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The Uncanny and other negative existential feelings

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1. The feeling of uncanniness

In his famous essay on the Uncanny (« Das Unheimliche », Freud [1919] 2003), Freud explores a peculiar existential feeling. A situation can strike us as being not quite familiar, and thus novel in some respects, but the feeling of uncanniness involves more than a failure of familiarity; it concerns the strangeness of what, in our environment, should be familiar to us. For instance, the perception of a wax figure or a human-like automaton answers some of our expectations about the presence of an animate being, while other expectations, having to do with its dynamics and its capacity to interact with us, are manifestly not met. The result may be a state of slight discomfort which is characteristic of the feeling Freud is interested in.

The feeling of uncanniness is a negative feeling; it belongs to the category of unpleasant affective experiences. Freud goes further and associates it with the frightening, but given the examples he himself offers, it is not obvious that this feeling should necessarily involve fear and dread, even though it typically brings to the subject uneasiness or even palpable anxiety.

As Freud observes, the Uncanny has been widely exploited in the domain of fiction. However, if the feeling of uncanniness may evoke the Kantian category of the sublime, it is not intrinsically aesthetic, but concerns human life in all its normal and pathological variations.

The feeling of uncanniness is existential in the sense that it somehow alters our sensory, affective, practical and cognitive relationship to the external world. Matthew

Ratcliffe defines existential feelings in terms of two characteristics. First, they are (often subtle) bodily states which we are at least partly conscious of. Second, they are not intentionally directed towards specific objects or situations but are “background orientations through which experience as a whole is structured” (Ratcliffe 2008, 2). Although this definition is of course schematic, it fits the various forms the feeling of uncanniness can take. Freud himself describes this feeling as a type of “emotional impulses”, characterised by the fact that they are “restrained, inhibited in their aims and dependent on numerous attended circumstances” (Freud [1919] 2003, 123). On the one hand, following Williams James’s metaphor, feelings of uncanniness belong to the “fringes” or “margins” of bodily consciousness (James [1890] 1980). On the phenomenological level, they have an “indistinct, spreading, blurred quality” and “seem to actively resist attempts to focus attention directly on them” (Mangan 2001). On the other hand, the feeling of uncanniness does not always target well identified aspects of the perceived situation. We are often at a loss if we are to explain exactly what in the relevant situation is familiar or not, and to select the appropriate response. In general, existential feelings, like other kinds of feelings (such as the feeling of “*déjà vu*”), generate a form of cognitive and motivational opacity which sets them apart from ordinary cases of emotions such as fear.¹

2. Extraordinary feelings

Even though existential feelings are ubiquitous in ordinary life, they also occur, often in spectacular forms, in many psychiatric cases. For instance, patients with the Cotard delusion, which is associated with a severe form of depression, have feelings of derealisation and depersonalisation. Nothing seems real or concrete to them, including their own bodies.

¹ As is well-known, Freud tried to explain the opacity of the feeling of uncanniness in terms of his theory of psychological repression, nowadays largely discredited.

Some of them hold that they are dead or disembodied, or declare “I do not exist”, flying in the face of a well-entrenched Cartesian way of thinking.

Another pathological case is the Capgras delusion. Capgras patients firmly hold that a close family member has been replaced by an identical-looking impostor, sometimes considered as malicious. For instance, in the presence of his wife, one patient coldly declares “This person is not my wife”, throwing disarray into his family, as we can easily understand. The warm glow of familiarity formerly associated with perceptual and practical acquaintance with his wife seems to have wholly disappeared. The patient visually recognizes his wife’s face, but he describes it as unreal, as if the person in front of him were wearing a wax mask.²

Cotard and Capgras delusions involve negative existential feelings that are especially salient and seem to explain, at least partly, why the patients develop delusions (“I am dead”, “This is not my wife”, etc.). These feelings reveal a pathological failure of affective experience. This is obvious in the case of the Cotard delusion, where the patients seem to lack positive affective experiences altogether. The Capgras delusion too is tied to a failure of affective experience, albeit more circumscribed. Electrodermal studies have revealed that the patients do not have the physiological responses that we ordinarily show in the presence of close family members. On a plausible neuroanatomical hypothesis, the patients’ so-called “visuo-affective pathway” is dysfunctional. The visuo-affective pathway enables swift connections between sensory stimulations and the limbic system, in parallel with the slower “visuo-semantic” pathway, which underlies conscious sensory experience and recognition (see, e.g., Young 1998).

