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THE PRACTICE OF SELF-UNDERSTANDING

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1) *The emotional side of the life of the mind*

WHERE there is life there is movement, vibration, bustle. If we activate the mind's view, we discover that our inner space is never still, nor empty, nor silent: inevitably, we find ourselves caught up in thinking, just as we inevitably feel ourselves feeling.

We always find ourselves in a lived experience, even when we seem not to notice any quality. Following Stein, we can venture into a mental experiment: now, but then, if I only stop to think, I feel myself in a precise condition: I can feel the pleasure of thinking, or the effort of building thoughts.¹ And, if I do not interrupt reflective thinking immediately to re-immense myself in writing, I can feel even more: I can grasp a sense of the background from far away that is lasting, and will also continue even when I have finished writing: it may be a sense of tranquility that smells of the well-being that binds us to the things of the world, or a corrosive fear of being, of coping with the maximally difficult task of becoming one's own being that is able to simply be, which feels encrusted in the tissues of the soul, almost dulling them. This feeling of background that I grasp when I stop thinking of descending into the life of the mind: it does not come to me as if it began at that moment, but as already previously present, even if I am only aware of it now.² And I am aware of it like something is before me objectively, that is, as a given, that was there before. If we have thoughts gathered on continuing feeling, we can have the impression of perceiving our existential profile

¹ E. STEIN, *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities in The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, vol. VII (transl. by M.C. Baseheart and M. Sawicki), Washington 2000.

² *Ibidem*.

and, compared with this feeling that lasts, occasional feelings may appear to lose colour, to fade. Then, when I turn away from thinking the lived experience while it is happening and reflect on this cognitive experience, I cannot fail to note that I am always in an emotional situation.

When we consider the life of the mind, it is easy to make it coincide with its intellectual side, as if the side of feeling was non-existent. However, «the heart is the true centre of life», with this term indicating not a bodily organ but the emotional side of the life of the mind, «the intimate of the soul».³ Stein states that our soul is naturally full of feelings such that one replaces the other and keeps our heart in constant motion, often in turmoil and unrest.⁴ The importance of the existence of affective life is so great that the globality of the lived experience is strongly influenced by feeling:

They are the sentiments that often occur in our soul, what is happening to us in every sense. They happen to us in the sense that they plague us, they sometimes pierce us, pass and go on. They possess a fleeting, mobile, fluid character. And all that is fluid is expansive and intrusive, it tends to occupy space... Feelings are like this; they extend for the whole time of consciousness and touch everything that happens in it; nothing escapes feelings, whole groups of thoughts, series of perceptions, even the memory remains touched.⁵

Feelings are therefore not transient and superficial phenomena, but are co-essential to cognitive life: they are not a fleeting phenomenon that accompanies our thoughts and will, nor a mere stimulus that causes them, nor a sole state of fact, to which, in one way or another, we resign ourselves;⁶ they accompany cognitive phenomena like hail in the storm.⁷ Feeling is what makes you feel life, where it is and where it is

³ E. STEIN, *Finite and eternal being. An attempt at an ascent to the meaning of being*, Washington 2002, 437.

⁴ E. STEIN, *In der Kraft des Kreuzes*, Freiburg im Breisgau 1980.

⁵ M. ZAMBRANO, *Per l'amore e per la libertà*, Genova/Milano 2008, 74. Translated by the author.

⁶ M. HEIDEGGER, *What is metaphysics?*, New York 1993, 89-110.

⁷ M. HEIDEGGER, *Being and time: A translation of Sein und Zeit*, New York 2010.

not, or where it is not yet.⁸ Therefore it performs an ontological function of revelation.

According to the Heideggerian thesis of emotional situation or emotional tone, it is a fundamental existential phenomenon, because the human as an existing being is always in an emotional state, which goes from the pole of depression to that of euphoria, passing through anxiety and inertia, the sense of security and insecurity, of anxiety and of serenity. With phenomenological analysis, the emotional dimension is in fact constitutive of *Dasein*, in the sense that existing is always emotionally toned, to the point where it could be said that emotional tonality assails us. Feelings are such essential parts of living that they permeate the entire flow of the mind and colour everything they touch, every act of thought with their quality: perceiving as reflecting, conjecturing as remembering. Nothing escapes feelings because the emotional situation is that to which *Dasein* is delivered.

This vision of the quality of inner experience as being always emotionally connoted is contrary to the perception of common sense, which tends to consider only those states of being that become evident to consciousness as emotional phenomena because they constitute a significant change of the ordinary state, such as cheerfulness or sadness, elation or anguish, joy or depressive melancholy. In the ways of ordinary experience, the experiences that do not cause perceptible changes in bodily state are seized in a totally vague manner.⁹ The quality of feelings is that of being fluid and hard to grasp, invisible to consciousness, even if touched by them in the deepest tissues. As a result it is difficult to notice that the soul is always imbued with feeling, especially when it comes to almost imperceptible emotions, such as a certain indifferent inertia in daily life or the subtle melancholy that accompanies certain actions.

Feelings are fluid, have a light consistency and thus permeate, even if not felt, the flesh of the soul. But theirs is always a heavy lightness, which is seriously felt in the interior experience. In fact these emotional tonalities, which the subject struggles to grasp because it lives

⁸ M. ZAMBRANO, *Notas de un método*, Madrid 1989.

⁹ M. SCHELER, *Ordo Amoris*, in *Selected Philosophical Essays*, transl. by D. Lachterman, Evanston 1973.

immersed in them, although not easily perceptible, have an ontogenetic consistency because they qualify our way of being; that is, they make us decide how to relate with the world. Moods are a feeling a person lives in, what he expresses his ontological peculiarity in;¹⁰ these not only announce «the actual vital state of the person»,¹¹ constituting themselves as indicators of vital energy, but have the power to influence existential choices because they orient us in a particular direction.

In some cases the effect that emotions have on being is that of causing a slight change of direction, a displacement of existential orientation which does not, however, significantly change the person's being and thus can be re-encompassed and modified because it remains at a fairly superficial level of being. On the other hand, there are cases in which despite their inherent fluidity, certain feelings come to be entrenched on the walls of the soul, with the effect of heavily conditioning the way of being, which is thus marked by the quality of those feelings, and thus de facto always unbalanced on a precise tonality of feeling.

Therefore, the performative potential of emotional life constitutes a substantial issue to think about; precisely because of the importance that it has for being itself, a proper understanding of emotional phenomena is made necessary.

1.1) The culture of feeling

Since ancient times it has been known how essential feeling is for the life of the mind.

In biblical anthropology, the heart is the seat of intelligence, to the extent that it has *Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes)* say that by seeking all that happens under heaven with wisdom, he has consecrated his heart, because the heart is the seat of thought. In fact, he repeats several times: «I thought in my heart».

The importance of feeling, and precisely the idea of the heart as the generator of a feeling that thinks, is widely present in the culture of the Gospels. Matthew states that the essential teachings are things that are

¹⁰ E. STEIN, *Einführung in die Philosophie*, in *Edith Steins Werke*, vol. XIII, Freiburg 1991.

¹¹ R. DE MONTICELLI, *L'allegria della mente*, Milano 2004, 63. Translated by the author.

sown in the heart¹² and therefore, a serious problem occurs when the heart “has hardened” because «they would not understand with their heart».¹³ Great actions are always preceded by decisions in which sentiment plays a decisive role; in fact, when Jesus decides to perform the miracle of the multiplication of the fish, he does so because he feels compassion [*esplanchnizomai*]¹⁴ for the crowd. And again it is compassion that pushes the Samaritan to take care of the other. When we listen to the word, the one that pronounces essential things, it is held guarded in the heart. This is what Mary does: after listening to the shepherds, she «kept all these things and pondered them in her heart».¹⁵ Essential thought is thus what happens in the heart and vice versa, it is the heart that helps in the art of living what it thinks.

It should not be forgotten that to begin his journey, Dante required the presence of Lucia to stir his heart, setting him off on his path. It is impossible to take the path of searching for the meaning of life without the heart’s participation. Dante assigns feeling a primary function at the ontological level because, when he writes «the love that moves the sun and other stars»,¹⁶ he identifies in the sentiment of love that which moves the world, that which gives life.

Even earlier we find Plotinus conceptualising an «intelligence that loves» [*nous eron*], which would be explained in a «receptive intuition» of the essence of the object.¹⁷ It is an obscure but interesting observation that this intelligence always possesses thinking but also not thinking [*to me noein*];¹⁸ that is, thought that does not follow the rules of ordinary intelligence. Beyond the fact that because the way in which Plotinus describes this intelligence seems very close to the thought of the mystics, because it hypothesises the possibility of a contemplative fusion with the object, what interests us in this conceptualisation is foreseeing a dif-

¹² Matthew, 13, 19.

¹³ Matthew, 13, 15.

¹⁴ Matthew, 13, 32

¹⁵ Luke, 2, 18.

¹⁶ D. ALIGHIERI, *Divina Commedia*, Paradiso, Canto XXXIII, v. 145. Translated by the author.

¹⁷ PLOTINUS, *Ennead* VI, 6,7,24.

¹⁸ PLOTINUS, *Ennead* VI, 6,7,30.

ferent thinking, which suggests the idea of poetic reason, about which however it is very difficult, almost impossible, to talk.¹⁹

If feeling is that in which all things find connection, the glue that holds together different moments and levels of experience, then for developing that heuristic capacity that knows how to be with the complexity of reality, intelligence cannot fail to take advantage of the view of feeling.

With time, however, our culture has proceeded to affirm a negative conception of affections, considered as an encumbrance, the presence of which had to be anaesthetised as much as possible for ensuring an effective and efficient existential posture. For this reason, attention has long been directed almost exclusively to the phenomena of knowing and willing.²⁰

Only in recent decades has the cultural attitude towards the sphere of emotions changed, because we tend to no longer regard them as irrational components, but as intelligent aspects of life. This new interpretive paradigm can be said to have penetrated every sphere of investigation and reflection taking place in various professional fields, even those that have always been most hostile to emotional life.²¹

In place of a neutral, emotionally aseptic cognition, today we tend to conceive of live thinking as emotionally dense thinking because if emotions are in need of thought to illuminate experience, thought without emotions would be unable to penetrate reality. For Heidegger, pure intuition – assuming it is a truly viable cognitive act – would fail to penetrate the most intimate structures of lived experience as, on the other hand, it would be possible with thinking that activates the dimension

¹⁹ M. ZAMBRANO, *Note di un metodo*, Napoli, 2003, 130.

²⁰ M. HEIDEGGER, *History of the concept of time: Prolegomena*, Bloomington 1992.

²¹ A substantial part of the psychoanalytic community currently considers feeling as a precious element, a resource to be valued and used wisely. Even epistemology, which has long theorised a neutral mode of heuristic acts because it was considered a condition for acquiring objective knowledge, now acknowledges the legitimacy of what is defined as passionate knowing; however, this does not result in authorising the spread of the emotions in the interaction with the other and generally in the action of seeking, because affectivity becomes an effective instrument that reinforces the knowledge of things if it is accompanied by the reflection that examines what happens in the mind and in the relationship with the world.

of feeling. A «purely rational knowledge» with no «inner feeling»²² remains nailed to the surface of things, incapable of a profound understanding of human events.

As to the positive revaluation of feeling, Heidegger recognises the merit of phenomenology (Max Scheler and Edith Stein proved to be careful analysts of feeling), but notes that Aristotle must be credited with the first systematic hermeneutics of the world of affections.

It was Martha Nussbaum who developed the Aristotelian position in an original and analytically detailed way, highlighting the contribution of Aristotle starting from a contrastive relationship with the position taken by Plato. For Plato, the possibility of reaching epistemically rigorous practical wisdom required elimination, or at least reduction, of the force exerted by affections, because they are considered the source of uncontrollable dangers. On the other hand, Aristotle not only opposes this negative evaluation of emotions, but considers sensitivity to the real that emotions are capable of an important and necessary element for good practical deliberation.²³ The cognitive act of choice is described as an act which is intellectual and emotional at the same time. Emotional sensitivity is considered as providing an essential contribution to the deliberative act, because it enables highlighting ethically relevant characteristics of the phenomenon in question.²⁴ Depriving the practical intellect of the contribution of affection means losing many elements that are useful for properly orienting practice.

