fuchs, 2017).

Lenzo and Gallagher suggest that we need to more clearly distinguish between (a) the flow of experience and (b) the experience of flow. In addition, they propose to reorient the focus of analysis to some of the other structural syntheses that are necessary for the constitution of subjectivity and objectivity. More specifically, they suggest that the locus of depression is not a disruption of the primary passive *temporal* synthesis, but rather of the primary passive *associative* and *affective* syntheses.

I agree with Lenzo and Gallagher about the diagnosis of the theoretical problem, and I also partially agree with their proposed remedy, although I will suggest that, in the end, we will need a more radical treatment. In the rest of this commentary I will therefore complement their contribution in three respects:

1) I extend their critical discussion to schizophrenia, where we find the same problematic appeals to a disruption of fundamental temporal structure;

2) I radicalize their positive proposal by showing that once we distinguish between the experience of flow and the flow of experience, we can also envision a more general distinction between phenomenality and structure of consciousness; and

3) I highlight that this more general distinction has important implications for the naturalization of phenomenology, in particular by supporting growing calls for a reconceptualization of the scientific concept of nature.

2. From temporality to affectivity

Since the late 1990s the insights of phenomenological philosophy and embodied cognitive science have been brought together in a mutually informing manner. An important point of contact was the structure of time consciousness, and this has been explored in quite some detail (Varela, 1999), including with respect to abnormal experience in schizophrenia.

For example, Gallagher applied this interdisciplinary approach to the characteristic symptom of thought insertion (Gallagher, 2005, pp. 173-205; Gallagher & Varela, 2003). While it is normal to occasionally experience unbidden thoughts, memories, and fantasies, there is still a sense that these experiences are originating within one's stream of consciousness. But this lingering sense of passive generation is argued to disappear along with protention: "Without protention, thought continues, but it appears already made, not generated in my own stream of consciousness" (Gallagher & Varela, 2003, p. 117). However, in line with Lenzo and Gallagher's recommendation, we should refrain from positing such a fundamental disruption of temporality. Protention is inseparable from the stream of consciousness: the now, as the present phase of consciousness, is constituted by way of fulfilment of an otherwise empty protention (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2014). It is questionable to what extent a subject's thoughts, or even experience more generally, can continue without protention.

Again, the key problem is that the fundamental structural level of consciousness is an all-or-nothing affair: either there is a continuous stream of consciousness or there is not. There is no middle way. As the work of Husserl and of later phenomenologists revealed, the basic unit of time-consciousness, i.e. the present moment, has a concrete duration; it is not an abstract point on a line, but a temporal field that dynamically gives rise to the now ("primal impression") on the basis of the nearly-present ("protention") continuously slipping into the just-past ("retention"). Given that this recursive slippage results in a nested, or even fractal-like temporal organization, the present moments become structurally linked into an internally unified whole, and thereby constitute the foundation for subjectivity and its meaningful engagement with the objective world (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2014). But this

foundation in a tripartite temporality is precarious: remove any of the parts, and the whole subject disappears.

Gallagher and Varela (2003, p. 120) seem to have sensed this tension because later on they emphasize that "the schizophrenic phenomenology is not simply a structural or logical problem." Accordingly, they moved from an abstract structural explication of protention to a process of protention which is always already suffused by an affective tone determined by the past, and which is rooted in and constrained by distributed patterns of neurobiological dynamics, in line with Varela's (1999) neurophenomenology research program.

3. From affectivity to phenomenality

Lenzo and Gallagher build on this work on the deep connection between temporality and affectivity to show how there can be temporal alterations in depressive experience without a disruption of the most fundamental level of temporal synthesis. Their proposal is to shift the disruption from the primary temporal synthesis to a less fundamental level of structural synthesis, and thereby preserve the unity of time consciousness.

They argue that a moment of experience that affects us strongly will attract our attention in such a way that it evokes far-reaching chains of associations of experiences that relevantly precede and follow it, and the moment will therefore appear as longer. This alteration can assume pathological proportions: an intensely affecting past experience, say a trauma, can be so prominent that it consistently reorients attention to that past moment, while the concomitantly evoked past associations overwhelm what is happening now. This is a plausible account of how differences in affectivity can give rise to differences in lived duration. However, it is not clear whether this account can also explain why it seems like time itself has ceased to flow. For example, occasionally I may feel overwhelmed by associations evoked by a prominent moment in my past, but I experience these unwanted associations in the present moment as part of my normal stream of consciousness.