² On these delusions and others, see Coltheart and Davies (2000).

3. Familiarity and strangeness

The analysis of the Capgras delusion should help to clarify the nature of the feeling of strangeness or non-familiarity, which is a key component of the kind of affective experience discussed by Freud.³ It is true that the patients do not feel any feeling of familiarity in front of their relatives. Should we conclude that the absence of such feeling provides an exhaustive description of their affective experience? If the answer is positive, there is no feeling of strangeness or non-familiarity, but only the absence of a feeling of familiarity. In other words, the feeling of familiarity would not have a polar opposite – in the case in point, a distinctive feeling of strangeness or non-familiarity. In this respect, it would be different from many emotions that have polar opposites, such as happiness and sadness, love and hate, or admiration and contempt (see Mulligan 1998).

The claim that the feeling of familiarity lacks a polar opposite would certainly deserve more discussion, but I am inclined to reject it since an important consideration seems to me to support the opposite claim. Some subjects have a visuo-affective deficit analogous to that of patients with the Capgras delusion, but in contrast to Capgras patients, they do not develop the delusive belief that one of their relatives has been replaced by an impostor (see Tranel et al. 1995). These subjects believe (indeed know) that the person in front of them is the familiar person whose face they can recognize, but report that their visual experience is strange, flat, that it is *as if* the person were somebody else.

Two theoretical options are available at this point. The first option is the claim that non-delusive subjects have the same types of feelings as Capgras patients. An additional factor, other than affective experience, must then be invoked to explain the formation of

³ The question of whether the strangeness experienced by Capgras patients belongs to the Uncanny in Freud's sense will be tackled later (section 5); my answer will be negative.

delusive beliefs in the pathological case. This factor is typically identified as a deficit tied to the mechanisms underlying belief revision. The patients form a highly implausible belief based on abnormal affective experience, but maintain this belief in the face of background knowledge to the contrary, which should lead them to revise the extravagant interpretation which they give to their feelings.⁴

The second option is the claim that the affective experiences of the two groups are quite different. While non-delusive subjects have merely lost the positive feeling of familiarity that we experience in front of a family member, Capgras patients have in addition a negative feeling of strangeness, which is so strong that they cannot refrain from forming the belief that the person with their relative's face must in fact be an impostor.

The latter option strikes me as more plausible. The former option is not very elegant from an explanatory point of view, since it assumes that the delusion arises from two factors that seem to be conceptually independent, namely abnormal affective experience and undermined capacity to revise one's beliefs. In contrast, the second option offers a unified explanation, but it entails that the feeling of familiarity has a polar opposite after all, namely the feeling of strangeness.

4. The doxastic analysis of feelings

Feelings of familiarity or strangeness are often tied to perception, but they do not seem to correspond to perceived qualities on a par with colour, form or orientation. There is indeed a tendency to describe the feeling of familiarity as if an aura or halo surrounded the familiar person ("the warm glow of familiarity"), but such descriptions are arguably metaphorical. As

⁴ For a defence of the two-factor explanation, see Max Coltheart and Martin Davies's contribution to Coltheart and Davies (2000).

Mangan observes, the feeling of familiarity “is not a color, not an aroma, not a taste, not a sound. It is possible for the feeling of familiarity to merge with, or be absent from, virtually any sensory content found on any sensory dimension” (Mangan 2001, Introduction). The feeling of familiarity, like other kinds of feelings, is not the experience of a manifest property in the world.

On the assumption that feelings are not intentional experiences like sensory experiences, how should we understand their relationship to the formation of some of our beliefs about the world? To answer this question, let us turn to the doxastic analysis of feelings once offered by William Alston:⁵

A subject *S* feels that *A* =_{df} *S* is in a conscious, non-cognitive state such that by virtue of being in this state:

(a) *S* has a *prima facie* tendency to believe that *p*.

(b) *S* has a *prima facie* warrant for this belief.