However, because of the contribution they can make to the understanding of experience, in reassessing emotions we must be careful not to fall into that position, opposite to a devaluating one, which would lead to placing unconditional trust in feeling. Every view of things is always partial because it moves from a balustrade of presuppositions. For this reason, however, in adopting the Aristotelian position it is necessary to bear in mind that certain emotions can be an obstacle to acting properly. A vivid example of the erroneous power of certain passions can be found in *The Trojan Women* by Euripides, where it says that to

²² E. STEIN, *Finite and eternal being...*, 550.

²³ M. C. NUSSBAUM, *The fragility of goodness: Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy*, Cambridge 2001.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

have pushed the Achaeans to an unacceptable cruelty is being unthinkingly entrusted to an unfounded fear that has clouded reason, and, says Hecuba, «the fear of those who fear without just cause is not commendable».²⁵ There are negative feelings that weigh heavily on the ways of acting. Negative feelings are those that interrupt good relationality with others, with the world; negative feelings are those that cause suffering in relationships, those that trigger actions which threaten, up to the point of destroying, the good quality of living. We live based on relationships, and marking relations with negativity means compromising the quality of life.

Emotions are useful for thinking, becoming instruments of intelligence of the real when they are the subject of a reflective analysis which includes the essential quality of them. Simply being in an emotional state does not permit clarification of the situation. According to Zambrano, conduct, contrary to a widespread error, is not supported from the exterior but rather from the interior of the person, and, in the case of feelings, from the most intimate part of this interior.²⁶ The greatest threat to a person's being is in those pressures on living which emanate from inside without becoming manifest, without showing their face. Certain feelings are like stones of slavery that we carry around without being aware of the power they have over us: they consume energy, press upon the soul, and decide the direction of that journey which is life. Engaging in the discipline of self-inquiry means choosing an attentive living, that which does not permit moving by what is not known and has not been freely chosen. For the sake of one's own freedom of a life lived consciously, education for the self-understanding of emotional life is decisive.

1.2) Reflecting on feeling

Affections are considered a resource, but to be so it is necessary to know them. Listening to one's affections helps to build a deeper sense of reality, develop a more sophisticated understanding of our own experience.

If only we stop to think about our existential situation, we cannot

²⁵ EURIPIDES, *Troades* 1165-1166.

²⁶ Cf. ZAMBRANO, *Filosofía y Educación. Manuscritos*, Málaga 2007.

fail to find ourselves emotionally placed, that is, surrendered to the sentiment of our situation; for this reason, we can speak of evidence of the emotional situation. But feeling oneself in an emotional situation should not be confused with reflective understanding.

A weariness can be present (perhaps betray itself to others through my exterior), without my knowing anything about it myself. In a state of excitement or during intense activity I am completely given over, consciousness of how I am doing might not even occur to me.²⁷

Feeling oneself is being immersed, being thoughtless, like fish swimming in water. Compared with this state of immediate “situational self-sentiment”, we can decide on the practice of self-clarification consisting in reflective awareness: that awareness that makes the person the first and last guardian of his/her conduct. To gain awareness with respect to one’s way of *Dasein* requires the subject to stop and think about his/her emotional situation in order to understand it.

The search for reflective knowledge of our inner being transforms us from simply living beings, that is, unthinkingly plunged into the flow of life, into existing subjects who answer the call to understand how and when one lives. Engaging in a phenomenology of affective life means understanding how one shows the fatigue of living or the joy of being, the sense of pleasure for experiences lived or the inner inertia that freezes the soul, which gives rise to a certain feeling, and what effects it has on my way of relating to myself, to others and to the world. When passions are not accompanied by reflection one becomes a slave to them, while exercise of reflective discipline has a purification effect with respect to the tendency to let oneself be dominated, and makes it possible to gain an adequate capacity of temperance.²⁸ It is perhaps no accident that in *Phaedo*, to indicate reflective thinking, Plato uses the term “*phronesis*” which simultaneously indicates thought and wisdom; therefore, there is thinking that is not reasoning, but thoughtful reflecting which, by taking care (because *phrontizein* indicates both thinking and reflecting as well as taking care and worrying) of the object, can

²⁷ E. STEIN, *Beiträge zur philosophischen Begründung der Psychologie und der Geisteswissenschaften*, Tübingen 1970, 18. Translated by the author.

²⁸ PLATO, *Phaedo*, 69b-c.

generate wisdom.

Living the affective dimension consciously helps to be in reality in a more vivid and penetrating way, can positively resolve those energies that would be used to ward off affections, and reduce the risk of impulsive forms of behaviour, because impulsive reactions are also the result of poor education in self-reflection.

But in order to postulate a process of understanding of affective life, a fundamental presupposition is the assessment of whether this has the traits necessary for being subjected to a process of analysis or whether it is a matter that is so unstable and elusive that it cannot be grasped rationally in its essential quality. According to Hannah Arendt, work regarding reflection on emotional experiences would be impractical; she argues that feelings and passions cannot become part of the world of appearances as they do with thought, which becomes visible in language. That part of emotional experiences which is made manifest in the world would be only what is processed by the operations of thought; in other words, the emotions that I feel cannot show themselves in their own essence, but are altered by the reflective process that works to make them thinkable.²⁹

Arendt's thesis about the impossibility of access to the essential quality of affective life rests on an extra-cognitive view of emotional experiences. If affective life is conceived as a flow of experiences that have nothing in common with cognitive life, it is difficult to imagine a process of understanding, because cognition would struggle to grasp the quid of something absolutely foreign to it. On the other hand, if we refer, as suggested by Nussbaum, to the neo-Stoic theory of emotions, the possibility opens up of understanding emotional experiences because these are assigned a core of cognitive substance.³⁰

Neo-Stoic theory recovers a fundamental thesis of Hellenistic philosophies, according to which emotional experiences are not irrational impulses which drag the being of a person regardless of his/her beliefs, but have a cognitive dimension by being closely linked to the beliefs that are fundamental for the person, that is, the ethical convictions that

²⁹ H. ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, New York 1978, 32.

³⁰ Cf. M.C. NUSSBAUM, *The fragility of goodness...*

define what has importance and what does not.³¹ For example, evaluating the qualities of a person as excellent reawakens in the evaluated subject admiration for him/her; faced with a situation that the mind evaluates as threatening triggers fear; evaluating a lived experience we have devoted much of our energy to as a failure generates a sense of discouragement which can result in an impairment of one's capacity, which translates easily into a decrease in self-esteem.

According to Epictetus, there is a judgment behind every action, whether it be inner or social;³² if certain things do not result a certain way as a consequence of our elaborated evaluations of the events' meanings, we will not undertake certain actions.³³ «When one irritates you, know that it is your opinion that has irritated you. In the first place, do not allow yourself to be carried away by your impressions».³⁴ Emotions, feelings, emotional tonalities and passions can be irrational when the convictions they are based on are false or unjustified, they are not irrational in the sense that they lack cognitive components.

Exponents of the phenomenological school who have addressed the issue of emotional life in general share the thesis of the cognitive substance of emotional life; specifically, Dietrich von Hildebrand argues that every attitude, and generally every cognitive act of some importance for a person, depends on the attribution of values given to the object in reference, or by their position on the value scale. If one accepts this concept, then that on which thought should first be concentrated are the scales of value that constitute our reference in order to carefully examine their adequacy, but also the cognitive acts through which these scales change over time.

Developing the interest that phenomenology has shown for emotional life, Edith Stein also gives voice to this cognitive view of emotions, arguing that sentiment is a state of "I" that moves its vital flow and takes the strength to move a person from always being connected to a value: to each value corresponds an act of sentiment in which the

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² EPICETUS, *Discourses*, I, 11, 30-33. Translated by the author.

³³ *Ibid.*, I, 11, 37. Translated by the author.

³⁴ EPICETUS, *Manual*, 20. Translated by the author.

latter comes to adequate givenness.³⁵ The essence of feelings – meaning essentially the qualities that apply necessarily to one thing, and without which they could not be – would therefore be founded on values and as such «play the role of forces that flow in the activity of reason».³⁶ From this theory, it can be assumed that the intensity with which a sentiment is lived, and therefore the influence it exerts on a person's being, is directly proportional to the place that that value, of which sentiment is an expression, occupies in the axiological hierarchy of the person. In other words, the more a value is important for a person, the greater the force exerted by the sentiment connected to it, because «the depth of sentiment felt depends on the height of the value felt, as its strength and its specific colouring depend on the particular nature of that value».³⁷

A feeling's driving force depends on the type of value it is connected to,³⁸ that is, that push to action that feelings are capable of triggering, awakening an act of will in the subject. If I rate an experience as positive for my being, I can feel a sense of joy which, depending on the type of value the evaluation is connected to, has a force capable of enabling the intention to nurture other kinds of operational experiences. It is in this precise sense – that is, the dependence on an evaluation – that one can say that the feeling is not irrational. In other words, precisely because the feeling incorporates ideas of value, emotional life cannot

³⁵ Cf. E. STEIN, *Einführung in die Philosophie...*

³⁶ E. STEIN, *Beiträge zur philosophischen...*, 106. Translated by the author.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 68. Translated by the author. I can recognise the value of a work of art, but without this arousing enthusiasm and aesthetic pleasure in me: this is a sign that the aesthetic value has no sufficient vital importance for me to change the quality of my emotional lived experiences. I can recognise an act of injustice and identify its effects of suffering on certain people without, however, being able to be sufficiently indignant to decide to act: this is a sign that justice does not occupy a prominent place in my scale of values. If the person is a slave to a deceptive view of his/her scale of values, it is precisely his/her own analysis of lived experiences that helps to clarify the actual axiological importance of certain beliefs. Because moral sentiments depend on their axiological coordinates, in the sense that the vital force of a sentiment depends on the vital force of the axiological content to which this sentiment is connected, and because the vital force of a value depends on the position it occupies on our axiological scale, then the self-training action on moral sentiments requires careful reflection on its axiological architecture.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

be considered the seat of confused states, of obscure and indeterminate fermentations on which reason cannot intervene, but since the feeling is the expression of the options of value on it, the thought can act by working on the axiological coordinates.³⁹

To say that the feeling is rational, in that it incorporates a cognitive nucleus, does not authorise it to always and in any case be attributed a positive value as, however, the concept of “intelligence of emotions” in fashion today seems to imply, because the positive or negative value of the way of being depends on how the mind has come to consent to a value or a certain scale of values. In fact, there are values that we absorb from the environment without adequate considered reflection, or certain values which, even if they receive consent following a critical analysis, over time become cognitive crystallised elements that we apply almost automatically without dedicating ourselves to an adequately rigorous verification of their validity; when the feeling depends on this type of value, which see a person as passively subject to them, one cannot talk about intelligence of feeling, which is instead a quality that is appropriate for a sentiment when it arises from an evaluative act dependent on reference of the mind to profoundly meditated values.

Against this background, it can be asserted that working to identify the hierarchy of one’s values and identify the quality of the feelings related to them is to profoundly understand the dynamics of one’s emotional life. If one agrees to think that the individual identity of a person, what shapes one’s essential depth, is given by one’s value preferences, then focusing the attention of the process of self-inquiry on what one really cares about means finding a way to access the depths of one’s being. Outlining the profile of one’s “*ordo amoris*”, that is, those rules of preferring and postponing certain values that go to configure the view of the world, and with it to determine the manner of one’s being,⁴⁰ thus become the heart of the self-care process.⁴¹

³⁹ On this respect, cf. M. SCHELER, *Ordo Amoris*...