I think the way forward is to radicalize Lenzo and Gallagher's proposal and further bracket the general strategy of appealing to structural differences to understand phenomenal differences. There are hints in their analysis that an alternative strategy could appeal to the feeling of prominence, relevance, or salience directly: what makes the key difference is not a prominent moment's quantity of associations, but rather the personal significance of its felt quality. This strategic reorientation involves a subtle but significant shift in the roles played by affectivity, which ambiguously refers to both being passively affected and to felt affect (Sass, 2004). I propose to replace Lenzo and Gallagher's focus on the former role with an emphasis on the latter role, which is at the core of the subject's "lived self-acquaintance" (Zahavi, 2005, p. 80) or "affective self-familiarity" (Fuchs, 2017) across time.

For example, we can imagine that an ordinary experience, like being lost in thoughts and spontaneously deciding to cross the street on the way home, can go nearly unnoticed if it has no further significant consequences, and yet become a target for obsessive attention if it leads to traumatic consequences. The fundamental structural differences between the moments surrounding the decision are the same in both scenarios, and yet the valence of those differences is incomparable: in the ordinary case the moment of decision retains the

same level of valence as the preceding and subsequent moments, while in the traumatic case there is a shocking increase in significance of the decision such that the valence of differences between the preceding and subsequent moments pales in comparison. And without any appreciation of meaningful differences between the moments flowing through awareness, time itself may well seem to have stopped flowing altogether. We can compare this to the phenomenology of perception: research into inattentional blindness, change blindness, and categorical perception has revealed that we often remain unaware of large structural changes in the visual scene, and this is facilitated if the changes do not impact the meaning of what is perceived (Froese & Leavens, 2014). Similarly, people with depression may suffer from disordered affect that hides structural differences between moments in time by blanketing those differences with indifference, thereby making time itself appear stagnant. This disordered affect may have various origins, but trauma can certainly make the valence all other changes in life pale in comparison.

4. New horizons for the naturalization of phenomenology

This shift in analysis of affectivity from structural self-affection to phenomenally felt quality has broader implications. It points more generally to the relative independence of structural dynamics from phenomenology. This is presumably what made the structure of time consciousness an appealing starting point for Varela's naturalization of phenomenology in the first place, but it also means that this strategy will not go far. First of all, whereas naturalization has mainly focused on how to relate the structures of consciousness with the structures of the brain, we also need to relate feelings being alive with our organismic embodiment (Fuchs, 2012). But even if the structures of consciousness could be explained in terms of whole brain-body-world structures, this would still fail to account for the felt quality. It would miss the fundamental subjective dimension of affectivity:

> It is an unmediated feeling or sense of aliveness, a sense of certain tonality or luminosity of consciousness that founds our existence and is a necessary condition for more elaborate levels of self-awareness and for our encountering of the world. (Sass, 2004, p. 138)

The only way forward is to bite the bullet and accept that the phenomenal as an irreducible element of our existence, and one that can make an important difference in our lives. Yet this confronts us head-on with the hardest version of the mind-body problem, which is tied with a specific concept of nature:

> Anything that could count as a solution to the hard problem would have to buy into the assumptions of classic naturalism, since those assumptions define precisely the framework within which the hard problem is defined, namely, that a complete scientific description of the brain will be deterministic, and completely independent of first-person experience. (Gallagher, 2017a, p. 111)

The proposal by Lenzo and Gallagher that "affectivity can disrupt the underlying dynamics", therefore, must ultimately be considered in the context of the "ongoing theoretical struggle between the task of remaining scientific (which Varela certainly wanted to do) and reconceiving nature (and therefore reconceiving what science actually is)" (Gallagher,

2017a, p. 111). I suggest that the new "remedy" – not the solution – of the hard problem, i.e., of how subjective affect could make a difference to objective dynamics, needs to involve two interdependent tasks: (1) develop an alternative theory of the brain, and of the whole organism more generally, that takes incompleteness and nondeterminism as its starting point, and (2) develop an account of how first-person experience could make a difference to the brain's or organism's activity.

Task (1) is slowly taking shape; it does not contradict any empirical evidence, and there is evidence that can be interpreted in its support (Froese & Taguchi, 2019). Task (2) is a much harder nut to crack, but crack it we must if we want to retain room for the subjective in an objective world (Fuchs, 2018). Lenzo and Gallagher's reference to Jasper's general psychopathology is useful here, especially his claim that both scientific explanation and phenomenological understanding are limited. It is tempting to see the objectively inexplicable and the subjectively unintelligible as complementary gaps through which the intertwinement of the living and lived body takes place, where each side can reach into the other, but without violating the defining essence of the other domain (Froese, 2018).

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