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ For those who embrace a realistic perspective, *ordo amoris* is that nucleus of order that the mind can grasp because it would be imprinted in things; Scheler speaks of «values that are valid independently of the particular form of these goods» (*ibid.*, 123) and «the dignity of existing love» (*ibid.*, 119) accessible to a mind that knows how to order acts of knowledge in a fair manner, because the order of things would be «hid-

If we conceive the order of values as something without which life would be impoverished, then attention to one's axiological horizon constitutes an existential primacy. In a culture like ours, where economic and commercial logic has the power to disqualify values exactly like the natural mechanical view disqualifies intuitive sensible qualities,⁴² the path of self-education suggested here of working above all to shape one's own order of values may seem vain, but the *paideia* has always been an outdated discourse, forced – as Socrates has shown us – to structure itself as a radically critical orientation with respect to prevailing idols. Faced with what in some cases is emerging as excessive activeness towards doing things to gain power, the self-training process can help find meaning and direction in one's own becoming to orient oneself to deal in a thoughtful way with that order of values which determine the quality of one's being, so as to avoid as far as possible that disorder in the things of sentiment that is at the root of the disorder of existence.⁴³

In line with the neo-Stoic and phenomenological views of emotional life, we find that psychological perspective which is qualified as the “cognitive theory of emotions”, according to which emotions have a cognitive substance, which would consist of the evaluations that the subject provides of the events and phenomena of lived experiences.⁴⁴

den at first, but subject to discovery» (M. SCHELER, *Ordo Amoris* . . . , 118). On the other hand, for a constructivist, like every cognitive act, even that which presides over the formation of its axiological order is a constructive act, and thus always limited by the barrier of ideas with which the subject thinks and knows. If the limit of constructivism is to imply the risk of a radical relativism if it is not adequately meditated, the limit of realism is to imply that an isomorphic view of that axiological structure which «is the core of the world-order» is accessible to the human mind (*ibid.*, 110). If not critically meditated, at the individual level the realist thesis produces the presumption of knowing with certainty the order of value of things, and at the collective level, certain fundamentalisms that prevent the creation of constructive relations between different perspectives. When the mind believes that it has achieved the view of an objective order of values, there is a stagnation of spiritual becoming, which can degenerate into madness, enveloping and inhibiting thinking in an unfounded presumption of knowledge. Good self-care cannot therefore disregard an epistemological reflection, which is implemented as radical thinking of the real possibilities of human reason.

⁴² Cf. M. SCHELER, *The Idols of Self-Knowledge*...

⁴³ Cf. M. SCHELER, *Ordo Amoris*...

⁴⁴ K. OATLEY, *Best Laid Schemes. The Psychology of Emotions*, Cambridge 1992, 64.

According to this cognitive perspective, fear, for example, would arise as a result of the evaluation of a situation as threatening; joy would be possible when the subject evaluates an event as a generator of well-being; indignation, which can be considered a moral sentiment, is the consequence of evaluating an event as unfair and intolerable. The so-called moral feelings are those in which the essence of cognitive emotional life is captured most lucidly, but on careful phenomenological analysis of emotional experiences, the feelings that are less elaborated on a rational level, that is, those emotions that seem to be a mere response to external events, also reveal a cognitive content.

According to Oatley, «an underlying mental state is the core of an emotion. In common with most mental states, only limited aspects of it are conscious».⁴⁵ While Frijda considers emotion a complex consisting of coding the event, evaluating its relevance, evaluating its meaning, preparing for action and action,⁴⁶ Oatley suggests considering emotion as a mental state of preparation for action based on an evaluation which, for being understood in its essential quality, in addition to identification of the underlying evaluation may involve, a phenomenological analysis of how it manifests itself, but must be separated from the consideration of other aspects: conditions of activation, accompanying elements and sequences of action.⁴⁷

Given that the evaluative act which accompanies the onset of an emotion foreshadows the possibility of actions that unfold in the subject's conscience, it is essential to learn to understand the quality of the acts of evaluation, going back as far as possible to the setting of often implicit criteria which act as a tacit backdrop to decisions. It is this pro-

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 20. In fact, for phenomenological analysis, emotional lived experiences are very complex: they often involve a physical modification that involves the autonomous nervous system and other physiological processes; they become visible through corporeal changes (facial modifications, tones of voice, physical postures); they can result in a focusing of attention on the lived experience which almost completely absorbs the attention; etc. (*ibid.*). The attention given here to the cognitive side of emotional life rests on the assumption that, in order to verify a process of self-understanding, the subject must focus their attention on the evaluative core, because not only the quality of emotion, but also the decision of the action that it entails depend on the evaluation of the lived event.

⁴⁶ N.H. FRIJDA, *The emotions*, Cambridge 1986.

⁴⁷ Cf. K. OATLEY, *Best Laid Schemes...*

cess of understanding cognitive processes that accompany emotional experiences which can enable acquisition of self-knowledge, understood as awareness of one's existential ways.

Discursive psychology, which deals with emotions as «entities psychologically equivalent to statements», also strengthens the argument according to which the understanding of emotions involves understanding the underlying cognitive core.⁴⁸ That is, emotions are conceived as overt expressions of judgments and, in many cases, though not all, are also ways to create certain social acts.⁴⁹ If the emotional phenomenon implies a cognitive phenomenon, that is, if the quality of feeling that we experience is always connected to a specific cognitive content, which generally presents itself in terms of an assessment of the event that the subject is experiencing, then we can assume that it is also possible to intervene in transformative terms on the emotional dimension, because working on changing cognition would result in a modification of the emotional lived experience.

Precisely by studying the theme of emotions from a neo-Stoic and cognitive perspective and situating this analysis within a reflection on self-care that has ancient philosophies as a matrix, the decisive importance of evaluations of emotional life's dynamics is highlighted. The way in which we are depends on the evaluations that we formulate with respect to both external and internal events. Keeping the evaluative acts that we elaborate under the watchful view of thought and trying to figure out which theories they are based on, and thus what implications they have on our quality of life, constitute an essential, if not primary, cognitive commitment. A commitment that has positive effects on being if continued over time, if one is persevering, honest in analysing and radical in pursuing a true knowledge of the quality of the experiential phenomenality examined.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ R. HARRÉ, G. GILLET, *The Discursive Mind*, New York 1994, 146.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ The thesis according to which working reflectively on the cognitive core of emotions can cause changes in the way of feeling can be accused of rationalism. The risk of an overestimation of the possibilities of reason is certainly possible, given that rationalism is something that we have in the blood in a much deeper way than we believe (Cf. M. SCHELER, *Ordo Amoris...*); however, one cannot fail to appeal to cognitive resources because this would mean treating the emotional side of the experience

2) *Affective self-understanding*

2.1) *The subject of affective self-understanding*

Focusing on the essence of the process of self-understanding emotional life means specifying: *what* to consider and *how* to develop analysis.

One could avoid considering the first question if they were to assume that a good practice of self-inquiry should consider an entire emotional life as the subject. Total self-clarification would certainly fully achieve the objectives of the process of self-understanding, but this would be an immeasurable objective for human reason and fixing oneself immeasurable objectives means risking not attaining any glimmer of understanding and remaining unaware of oneself. It makes more sense to identify the issues that seem most significant to focus attention on in the entire geography of emotional life.

However, before addressing this question, it is necessary to specify that when we enter the field of affective life, we come up against the difficulty of finding different uses of terms that refer to different conceptualisations. Finding a common categorisation of the various affective phenomena is therefore impossible; of course it is not always easy to establish a clear boundary between the various affective experiences because «the distinctions are slippery, and some cases may be genuinely indetermined».⁵¹ Emotions, feelings, moods or affective tonalities and passions are words which identify phenomena that are not always clearly distinct from one another; further, in some texts the word “emotion” is used to indicate what in other texts is indicated by the word “feelings”, and in other cases “feelings” are made to match “moods”.

Despite the limits of any possible attempt to make a perspicuous distinction functional, some reflection that facilitates a phenomenological analysis of emotional experience is useful.⁵²

as something absolutely ungovernable. Therefore, without falling into false rationalistic illusions, and knowing that we are allowed only a few crumbs of sovereignty over *Dasein*, and on the condition of the compelling task of thinking, it is a question of cultivating the transformative potential that thinking can have on being.

⁵¹ M.C. NUSSBAUM, *Upheavals of Thought*, Cambridge 2001, 9, footnote 7.

⁵² Although it is impossible to make clear distinctions among emotional experiences, it may be useful to attempt a categorisation, to be assumed as always provisional, because this helps to bring order to the discussion. The categorisation proposed here uses

Depending on the implications that the emotional experiences can have on the quality of *Dasein*, it is possible to distinguish between a *positive feeling* and a *negative feeling* (this is a distinction found in

the following criteria to discriminate the quality of the different types of affective lived experiences: the presence of a well-identifiable event that causes the lived experience; the fact that the emotional lived experience has a subject to refer to; the possible presence of a direction of being that feeling tends towards.

It can be assumed that the expression *emotional tonality* indicates a feeling which connotes, like a climate, the soul, without an identifiable object and definite direction with which this feeling directs the soul. Tonalities are moods devoid of purpose (*ibid.*). Those which Scheler calls “spiritual feelings”, that is, for example, melancholy and bliss (Cf. M. SCHELER, *Ordo Amoris...*, 77), can be considered emotional tonalities.

The term *emotion* may indicate a feeling that is unexpected and of variable duration, which is manifested as a result of a well-identifiable event. Emotions always involve a deliberate thought, a thought that is directed to an object, for which a form of evaluation is performed (Cf. M.C. NUSSBAUM, *Upheavals of Thought ...*). An object emotion refers to is thus identifiable, but not a precise directionality; it can be said, in Heideggerian terms, that emotion has a very specific “whence”, but not a “where” the subject intentionally heads towards.

Sentiment is a feeling based on a precise evaluation with respect to something and with its significant duration; it may be *intentional* when a precise object it refers to is identifiable: you have admiration for a person, or are thankful for something; it may be *tensional* when it holds the mind directed towards the open: tensional hope is not oriented towards something specific (hoping for), but is a sentiment that keeps the being open to the possibility of becoming in full (hoping in).

Assuming the Platonic point of view, *passion* may be defined as an excessive and disturbing sentiment which, by triggering negative behaviour – such as wars and struggles with others (*Phaedo*, 66c) – breaks the state of well-being and causes suffering. Precisely because passions are feelings that trouble the soul, one of the virtues to be cultivated to give shape to a good life is temperance, which consists in being able to suppress the source of passions and moderate them (*Phaedo*, 68c). Passions originate from disorganised desires or extreme fears that lead to excesses and condition the soul, making the subject that lives them passive; they unbalance the soul because they are an excess, an exaggeration, which occurs when the feeling becomes detached from reflective thinking that contains, gives measure; in this sense, passions can be defined as sentiments that have been subtracted from the regulatory and containing function of reflective reason. De Monticelli defines as «habitual folds of the will» (R. DE MONTICELLI (ed.), *La persona: apparenza e realtà*, Milano 2000, XLIX) those which have a disturbing effect because not always in harmony with the value preferences in which we recognise ourselves or wish to recognise ourselves. This definition does not exclude a positive use of the term “passion”, which occurs when such a word is indicated with a vital tension, a more dynamic energy capable of moving the subject’s being towards something that is evaluated as particularly valuable: for this reason, we can talk about passion for thinking, passion for politics, passion for art, etc.

many authors: e.g. Heidegger and Zambrano): positive feelings are those that are good for the soul by allowing one to pleasantly be in relationships: negative feelings are those that hinder the possibility of a good relationship with oneself and others. Then there are those that Simone Weil defines as low sentiments such as envy, resentment and bitterness, which are nothing but degraded energy which, while drying up the life of the mind, pollutes one's relational space generating unnecessary suffering.⁵³

As for the function that they perform with respect to being, we can say that positive feelings and moods certainly feed the full flowering of the human, while negative feelings disturb the state of well-being and yet can constitute positive experiences for one's existential implementation if they become the subject of a conscious and critical reworking from which to gain attitudes that are constructively oriented toward existence; low feelings, on the other hand, always perform a negative function because they unnecessarily consume inner energy with the frequent result of degrading interpersonal relationships.

If we follow the thoughts of Heidegger and Stein, we cannot fail to examine moods among emotional phenomena, because they are considered capable of indicating the colouring of a person's emotional life; feelings and passions are no less important because they have the strength to direct the way of Dasein in precise directions. If an analysis of emotional tonality tells me how I am, that of feelings tells me something about my fundamental orientation, my tensions and my relational consistency, while analysis of passions gives me an idea of what keeps me in tension or unbalances me, or makes me suffer because it puts me in excess.

Stein also suggests distinguishing emotional experiences depending on the degree of depth in which they are found in our being, because this would be deployed in the most intimate and deep parts and the most external and superficial parts. Stein identifies the soul at a person's centre and states that the feelings that arise in the soul are deep feelings that invade the whole being, while the feelings that do not stem from these depths would be peripheral and as such would not qualify the person.⁵⁴

⁵³ S. WEIL, *Cahiers, II*, Paris 1972.

⁵⁴ Cf. E. STEIN, *Einführung in die Philosophie...*

The moods and feelings that develop in the depth of the soul, where the thoughts that qualify the intimate essence of spiritual life are harboured, are defined as fundamental because the individual peculiarities of a person are expressed in them.⁵⁵ Von Hildebrand defines as “deep” all that which not only develops in a person’s depth but which has a greater weight than the rest.⁵⁶ Nussbaum develops a similar distinction when she establishes a difference between: *background emotions* and *situational emotions*.⁵⁷

The same emotion can be background or situational. We can live a restless sweetness of short duration because it is linked to a well-defined event, such as the slow flocking of snow which muffles the noise of the world or the dispersing of cherry tree petals in an aqueous wind, or we may feel the same quality of unease permeating the soul in depth and accompanying our every thought. We can live a superficial cheerfulness that does not leave footprints on being, or feel ourselves permeated by spiritual cheerfulness that comes from the heart of the mind. We can feel bitter about something that has struck us without this experience lasting, to the extent that other emotional tonalities immediately gain the upper hand in the mind, or can happen to make the whole soul feel bitter and from this bitterness trace the generative matrix in a suffered evaluation of our living that has come to take root in the tissues of the mind. There are times when the background lived experiences are so intense that they flood the entire interior space up to colouring every other peripheral lived experience.

Background emotions are those attached to the flesh of the soul and characterise us as such, that is, they express our essential emotional quality; situational emotions are those related to particular, more or less improvised experiences, and do not go to touch the core of our most vital beliefs. If we accept this distinction then an essential part of the process of self-understanding should be aimed at identifying those ways of feeling that identify us, and among them identify those which are fun-

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ D. VON HILDEBRAND, *Sittlichkeit und ethische Werterkenntnis. Eine Untersuchung über ethische Strukturprobleme*, «Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung», V (1922), 462-486.

⁵⁷ Cf. M. C. NUSSBAUM. *Upheavals of Thought...*

damental or underlying that we find ourselves living with most intensity and continuity. Identifying fundamental feelings is to grasp one's affective colouring, because essential experiences bear the imprint of the individual characteristic.⁵⁸ Grasping essential states and distinguishing them from situational states is not easy, but being able to understand what they are and the quality of background feelings means going back to one's essential individual qualities.

It can be assumed that there exists in each of us a *heart of the life of the mind*, whose substance is given by our core beliefs and the feeling that accompanies them. Trying to identify fundamental feelings then means trying to approximate ourselves to the innermost core of the heart of the mind, where convictions about what has value in life are gathered, and this work of gradual approximation to the living core of our inner life is the path to take to reach that self-understanding, which alone is capable of throwing some light on that tangled matter which is our being.

But questioning oneself about what to investigate opens up other issues; for example, one cannot avoid thinking about whether to distribute attention to every sentiment, or choose between the positive sentiments that do good or the negative ones that disturb the possibility of good essential implementation.⁵⁹ If one looks at the relationship that the mind establishes with positive feelings and emotional tonalities, they do not result in constituting a pressing investigative concern because, precisely to the extent that they are lived in a positive way, they do not interrogate the mind in a problematic way that makes it necessary to dedicate efforts for understanding them. If one performs a phenomenological analysis of the experiences of positive feeling, one realises that

⁵⁸ Cf. E. STEIN, *Einführung in die Philosophie...*

⁵⁹ Any distinction that can be made with respect to emotional life should nevertheless be taken with caution because it is impossible to distinguish a priori the ontological quality of an emotional lived experience, be it a tonality or a sentiment; the quality of a lived experience depends on the situation in which it occurs and the entire affective experience of a person. If placed within an experience of life in which interior security and trust are the dominant traits, a lived experience of suffering, however sharp and piercing it is, has less negative effects on the sense of self than a lived experience of not particularly acute suffering that is situated in an experiential history where positive feeling is rare and short-lived. Like every other aspect of life, the emotional aspect is also situated and as such should be investigated and understood.

the subject lives there without feeling the need to think of them, but in doing so lets cheerfulness, happiness, moments of luck and detection of beauty pass, without extracting the necessary experience from them, which would perhaps permit identification and the nurturing of those ways of being that constitute the generative matrix of this feeling, grabbing that grain of knowledge that would fertilise all life.⁶⁰ Investigating them would therefore be necessary for understanding where they originate from, which experiential directions they generate, and what ways of inner and relational acting create life contexts that facilitate such experiences.

However, the fact that positive emotional experiences are particularly difficult to investigate must be considered, as when we experience them we are immersed in them as much as possible, because it is as if we notice that activating an analytical view would have the effect of interrupting or reducing the intensity with which we feel them. Under the analytic action of reflection, the flow of inner experience is changed; when, for example, joy becomes the subject of reflection, the quality of this positive feeling is compromised, because lived experience evaporates under the eye of reflection.⁶¹ Precisely because it involves an interruption of the free flow of being, the reflective act interrupts letting oneself live in joy and this feeling, becoming the subject of a thoughtful view, suffers a decrease in intensity. Simone Weil writes that «there are joys – and they are the most valuable – which, imagined, are very pale, all their value is in their presence».⁶² It seems that positive feelings are almost damaged by reflection, because reflection interrupts lived experience and thus interrupts the pleasure of savouring situations that make one feel good. It is no coincidence that when asked to describe emotional life, everyone lingers on problematic lived experiences, not on the good ones, for which they seem to have no words to express them; in fact, when they happen to live them, they are immersed in them with an a-conscious pleasure.

On the other hand, conscience tends to flee from low feelings be-

⁶⁰ Cfr. M. ZAMBRANO, *Notas de un método...*

⁶¹ E. HUSSERL, *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology*, London/New York 2012.

⁶² S. WEIL, *Cahiers...*, 78. Translated by the author.

cause they disturb our identity; there is a tendency to avoid them, without realising that when we try to avoid or resist them, we end up increasingly sinking into them. The first condition for facing them is not to flee to the periphery of ourselves, but to accept the lived experience that grabs us, even if this causes suffering; we need to stay inside the situation, listening to what happens to us, and accompany our decision to stay anchored to ourselves with commitment to reflection. With respect to them, therefore, that critical attention necessary for identifying the generative dynamics and performative effects must be activated with an effort of will.

On the other hand, negative feelings impose themselves vividly on consciousness, making the need to understand what is happening felt. Precisely because negative feelings bring the inner sense of well-being into crisis, self-understanding with respect to them becomes essential. The need to understand is compelling in the face of suffering: from the most bearable inner restlessness to the most excruciating despair, from the discomfort caused by restlessness that does not leave the soul tranquil even for a moment, to the depression that makes life feel distant and alien while within us. One wishes to live joy as intensely as possible without anything affecting the pure lived experience, when on the other hand with the experience of pain, pain of the mind, the need for understanding inevitably engages thinking.

Pain in the body hurts, but pain of the mind also hurts. This heavy and silent pain stems from the labour in thought, that radical thought which wonders about the meaning of *Dasein*, the same thought from which we then ask for comfort. When thinking about the shape of our happening, we feel submerged in the time that passes without being able to grasp appropriate forms of lasting consistency; when we see our search efforts vanish without having the time to translate them into something with a certain stability, then the pain of living is rampant in the mind. It is a pain that can work so deeply in the soul as to anaesthetise the desire to exist. It is an intangible sentiment that is dry and silent but heavy in its performative force. It can creep slowly into the tissues of the mind, like the slow falling of a drop on another, but then when the soul notices its presence, it is as if a wave drowns it, leaving it breathless. When the full weight of *Dasein* is felt in pain, the suffering

is embodied in the tissues of the mind to such a point that one has the perception of being faced with an irreversible situation, from which it seems impossible to escape.

The force exerted by pain is such that it is like being gripped in a vice, and under its weight one notices what is happening deep within: the work of pain weakens the energies of the mind and in this weakness it has a tendency to loosen, if not stop altogether, relationships with things and with others. The world becomes distant: it seems impossible to be able to touch things, and other people become intangible, as if they belonged to another world; it is then that the experience of pain becomes one with that of feeling isolated. In some cases, isolation is deliberately sought because the lack of energy makes us desire a kind of stillness of the soul which would be impossible to live in relationships, insofar as they continuously fuel existence by calling on the subject to act, or at least react. The immobility which is reached in succumbing to pain is not, however, the relaxed tranquillity to which we aspire, but a shrivelling up of the soul into itself. In this sense, isolation only serves to exacerbate the weakness of the mind, which becomes increasingly helpless when faced with pain, in a spiral that is hard to stop.

Given its relational ontological substance, in order to face pain the human being firstly needs good relationships, those that help the mind find the energy to go back to breathing life. For this it is needed to belong to a community that is qualified as being able to take care, a community of relationships that remain as a network even for those seeking *isolation*. However, we do not always have a chance to anchor ourselves to a good relational soil, and even when this happens it is not sufficient to rely on others, we need to seek the strength to get back on track within ourselves. For this it is essential to focus attention on pain in order to understand what is happening. Exercising the discipline of reflection should keep the soul aroused enough to gain consciousness of the role that pain plays. Understanding what is happening certainly does not eliminate pain, but it can reduce its piercing power, because thought is action and as such has effects on the life of the mind. Observing what happens to us internally and becoming aware of the dynamics of inner life has transformative effects, because it puts us in a situation of self-presence and being present with oneself develops a force that

dampens the often devastating and annihilating power of the most painful feelings.

The entire sphere of feelings that colour experience would ask to be the subject of the self-inquiry process, but intense attention should be paid to those that Stein calls «life feelings»,⁶³ that is, those that qualify the way of feeling ourselves with respect to the world, such as fatigue and freshness. Much depends on these vital feelings, because when we feel tired, tired of living, then our Dasein tends to slouch lazily and has a tendency to fall back into itself almost without wanting to touch things, because every movement of living costs too much in terms of vital energy; on the other hand, when we feel freshness in the soul, force for Dasein comes to life and every lived experience assumes a colouration of pleasing vigour. While fatigue pushes the subject to withdrawal from the world, and even from him/herself if it were possible, freshness is a continuous source of vigour that a continuous force for the movement of existence flows from. In both these polarities of vital feeling the force is equally intense, with the difference that in the case of fatigue force is oriented defensively while in the case of freshness it follows an expansive line and is open towards the world.

Focusing attention on the life of the mind to grasp the fundamental emotional qualities, those which decide the tonalities of our being, allows us to go back to our essential core, to our inner essence. Devoting thinking to vital feelings is understanding what feeds them and what hinders them, and this kind of understanding is important because gaining some clarity on the connection existing between certain events and vital feeling can facilitate a more vigilant direction of oneself. In this sense, the effort to understand is a form of virtue, because it allows us to identify what to avoid and what to cultivate in the search for the soul's well-being.

2.2) *Method of the self-understanding process*

To enjoy access to the quality of the emotional phenomenon, phenomenology suggests the most appropriate method, which consists in observing and describing the phenomenon as it is manifested. The feeling appears, has its own way of manifesting itself to the conscience

⁶³ E. STEIN, *Philosophy of Psychology...*, 34.

and, like everything that appears, it also makes that givenness available to the thought, which is the essential material for understanding. Describing this phenomenality means saying *how* I perceive myself, while alive is an emotional state and therefore how I perceive myself physically but also in the soul.

The essence of feeling is never fully revealed, what remain hidden are «the whence and whither» of feeling,⁶⁴ that is where that precise emotional state originated and which way of being in the world it leads toward. In order to acquire adequate knowledge of these aspects of emotional phenomenality which tend to remain concealed, it is necessary to apply the phenomenological principle of transcendence, that principle which seeks to go beyond the evidence to facilitate insight on aspects that are not immediately manifest; in reality, nothing can ever be taken with one blow in its entirety because the appearance of the real always leaves something hidden. The principle of transcendence, read in the light of cognitive psychology and neo-Stoic theory of emotions, calls for seeking the cognitive content feeling is anchored to and understanding which way of being it tends to orient a person towards.

The description may be structured in four directions:⁶⁵ (a) decipher how the emotion is felt physically (e.g. the exaltation involves physical agitation); (b) describe the typical expression with which that emotion is manifested, is externally manifested, thus becoming a socially recognisable phenomenon (e.g. exaltation can be expressed by laughing or crying, hopping, clenching the fists); (c) identify the cognitive content, which is often a judgment or evaluation, that underlies the emotion (e.g. an emotion of elation implies the judgment that something particularly beautiful has happened for which the subject has some responsibility); (d) nominate the social act which the expression of emotion follows, that is, the illocutionary force of what is said or done (e.g. exaltation can express the social act of self-congratulation, of showing others the success obtained). To these directions of inquiry a fifth could be added which is particularly significant on the existential level; it calls for (e) identifying the possible performative power of emotion on its way of being, and then assessing whether and to what extent this emotional ex-

⁶⁴ M. HEIDEGGER, *Being and time...*, 131.

⁶⁵ R. HARRÉ, G. GILLET, *The Discursive Mind...*, 167-171.

perience with its cognitive correlate helps to give a good, positive feeling, or a negative, problematic orientation to the experience.

Placing attention on the corporeal dimension of feeling is important because emotional lived experiences have a somatic translation: when I grieve my heart aches, fear makes it tremble, it warms up with sympathy, it opens up when I experience joy and instead stiffens when I feel anger. However, although emotional experiences tend to overflow in the body, this does not always happen; for this reason, the first step of the analysis process should be taken as a possible but not necessarily constitutive indication; rather, it is necessary to ask oneself more generally, and thus in a less binding way, to describe how the feeling manifests itself without immediately focusing thought on the corporeal dimension. In fact, when a thought thinks it may be grasped in its corporeal dimension, but also as a cognitive phenomenon, whose way of revealing itself to reflective attention is such as to not make the corporeal dimension immediately significant, only becoming so later.

There is a restlessness of *Dasein* that is felt in the body, like agitation and muscle tension, like a trembling in the stomach that leads to shortness of breath; and there is a restlessness that is felt in the mind, when thoughts do not know how to stop and frantically pile up and curl up on each other, producing an internal disorder that may atrophise the breath of the mind. There is a sensible pleasure that is felt in the relaxation of the body and perception of relaxed and tension-free muscles. And there is a pleasure of *Dasein* which is experienced in the mind when you feel something significant coming from your thoughts that you find consistency in; it is that pleasure which makes your being open itself up to things.

Assuming an intellectual feeling does not mean presupposing that the corporeal dimension must be perceived as something other than cognitive, because mind and body always go together; however, the intensity with which one aspect or the other manifests itself can vary and in this way capture reflective attention differently. The experiencing of an intellectual feeling, of suffering or joy that seems to have no connection with the corporeal dimension, is not without evidence, and it is precisely this incorporeal feeling that makes us aware of the immaterial essence of a part of our being. However, it is Plato, who theo-

rised the fissure between body and soul to remind us not to venture onto the slippery terrain of dualist ontology. When, in fact, he describes the state of the soul when it is faced with something admirable because of its beauty, it is represented as something not at all immaterial, because it is a soul of flesh that is let go by a thrill and by a warmth that melts its most hardened parts.⁶⁶ The flesh of the soul, moistened and heated by the sight of beauty, «ceases to mourn and rejoices»,⁶⁷ and rejoicing causes the wings to germinate that will lift it high.

The human being breathes its essence in a spiritual way,⁶⁸ but it is a spiritual life immersed in matter: in this sense, the soul has a body. Spiritual energy has a corporeal substance: where there is a soul there is a human body, and where there is a human body there is a soul.⁶⁹ A spiritual being without a body would be a pure spirit, not a soul.

2.3) *Reflection which transforms*

A good phenomenological description is one that analyses each dimension of feeling, each of which is considered with respect to the others in reciprocal intimate correlations. A vivid example of this type of description is offered by Edith Stein:

If I feel myself to be weary, then the current of life seems to stagnate, as it were. It creeps along sluggishly, and everything that's occurring in the different sensory fields is involved in it. The colours are sort of colourless, the tones are hollow, and every impression – each datum that is registered with the life stream against its will, so to speak – is painful, unpleasant. Every colour, every tone, every touch, hurts. If the weariness subsides, then a shift enters the other spheres as well. And the moment when the weariness changes into vigour, the current starts to pump briskly, it surges forward unrestrainedly. Everything that is emerging in it carries the breath of vigour and joyfulness.⁷⁰

What is always necessary to pursue is a pure phenomenological de-

⁶⁶ PLATO, *Phaedrus*, 251a-e. Translated by the author.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 251d. Translated by the author.

⁶⁸ E. STEIN *Finite and eternal being*..., 430.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 445,

⁷⁰ E. STEIN, *Philosophy of Psychology*..., 14-15.

scription, pure in the sense that it abides by the evidence that the reflective view captures, setting aside any tendency to seek explanations that imply acceptance of metaphysical presuppositions, and as such empirically unverifiable – as is, for example, Stein’s hypostatisation of an original predisposition which would imbed a qualitative irrevocable last moment that would identify in a stable manner, and therefore not evolutionary, the essence of the person.⁷¹

No matter how much it is practised with rigour, the description of emotional life is not devoid of self-deception. Forms of self-delusion are also possible in the analysis of emotional lived experiences. It may happen that we want to dwell on a superficial sentiment that gives us pleasure in feeling it and try to hide deep sentiments whose awareness disturbs the conscience. Being capable of applying the phenomenological principle of transcendence also means having the courage to take a view «behind the periphery of our consciousness»⁷² and keep it focused also on those sides of oneself that one would not want to grasp. When we are aware of a sentiment or a passion that we evaluate as intolerable with the image that we have built for ourselves, it may happen that we look away and minimise the weight of its presence in inner life. It is the movements of thinking that build light areas and dark areas in the life of the mind. Inability to accept the profile of one’s feeling renders each effort of inner examination void. No technique for analysing the inner world can substitute the virtue of honesty, which makes us keep attention alive on the feelings that we do not want to feel and thus on the underlying cognitive content.⁷³

⁷¹ Cf. E. STEIN, *Einführung in die Philosophie...*

⁷² M. SCHELER, *The Idols of Self-Knowledge...*, 61.

⁷³ Describing, although qualified as a silent act confined in the space of our individual mind, is a linguistic act and thus uses words. It is with words that we give voice to emotional states and the underlying cognitive nuclei. However, it is precisely in the use of language that a difficulty occurs, because ours is a language of the external world, a spatial language (*ibid.*). Because saying performs not only a denotative but also structuring function with respect to the phenomena that it nominates, then it becomes essential to meditate on the words that are used to find the ones that are able to say the specific quality of a lived experience, rather than subsuming it within conceptualisations that are unable to pronounce its essence. It is not just a question of avoiding the use of words too full of meanings that would obscure the quality of the datum, but also of seeking new words or an unusual use of them, because a lived

The effect produced by the practice of self-description should be considered because on the one hand, reflective attention has the effect of decreasing and softening the intensity of the experience from the moment that in order to be observed it has to be placed at a distance from itself, and on the other, it introduces a level of self-awareness that increases the intensity of feeling, making it more vivid to the inner view, with the effect of generating almost another way of feeling. It may happen that when, in the middle of an action, even a brief glance is allowed to fall on the space of the mind, we feel a great interior uproar, a simultaneous exchange of different emotional sounds. When, in order not to feel overwhelmed by this chaos, we take the time for contemplative thinking and we are inclined to an act of reflection on lived experiences, it is possible to feel the uproar disappear and the lived experiences to become so barely noticeable that we seem to be unable to capture our emotional consistency. The vanishing of the consistency of the lived experience under the gaze of reflection seems to occur above all with respect to situational emotions, but when emotional tones related to fundamental cognitive experiences – those related to the core of their “*ordo amoris*” – are the subject of attention, then the reflection has the effect of intensifying their consistency.

In this way, it so happens that describing a lived experience of happiness increases the sense of pleasure, as if there were a second-rate happiness that had found the opportunity to live this way of feeling; on the other hand, describing an experience of anxiety may intensify the sense of unease that this problematic emotional tonality produces, precisely because the awareness that reveals the essence of the disturbing lived experience highlights all its complexity at the existential level. Reflective attention to feeling is as if another level of emotional life would be generated which, precisely because it is subsequent to self-inquiry that

experience for which there is no specific word or the particular quality of a lived experience for which there is only a verbal meaning that is totally general or undifferentiated, is mostly not even perceived by the individual who experiences it (*ibid.*). Phenomenological analysis then becomes one with work on words, which calls for the activation of a poetic posture, because it is precisely up to poetry to seek those words and combinations of signs which know how to say that which was until then opaque or unspeakable. Looking for the words that also know how to give voice to the finer nuances only serves to enhance the ability of self-examination.

produces a vivid and perspicuous view of the lived experience, constitutes an experience with a different essence. Therefore, reflection does not stop the feeling by dissolving it, but changes its perceived quality.⁷⁴

If the intensification of the quality of the lived experience is pleasant when the reflective act concerns a positive feeling, it may be perceived as a problem with a negative feeling, because making it more vivid could create suffering that is perceived as being heavier. Stein, an expert of deep depressive states explains this condition as a state of division between the life one lives and one's profound being.⁷⁵ Discovering ourselves as such through the self-inquiry process, thus coming to find ourselves in front of the perception of not being able to live our essential part, our existential preferences, because we are forced beneath inauthentic semblances, may create a lived experience of intimate and heart-breaking suffering that is more painful to bear than the depression itself. This perception could lead to avoiding reflective practice and even to trying to mute the feeling. However, it is necessary to learn to resist this temptation because the experience of reflection, with all the complexity that it can bring with it, such as the intensification of lived experiences of suffering, is existentially important because, without the thinking that is gathered on the lived experience, certain feelings would not be enjoyed in full. It is also ethically essential for developing a conscious positioning with respect to emotional life, which no one should claim to cancel. All feeling should be safeguarded, even that

⁷⁴ With respect to this question, Max Scheler assumes a different position when he states: «Not because we pay more attention to our emotional states, or take them into greater consideration, do we feel them more – on the contrary, the attention has the consequence of dissolving sentiments... Attention as such does not make sentiments richer and more lively, as happens for the contents of representation, on the contrary it destroys them» (*ibid.*, 63). In actual fact, a phenomenology of emotional lived experiences shows that when we dedicate attention to feeling, while attention certainly does not have the power to change the quality of the emotional lived experience, it has the effect of making it more vivid by allowing the emergence of mental content, which when brought to mind has the power to revive the emotional lived experience reflected upon, albeit in a different way from the original experience. If it were true that attention destroys sentiments, then no one would experience the need to take refuge in acts of repression, which distract thinking from certain emotional states. Nothing is destroyed by paying attention to pain; rather, under the gaze of reflection, boundaries seem to be sharper.

⁷⁵ R. DE MONTICELLI, *L'allegria della mente...*, 97. Translated by the author.

which, by revealing inconsistencies, omissions and excesses, warns us of the weaknesses of our form of life, because the seeing and accepting of what happens to us is the necessary condition, even though insufficient, for finding those paths along which to make our being flourish.⁷⁶

However, for this tiring work of acceptance to be no more than simple remission to present being, but an opening to follow up on, the willingness to accept ourselves should be hinged on that work of thinking which remains focused on two essential questions: the Ortega “what to do?”, that is, how to shape our lives, and that suggested by Steinian reflections which ask “from what depth of our being do we live?”; while the first is at the root of the choices which orient acting, the search for our own ways of existential implementation, the second is at the origin of reflective meditation with which we stop on our way to evaluate which path to take in order to continue the way of living.

2.4) *The logos of feeling*

From the point of view of neostic theory, the heart of understanding of affective life consists in going back to the cognitive acts which are at the root of emotional lived experiences. From which cognitive act does that bitterness which I feel constantly colouring the soul come? It can be an accurate view of life but, if so, it would be necessary to rebuild it and then figure out how it developed, and evaluate whether it makes sense and whether it is fair to keep it in the heart of the mind. When I feel lack of confidence, not in anything in particular but in life itself, can I understand through what evaluation of things this lack is generated? And what assumptions are the basis of this evaluation? And in what ways are they rooted in the most intimate spaces of the mind?

If the description of phenomenality with which feeling is offered to our view calls for the analytical cognitive act to comply with the evidence, going back to the cognitive content and the underlying evaluation requires making the principle of transcendence operational; that is, going beyond what appears while letting oneself be guided by the ways of the evident givenness of the lived experience. If applying the principle of transcendence is always difficult, it is even more so when applied to the fluid material of lived experiences. Because the material of the

⁷⁶ Cf. M. ZAMBRANO, *Notas de un método...*

life of the mind is a reality fluid enough to appear inconsistent, there are many forms of self-deception into which the process of self-examination can fall. We deceive ourselves when hasty analysis ends up building ghostly cognitive scenarios, when instead it would be essential to take the time for an analysis that is not only expanded over time, but also honest and capable of unravelling the lived experiences of feeling in order to enter the cognitive core that really moves them.

According to Plato, true knowledge is going around things.⁷⁷ But the possibility for the mind to follow a circular motion, which makes it possible to go several times around the thing, performing that sacred number of revolutions required to develop a perspicuous view of its essential quality, is possible only if the subject of knowledge is something stable, something like the entities described by Plato always are; however, things subject to becoming, those that change over time, cannot be investigated easily.⁷⁸

Emotional life is continuous becoming and as such, according to Platonic epistemology, would not be one of the things knowable, giving legitimacy to the Arendtian objection according to which thought sees only what it builds in the act of considering lived experiences. However, if we admit the existence of fundamental background feelings which, even though showing nuances that are sometimes different, present themselves with a certain uniformity, it is also possible for the sphere of emotions to repeatedly reiterate a reflective act on an object that maintains its continuous quality over time.

It is necessary to dwell on the heuristic concept of revolving around something to adapt it to the delicate matter of feeling. Revolving around should not be understood as an obsessive motion that prepares the mind to conquer the object; in *Phaedrus*, revolving around is a passive act: souls «stop straight on the vault of heaven and in this position circular motion makes them turn and they contemplate».⁷⁹ In this Platonic view of knowing is all the passivity of the contemplative act, that passivity which is required to configure a delicate way for approaching the fragile consistency of emotional lived experiences. Knowing requires pas-

⁷⁷ PLATO, *Phaedrus*, 248a. Translated by the author.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 247e. Translated by the author.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 247c. Translated by the author.

sivity, being led around the thing that the mind, receptively disposed, welcomes the givenness with which the phenomenon offers itself to be seen. Knowing the phenomenon without the imposition of its extraneous logic means letting the appearance appear so that sight can receive it in exactly the way that it is offered. Just like everything tends to a contact, so every phenomenon, even the most insubstantial and immaterial like feeling, manifests its essence in a givenness that the mind must learn to accept. And the gesture of the mind that lets itself be turned around the thing is receptive and concentrated attention, like the wide-open eyes of a child capable of admiration. Only continuous attention oriented by the passion of understanding has the possibility of grasping, though never entirely, interior becoming while it is happening. That fluent and constantly changing reality which is the flow of emotional lived experiences would require unlimited attention, that sustained view that knows no yielding to digression; not, however, a view that is structured in the form of a violent imposition, but that viewing which is like the oblique ray of auroral light, that edge where the light itself trembles.⁸⁰

But precisely because, unlike the Platonic essences which do not know the wear of time, the lived experience is a continuous flow, fundamental sentiments require an investigation that is not only circular but also linear; an investigation that moves along the conscience's internal time line following the evolutionary development of a sentiment and that of its underlying cognitive content because, like feeling, thinking continually changes in relation to the evaluation of meaning that the mind develops with respect to the lived experience.

Analysis of emotional life is therefore a complex spiritual practice because it requires that different heuristics acts be performed: the observing that goes around (circular motion) and the observing of becoming over time (linear motion). The need to differentiate the way to investigate is also evident when analysing superficial – that is, peripheral and short-lived – feelings, and this in view of the fact that all lived experiences are strung together in a stream of thinking and feeling that knows no solutions of continuity.

An act of feeling is to be considered not as an event that is defined and can be delimited – that is, to be described through an analysis that

⁸⁰ Cf. M. ZAMBRANO, *De la aurora*, Madrid 1986.

separates inner life into discrete acts – but as a wave of the current of lived experience,⁸¹ a wave whose structuring dynamism on our Dasein can only be understood if considered in connection with its before and after. Therefore, in order to permit adequate knowledge, description should never be implemented as a description of a finite moment, but of a flow of emotional waves, and as such requires a long time for conscience's internal concentration.⁸²

Precisely because it requires long internal concentration, which considers every moment of the life of the mind in its intimate relationship with the before and after of the inner flow, it is difficult for understanding to arrive quickly, according to our expectations, while it is easy to experience prolonged moments of opacity. In these situations it is necessary to not be gripped by the anxiety of reaching a rapid rational conclusion. There are complicated and enveloping lived experiences for which it is useless to expect short-term solutions. Learning to remain in composed expectation of the lived experience that happens without demanding anything is essential for exercising that spiritual practice of passivity which is capable of preparing the mind for a vivid and deep understanding of things alone.

Another important fact to consider is the different tension of feeling.⁸³ There is a weariness of mind that is shallow enough to leave it open to the world, and therefore receptive and responsive with respect to the stresses that come from others and from things, and there is a weariness of the mind that makes us feel our internal energies so exhausted as to almost annihilate every level of our sensitivity. Because the differences in intensity are qualitative differences of being, it is important to know how to identify them and then go back to their generative matrices; it would be difficult to distinguish all the nuances of intensity of the tension of feeling, but through a disciplined practice of meditation it is possible to learn to identify the gradations of one's affective life.

⁸¹ Cf. E. STEIN, *Philosophy of Psychology ...*

⁸² Precisely because knowledge is never an isomorphic representation of the phenomenon that it investigates, but a process of building scenarios, the reflective act that identifies a lived experience is a constructive act of the mind that defines boundaries where the phenomena have the characteristic of not having precise boundaries. The quality of the cognitive act should be taken into account.

⁸³ Cf. E. STEIN, *Philosophy of Psychology ...*

It is not irrelevant that «the more intense the experiencing, the more luminous and alert is the consciousness of it»,⁸⁴ because while the first level of consciousness – feeling ourselves feeling – intensifies as if alerted by the tension with which we are living, reflection on the other hand struggles to find space. The hard part in the effort to understand emotional life consists precisely in the fact that the more intense lived experiences are and the more difficult it is for the person to carve out a reflective space, the greater the intensiveness of the act of thinking required. But the gain that comes from this reflective work is then evident, because the more you reflect, the more self-consciousness takes shape, and the clearer and more awake consciousness is, the more intense living is.

Given the extensiveness with which ordinary thinking tends to use the category of causality, the process of understanding lived experiences also tends to be subjected to the application of that category. When weariness is felt in the soul it is easy to look for that event to be identified as a cause or establish a causal connection between weariness and the inability at that time to pay attention. Although reasoning of the causal type must be used with caution for explaining lived experiences, and generally for the human experience, it nevertheless seems that certain connections which are identified are legitimate. Perhaps the epistemological problem lies not so much in introducing or in causal explanations, but in the fact of seeking a not so much causal-linear, but rather multi-factorial explanation, and then possibly looking for connections between probabilistic-type events. It is possible that through a careful analysis of the flow of lived experiences one comes to identify those which can be defined as *evident connections*, which reliably take into account the reasons for which the soul finds itself living certain lived experiences; in such a case it would have elements available for rethinking how to give shape to one's *Dasein*. But precisely because it is difficult to find «essential connections»,⁸⁵ it is necessary to be cautious in formulating explanations, because when sure evidence is missing there is a risk of building ghostly landscapes that can lead one to decide on disordered actions.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁸⁵ E. STEIN, *Philosophy of Psychology...*, 37.

2.5) *The life feeling*

Intensive thinking concentrated in the process of self-inquiry is all the more able to describe and understand lived experiences the more the mind has what Stein calls “life feeling”.⁸⁶ Because, as Aristotle explains, characterising the essence of the life of the mind are not only actions [*praxeis*], but also energies [*energeias*], those dynamic forces that make acts of existing possible.⁸⁷ If we conceive vital force as that reserve of energy necessary for every act of existence and that which nourishes vital feelings, then the process of self-understanding should dedicate intense attention to it. Vital force is the spiritual energy that maintains the flow of psychic life, and if, as Stein claims, lived experiences are fed by it, it is also true, however, from a phenomenology of experience that it takes force from lived experiences themselves and that reciprocally, positive feeling feeds vital force.⁸⁸ Activating the reflective view, we can see how vital force is consumed in the course of an activity, such as when you are busy thinking but, in turn draws nourishment from the activity that makes it possible when the person perceives that he/she gains in being from dedicating him/herself to thinking that content or structuring mental activity in a certain direction.

There are emotional lived experiences, like negative ones and those passionate ones which unbalance the life of the mind, which absorb the vital force and leave us exhausted; there are positive lived experiences such as certain emotions that we live quite by chance or some good feelings that we cultivate intentionally, which instead give vigour to the mind. The feelings that feed the vital force are those essential to living like the air we breathe: trust and hope. Where there is trust and hope there is vital force and vice versa, the vital force is essential for feeling hope and confidence; given that the morphogenetic law of life is manifested in a circular happening where each element is in a relationship of evolutionary co-dependency with others, where there is strength, a sense of vigour, it is easier to cultivate a positive feeling. Finding the source from which to draw hope and confidence is one and the same

⁸⁶ E. STEIN, *Das Kreuz, wie eine Krone tragen: vom Geheimnis des inneren Lebens*, Zürich/Düsseldorf 1997.

⁸⁷ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 8, 1098b 15-16.

⁸⁸ Cf. E. STEIN, *Philosophy of Psychology...*

with nourishing the soul with vital force, that which alone makes these feelings resistant to the often difficult and painful shocks of experience.

The life of the soul implies a continuous consumption of vital force, but this consumption, when it is accompanied by the practice of self-inquiry guided by the intention to take care of oneself, generates existential ways that germinate sources of energy from which the soul always receives new vital force. Living composed in profundity means accessing the source of the vital force of the soul and looking for the way to nurture it so that it is a generative matrix of good forms of being. It is not necessarily the big things, the events of great importance that give nourishment to the soul or remove energy from it, but also the small things, the small gestures. Striving to know the sources of the quality of our being is to know oneself.

The vital force's quality conditions the life of the mind, but in turn is conditioned by the type of cognitive activity carried out and the emotional experiences that accompany it. The vital force can stretch out along a continuum of degrees of vitality ranging from freshness, which is the sense of vigour, to weariness which can become lassitude, and the lived experiences of the mind combine to determine the quality and intensity of spiritual energy according to a morphogenetic recursive-type reciprocation. Monitoring the condition of our vital force is essential for the quality of existence and if we assume that this condition is related to the quality of mental lived experiences, then identifying which cognitive and emotional lived experiences consume it and which feed it becomes a priority for being able to find the right direction of self-care.

As with any cognitive activity, also in this case we may happen to deceive ourselves, and this happens when the thought, instead of faithfully describing the modes of givenness of the vital force, allows itself to be conditioned by tacitly nourished illusions. A second reflection then becomes necessary, which is not directed to the content of the thinking, but deals with the ways of givenness of the reflective act for implementing «a critical epistemology of inner perception».⁸⁹

The job of analytical description of one's lived experiences outlined here constitutes that phenomenology of inner experience which is the indispensable condition for every act of self-understanding. Under-

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

standing emotional life does not mean building classification tables of emotions, feelings and passions, but understanding the connection between emotional phenomena and the fundamental movement of *Dasein*.

Understanding is adequate if it avoids relying on atomistic logic with a modern mould, which considers things always distinct and separate from each other, and identifies the origin of an emotional state either in the environment or in the inner being, as if it were possible to think of a subject distinct from its environment when, in fact, being always happens *in relation* with others, because relationships are the substance of the human condition. Therefore, seeking to understand where an emotional situation comes from and where it leads calls for understanding which world of meanings permeates the relational exchange in which the subject finds him/herself.

Precisely because of the ontological primacy of the relational dimension, the analysis of the feeling we have for others assumes a supporting function. It may happen that, behind the mask of our own narcissistic vision, we are unable to see the real quality of our relational feelings. We tend to trace in ourselves those that are acceptable to the community of belonging, thus building for ourselves that sort of self-deception which then results in an inauthenticity of living with others. «A long and critical confrontation is always necessary before we can make our own feelings clear»,⁹⁰ revealing the emotional constructions with which we deceive ourselves about our way of being.

Carefully examining the relational feeling also seeking to understand which of the feelings we attribute to each other are really just projections of ourselves, and then understanding what our real empathetic capacity is; that capacity which is developed in authentically feeling the quality of the feeling of the other while respecting, however, the status of extraneousness of the other to us. «[E]motional blindness»⁹¹ has serious implications on one's *Dasein*, because it prevents not only a frank glance at oneself but also the possibility of establishing good relations with others, those that help us to grow.

The need for understanding the emotional dimension of *Dasein* lies in the fact that, given the performative potential of affective lived ex-

⁹⁰ M. SCHELER, *The Idols of Self-Knowledge...*, 65.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

periences with respect to the way of being with others in the world, the passing from an unthinking condition to a reflective consciousness enables the gaining of a conscious, self-clarifying existential positionality. What, in fact, the soul feels the need for is that kind of awareness which accompanies the meeting with its own being. This awareness is a condition for gaining an unrestrained view, which does not exist when we stay rigidly trapped in unthinking living. Lack of thinking means ignorance of oneself and ignorance becomes immobility which results in non-transcendence.⁹² Self-understanding is to transcend, to flow consciously in being.

But beyond reflection which is understanding, which has been discussed so far, there is also a reflection that is directly functional to planning one's own acting; this is what can be defined as *anticipatory reflection*, because an emotional lived experience tries to anticipate the possible consequences on the plan of acting in the event that one decides to consent to it. Only after carefully weighing the possible consequences of an emotional orientation of Dasein should how to act be decided, that is, whether to adhere to it or not.⁹³ Ideas, not just those explicitly normative, but also those that are descriptive, exert a performative force. Reflection that carries the quality of this force as evidence to consciousness reduces the performative power of ideas, which acts tacitly; it is therefore with reflection that you can earn that freedom of self mentioned by Epictetus when he suggests not being carried away by ideas, but to wait and concede postponing before acting.⁹⁴

Reflection not only plays a hermeneutic function, which consists of understanding the quality of a cognitive act and an emotional lived experience, but also a programmatic function when it provides the elements for exercising that reflective judgment which determines what is fair and what is not, what is right and what is not, what is beautiful and what is not. Reflection that seeks to anticipate what may be the consequences of adhering or not to an orientation of feeling, and weighing the implications for the person and the world in which he/she lives for each of them is essential for preparing a reasoned decision, because first

⁹² Cf. M. ZAMBRANO, *De la aurora...*

⁹³ Cf. EPICTETUS, *Manual...*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

you have to «examine the premises and consequences, then take action».⁹⁵ When you come to a decision without adequate time for reflection, even if the orientation taken is correct, there is the risk of embarking on adventures that cannot be sustained by your vital force; however, in order for an undertaking to nourish Dasein, it is necessary to dedicate yourself to it with all your soul,⁹⁶ which is a condition that occurs only after careful reflective evaluation in preparation for a measured action.

If it is true that the soul has a reason,⁹⁷ it is precisely in the practice of self-training that a right, just reason is sought because there is no wisdom without a just logos [*ho orthos logos*] Aristotle, that which gives measure to the movement of being.⁹⁸

But cultivating a good reason takes time, in the sense that self-inquiry practices must be exercised to the point of becoming structuring parts of the self, turning into «flesh and blood»⁹⁹. The thought that thinks the feeling helps us if it becomes a discipline stubbornly cultivated over time, learning to stay at length with ourselves, and not a technique that we learn to exercise only when an urgent need is felt. Thinking becomes effective in the treatment of the emotional self when it becomes a practice implemented systematically for learning our existential quality. When not working to take care of our own inner life in ordinary time, even if certain cognitive exercises seem totally useless, we cannot expect that in difficult times, when certain negative feelings are rampant in the soul or pain bursts inside us, facing up to that pain requires knowing how to look at ourselves in depth, to be with ourselves so intensely as to be able to hold together the pieces of the experience, then it is hard to find the style of thinking and that cognitive force necessary to have a good and just mastery of the situation. The sense of the practice of self-care consists of modelling the interior dispositions that prepare us to face up to the difficult unpredictability of experience. According to Plutarch, who assigns an important performative force to thought, if we do not prepare in advance by cultivating cognitive prac-

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹⁷ DK B115.

⁹⁸ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 1, 1138b 29.

⁹⁹ E. STEIN, *Finite and eternal being...*, 438.

tices that will become habitual instruments, it is difficult to deal with disturbing thoughts and emotions when they are rampant in the soul like a storm at sea.¹⁰⁰ If it is agreed that the cultivation of certain provisions of mind consent keeping «the source of inner serenity» alive, then an essential task of self-education consists of exercising ourselves gradually, but continuously, to take care of our inner life.¹⁰¹

3) *For a possible transformation*

It is precisely human to seek a good quality of life and consequently not bear the condition of missing what is good.¹⁰² However, not all emotional situations contribute to the promotion of spiritual well-being; there are affective states that make us feel bad. Heidegger, who certainly does not approve of the categorisation of emotional states, nevertheless mentions the distinction between feelings that exalt and those that depress.¹⁰³ Negative lived experiences are those that erode the pleasure of living, that hamper the search for well-being; with respect to them it is therefore natural that the subject tries to perform transformations on his/her way of being. Therefore it responds to a human being's original direction of performing transformations on his or her existential force such as to make it more capable of feeding positive ways of being.

The problem lies in understanding what prevents the full realisation of one's existential possibilities in order to «discover the appropriate remedy».¹⁰⁴ This question is answered by the neo-Stoic thesis, according to which precisely because convictions are part of the substance of feeling, starting from which those evaluations of experience are expressed that give rise to precise emotional experiences, then transformative action on one's emotional profile is possible by working on the ideas underlying it.

This work is not easy, because there are internalised beliefs at such a deep level that, first of all, it is difficult to locate them and then, even

¹⁰⁰ PLUTARCH, *De Serenitate*, 1.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰² EPICTETUS, *Discourses*, I, 27,12. Translated by the author.

¹⁰³ Cf. M. HEIDEGGER, *What is metaphysics...*

¹⁰⁴ EPICTETUS, *Discourses*, I, 27,6. Translated by the author.

without assuming radical changes, it is equally difficult to set a process of critical reflection in motion. In the life of the mind there is perhaps no element inaccessible to rational argument – except for certain lived experiences such as those that are religious and mystical and animated by an intelligence different from that which presides over ordinary life – but to be effective the work of thought must patiently seek adequate access to the most intimate spheres of being. In expressing the work of thought, the metaphor of “digging deep” is often used, but this radical action which evokes something violent is not suitable for that delicate part which is the heart of the life of the mind, which calls for being approached cautiously, without interventional intentions because it requires attention moved by respect. The most intimate parts of the soul, those in which the person breathes his/her spiritual essence, must be approached with delicacy, “gently” says Zambrano, with a thought that must be like the water of mercy and the light of understanding: the water that dissolves inner tensions and the knots of feeling “encysted” in the soul, and the light that illuminates and covers the most intimate areas.¹⁰⁵

Stoic philosophy suggested the systematic use of so-called canons, that is, iastic maxims which, as the subject of constant meditating attention, would allow control of passions. These canons or maxims have the form of synthetic arguments that the subject should repeat to itself to the point of making them become automatism for the mind and when a maxim becomes an automatism, it would enable control of the emotional phenomena that create disorder for experience.¹⁰⁶ Epictetus indicates that it is essential to learn to control the evaluations that we provide of events: it is not the actions we suffer that make us feel offended or upset but the evaluations we formulate of them, so when we feel a negative sentiment we should indicate to the mind that our evaluation caused it: «try, therefore, in the first place, not to be hurried away with the appearance. For if you once gain time and respite, you will more easily command yourself».¹⁰⁷

Given that our feeling, and with it our acting, depends on the eval-

¹⁰⁵ Cf. M. ZAMBRANO, *Filosofía y Educación...*

¹⁰⁶ P. HADOT, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, Paris 2002.

¹⁰⁷ EPICTETUS, *Manual...*, 20. Translated by the author.

uations that the subject defines with respect to the experience, then according to Epictetus, the task which reason is called on to perform is, because of its capacity to reflect on itself and thus approve and disapprove itself, to analyse the criteria that guide the evaluation process in such a way as to deactivate those that trigger misjudgements.¹⁰⁸

The indication of activating the epoché comes from the phenomenology of that submerged continent which is our emotional life. Precisely because the feeling has a nucleus of thought, insofar as it rests on an evaluation, when the urgency is felt to render a negative sentiment inoperative, we can, if not neutralise, decrease the strength of an emotional tonality or a sentiment by devaluing the beliefs on which that feeling feeds.¹⁰⁹ Excluding an evaluation means rendering it ineffective. To render an evaluation ineffective it is necessary to deny approval; in this way it is excluded, its possibility of acting on the life of the mind is suspended; this gesture is the epoché.¹¹⁰ When we are confronted with a negative evaluation of an event and in giving approval cannot avoid succumbing to a disturbing emotional experience, we may decide to suspend the approval of that evaluation and give ourselves time for a meditated reflection, with the effect of silencing at least temporarily that feeling which unbalances the soul, and regaining sufficient sovereignty over our *Dasein*. This action of suspension of approval is completely different from fighting against a sentiment; excluding has the quality of a non-violent inner action, which would have the ability to at least temporarily maintain the interior climate, allowing time for preparing to face events with a better balance than what is experienced when falling prey to a negative feeling.

Regarding the need to work upon ourselves to change, Heidegger suggests that a technique can be defined for emotional life, which consists in not trying to free ourselves from a negative emotional tonality by focusing on it, but by cultivating the opposite tonality.¹¹¹ The ancient Stoic principle by which to counter a habit you must cultivate the op-

¹⁰⁸ EPICTETUS, *Discourses*, I, 1,1. Translated by the author

¹⁰⁹ Cf. E. STEIN, *Philosophy of Psychology*...

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Cf. M. HEIDEGGER, *Being and time*...

posite habit is echoed in this technique of the self.¹¹² If we interpret this emotional technique in the light of the cognitive theory of emotions, the result is that for cultivating an opposite tonality it is necessary to bring attention and give approval to the cognitive content of a sign that differs from those incorporated in the emotion that we would want, if not deactivating them completely, at least devaluing or weakening them. «When our eyes are wounded by too dazzling a light, we refresh them with the tints and hues of flowers and grass»;¹¹³ we should do the same with thought – instead of keeping it fixed on what produces pain, make it consider something else: pay attention to other possible landscapes of thinking for cultivating other emotional geographies.

But it so happens that there are feelings which, while essential to a good quality of life, we do not know how to cultivate, because we almost do not notice them among the possibilities of feeling, as if we lacked the education to consider them. One of these is the «sense of gratitude».¹¹⁴ Knowing how to express gratitude to something else, to the material and spiritual good that lights up the vital energy of our being, is a movement of the soul that has the effect of reconciling us with the world. Faced with the sense of anxiety that can harpoon the soul when the effort of living seems unsustainable, Plutarch suggests cultivating the capacity to have gratitude for life [*charin echein*].¹¹⁵ Being capable of gratitude relaxes the soul and almost seems to make it capable of touching things.¹¹⁶

¹¹² EPICTETUS, *Discourses*, I, 27,6. Translated by the author

¹¹³ PLUTARCH, *De Serenitate*, 8.

¹¹⁴ EPICTETUS, *Discourses*, I, 6,1. Translated by the author.

¹¹⁵ PLUTARCH, *De Serenitate*, 1.

¹¹⁶ If we follow the reflections of Epictetus (*Discourses*, I, 6, 19-22), it would seem that it is the exercise of contemplation of the things of the world and of phenomena that happen which generate the capacity of gratitude. Contemplation is an act of the mind everyone should dedicate him/herself to because a quality of the human condition is that of being spectators. The culture of modernity has enhanced doing, up to considering the manipulation of things at the top of the hierarchy, forgetting that the quality of our being also requires passivity, receptivity. When the position of the spectator, and with it the exercise of the capacity to contemplate, is considered in philosophy, among all the senses sight is given priority; but fully exercising the position of the spectator requires activating all the senses, because there are things that demand to be seen, others heard, others smelt, others touched, and still others enjoyed. It is the

The important role assigned to thinking is evident in these indications of spiritual practices; it is a perspective that gives voice to trust in the capacity of reason to let the person acquire some form, albeit weak, of sovereignty over experience. This is an ancient perspective, which we find well expressed by Plotinus when he states that unforeseen events the becoming of things has in store for us can be contrasted with virtue, «making external blows less strong with great thoughts».¹¹⁷ Epictetus also invested much in reason, because if it is not the facts in themselves that cause turmoil but «the judgments which men pronounce on facts», then the essential thing to care for are the representations that structure cognitive life.¹¹⁸

But you cannot, however, silence the limits of an overestimation of the strength of the mind. This is evident precisely when we feel the urgency of transforming certain feelings, such as fear of being or the anxiety resulting from the fear of not being able to be our own possible being. We are a series of possibilities, but possibility is not already being. When we discover ourselves called on to become our possible being, we may experience this task as overwhelming and feel harpooned by the fear of not answering the call of *Dasein*. Then the ontological sentiment of fear of being can dry up the vital force and create disorder in movements of existing. From the perspective of Heidegger indicated above, finding a remedy to the fear-of-being means focusing attention on another sentiment, confidence-in-becoming. Confidence in becoming is essential because it relaxes the soul.

The burgeoning of this sentiment in the soul is not, however, attributable solely to the job of thought. It is a sentiment of vital importance and, like everything that is essential, it also has something to do with the essence of the human condition which is relational; this means that confidence is an asset that we learn by experience from live relationships with other people, those who can testify gestures and words of confidence vividly. Feeling a look of confidence on us from people who are important to us allows us to learn to have confidence.

exercise of each sensory direction that produces the sense of real-being in which we feel ourselves in the world.

¹¹⁷ PLOTINUS, *Ennead* II, 9, 18. Translated by the author.

¹¹⁸ EPICTETUS, *Manual*, 5-6. Translated by the author.

Although the living experience is essential – but not enough to experience relations permeated by a confident style of being in the world because they generate this sentiment in us – there is always a need for thought, because only with thought can the lived experience become an experience from which we learn, but the thought capable of generating something different is never abstract but rooted in lived experience.

Any rationalist and rationalising prospect must therefore be taken critically, because we know from experience how fragile the strength of the mind is, how the good of things depends not only on thought and vital force, but on a whole series of environmental conditions, first of which are relational conditions; however, without placing too many expectations in that doing which belongs precisely to thought, the importance that spiritual strength can have when well cultivated cannot be denied.

However, in precisely the moment when we attribute transformative responsibility to thinking, it is necessary to distance ourselves from any easy illusions about the adjustability of affections.

One of the myths that marks certain theories about the intelligence of emotions is that of leading the subject to gain full mastery of self, a form of sovereignty, especially compared with his/her emotional world, making the person impervious to external events.

Although, depending on the intensity and continuity with which it is practised, the process of emotional self-understanding can make it possible to limit our dependence on emotional lived experiences to gain inner control, it is still necessary to avoid any managerial interpretation of our relationship with emotional life; this is because emotions and feelings are not things on hand that can be used and managed as with things, but are living elements which, although they may undergo transformation processes as a result of a practice of self-training, fortunately elude any managerial action. Stein herself, although attaching great importance to the practice of self-knowledge and conceiving the darkness of the soul as something that can be clarified by reason, argues that the light of self-knowledge should not be overestimated. However, Stein considers gaining mastery of self possible if the soul decides to turn its attention to a different world and direct its view to a realm other than

the natural world in which it is located, towards the divine.¹¹⁹ This interpretation of the process of self-education recalls the one expressed by Socrates in *Alcibiades* – in a part of the text where,¹²⁰ however, doubts have been expressed concerning its authenticity – in which the philosopher explains to his pupil that the soul can know itself only if it turns its view to the divine.

Without slipping towards the transcendent, we can instead reaffirm the value, albeit partial, of the process of self-inquiry, where the mind is focused on self; however, a self that is thought of as embodied and relational, that breathes in the world of things and men. What a mind attentive to its happening and dedicated to seek self-knowledge can do is to seek as deep as possible an understanding of affective life by adopting a lens that is as analytical as possible, but without claiming to programme emotional life.

Furthermore, the knowledge that can be gained will always be partial, because affections are complex material for human reason and always only a part of it reaches the conscious level. More than one feeling may simultaneously trigger a way of being; these feelings can be generated by different internal actions, making it difficult for the mind to go back to the full range of feelings under way. And even when reflective attention manages to grasp a certain level of complexity of inner life and identify the way in which the driving force of feeling about the person's decisions works, other motors of the soul can operate in the shadows, remaining in the background, but producing a no less intensive acting force on conscious feelings.¹²¹ Therefore, complete and constant contact with deep lived experiences, and thus fortunately also the possibility of control of inner life, remains impractical. While on one hand this inaccessibility to the heart of the life of the mind is a sign of weakness of the instruments of reason, on the other hand it also signals that intangibility of the depth of affective life that saves us from unacceptable manipulation.

However limited understanding of emotional life may be, there remains the undisputed need for self-education of feeling for reaching

¹¹⁹ Cf. E. STEIN, *Das Kreuz wie eine Krone...*

¹²⁰ PLATO, *Alcibiades*, 133c 8-17.

¹²¹ E. STEIN, *Philosophy of Psychology ...*, 203.

that inner condition which Zambrano calls «a firm heart», which knows how to assist thought in its hardest work: seeking horizons of sense when every measure of living seems to be missing, designing rhythms and directions of existence even when disorientation seems to prevail. Education for cultivating a firm heart should start as soon as possible, teaching the child, training him, to support himself with his heart, in the momentary emptiness of the mind, in front of the enigmatic situations that life will present.¹²²

This type of education is also bound to cultivating firm thought, that which knows how to cope with the devitalising feeling, like the fear of being, of being nailed to ourselves, into which we can feel we are sinking.

However, precisely because we are our thoughts and our feelings, the process of self-inquiry calls for having tact, for proceeding gently. In dealing with inner life, in the search for self-knowledge to understand the vital movement of thought and feeling, there is a need for not just one method – describing in detail while remaining faithful to the mode of givenness of the life of the mind – nor for only cultivating skills – such as intense and continued interior concentration – but also a certain way of dealing with the delicate material that is flows inside. Treat it gently. It is perhaps no coincidence that the soul has been given the name of an insect as delicate as the butterfly, because *psyche* indicates both the soul and the butterfly. When you get too close to the wings of a butterfly and touch them, you ruin that work of art which are its designs and which, once touched are nothing more than dust on your fingers; the same happens with the soul. The action of knowing always raises ethical issues, but even more so when dealing with the intimate essence of the person; in this case there is a need for delicate ethics.

Delicacy is a virtue which allows you to treat things adequately, with respect: do not try to grasp, to manage, but try to approach things with tact. Axiological criteria which are relied on to give a sense of direction to one's path can be traced back to the roots of the cognitive core that characterises every emotional experience; precisely because the criteria that express the principles of value are a matter of ontogenetic value, that virtue of delicacy which cannot be separated from the virtue of humility is extremely necessary; this latter virtue is expressed in knowing

¹²² Cf. M. ZAMBRANO, *Notas de un método...*

all the limits of one's process of self-understanding and therefore the fragility of knowledge that we are building of ourselves.

The reflective thinking that responds to the principle of knowing oneself is not easy to practice, not only because of the cognitive commitment it requires, along with the choice, which that commitment necessarily presupposes, to terminate adhesion to doing for carving out a space for a break from ordinary involvement, but also because radical thinking- that which is genuinely reflective – cannot fail to awaken awareness of the fragility of one's being. When this awareness takes hold of the mind, there are two possible reactions: either to persist in the practice of self-inquiry because, even though feeling bewildered, one feels the search for the sense of *Dasein* inevitable, or to avoid the commitment to thinking in order to avoid the sense of disorientation experienced. If it is assumed that the first reaction is the one to be taken, then with respect to one's fragility being extended from moment to moment without having any certainty about the future state of being, the essential condition for continuing to exercise reflective thinking is on the one hand acceptance of one's ontological frailty and on the other intimate adherence to the self-education principle of taking care of oneself.

When the mind takes care of itself, takes care of thinking and feeling, then rivers of living water flow from it.¹²³ But although essential, too many expectations cannot be invested in self-care, we cannot wait for it to provide us with the opportunity of living a full life and of reaching the pinnacle of one's being,¹²⁴ which is a state that, because of its perfection, does not belong to the human condition. Nothing safeguards against the possibility of experiencing those dark nights in which the soul seems to slip into insurmountable abysses. However, even if nothing protects us from that painful knowledge of one's ontological frailty, it is precisely self-care which can provide the instruments necessary for finding glimpses of light even in the most difficult moments, thus safeguarding the health of the soul and the desire to give implementing fullness to one's existence.

¹²³ Cf. E. STEIN, *In der Kraft des Kreuzes...*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

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ABSTRACT

To shed new light on the importance of self-care, it is fundamental to pinpoint the role of the emotional life for this process of self-inquiry. The action of knowing raises ethical issues, even more when dealing with the intimate essence of the person; respecting a delicate ethics is the ground for dealing with such investigation. After an analysis of philosophical and spiritual examples which focus on feelings and affective education, I provide a phenomenological account that introduces some methods for self-understanding and a possible self-transformation.