Clause (a) of this definition is psychological. What is a tendency or inclination to form the belief (or judgment) that *p* (whether *p* is a true or false proposition)? The subject who feels that *p* does not merely have the disposition to believe that *p*, which she might be unaware of. Rather, the subject feels an “inner force” that pushes her to form this belief. In many cases, the relevant tendency is *prima facie* in the sense that the subject may not actually form the belief that *p*. With more or less effort, she can resist this tendency. For instance, I feel that an unknown person is familiar, but I do not form the judgment that she is familiar, because I realize that my feeling of familiarity is due to the fact that the person vaguely looks like a friend of mine.

⁵ See Alston (1969, 25). Alston’s analysis, which concerns what he calls “adjectival feelings” (such as the feeling reported by “I feel tired”), is here transposed to feelings whose contents can be specified by propositions.

The question arises as to the sense of the phrase “non-cognitive” in the *definiens*. Alston is not fully explicit on this point, but I would like to suggest the following interpretation.⁶ On a plausible model, the content of a perceptual judgment *derives* from the content of the underlying sensory experience. For instance, I judge that the cup in front of me is full of coffee at least partly because this is what I see (or seem to see). In contrast, the content of a feeling is not independent from the belief that it inclines the subject to form. In this case, the content of the feeling derives from the content of the belief. In other words, feelings, but not sensory experiences, are *mere* (felt) doxastic inclinations. Following Alston’s happy metaphor, feelings only provide “seeds of cognition”. They do not constitute grounding experiences or evidential bases for our beliefs.

The analysis of feelings as involving doxastic inclinations provides a coherent account of what Sartre calls “perception of absence” (Sartre [1945] 2001). In his famous example, I perceive Pierre’s absence in his usual café. Of course, one might wonder how the absence of anything can literally figure in the sensory content of our experience. In this respect, the introduction of the feeling of absence is salutary. Such feeling is constitutively tied to the inclination to believe that Pierre is not to be seen in his usual café. In general, the occurrence of a feeling results from rapid parallel information processing at the subpersonal level. Thus, I can have the feeling that Pierre is absent even before I have consciously identified the persons actually present in the café.⁷

Clause (b) of Alston’s definition is epistemological. Feeling-based beliefs are spontaneous and do not rest on independent evidence, but they can still have some justificatory value or epistemic authority. If I feel that a person is familiar, I have a reason to

⁶ Here is Alston’s own elucidation of the phrase: “In the Hegelian tradition feeling is taken to be noncognitive because it contains no ‘subject-object distinction’. It is a seamless whole, though it contains within it seeds of knowledge that will flower when its implicit content is brought to light” (Alston 1969, 24, fn. 16).

⁷ For further discussion of the perception of absence, see Martin and Dokic (2013).

believe that the person is indeed familiar to me. However, my reason is *prima facie* in the sense that it can be defeated by other, more important rational considerations.⁸

The doxastic analysis also applies to existential feelings. What characterizes existential feelings is their doxastic “depth”, so to speak, that is, the fact that they can spontaneously generate beliefs that are background orientations or frames of reference for many other beliefs. The more an existential feeling is doxastically deep, the more the subject’s inclination to form the corresponding beliefs is irresistible and difficult to revise. This may explain that in pathological cases, patients maintain their delusive beliefs in contradiction to common sense. For instance, Capgras patients do not merely experience a local feeling of strangeness about a person who looks like a family member, but their delusive beliefs reflect a pathological frame of reference, according to which the relative has disappeared from the *visible* world in general. Nothing *counts* anymore as a genuine visible encounter with the lost relative.

Arguably, the depth of existential feelings puts pressure on clause (b) of Alston’s definition. In line with Wittgenstein’s terminology in *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1969), we might say that they give rise to subjective certainties rather than beliefs. Certainties are what the subject takes for granted; they do not play the role of ordinary empirical beliefs in inquiry. Thus, they are not justified and do not justify (even *prima facie*), but their epistemic authority derives from the fact that they are hinges of our epistemic practice.

⁸ Obviously, this clause deserves more discussion. It may only apply to feelings that are reliable indicators of some underlying facts. For instance, my feeling that a face is familiar reflects that my brain is used to process this face, which in turn is a reliable indicator of its familiarity. On externalist assumptions, my feeling can then be taken as a *prima facie* reason to form the belief that I know this face, even before I can identify it. For further discussion, see Dokic (2012).

5. Negative existential feelings and the sense of reality

The last issue that I would like to raise concerns the role of negative existential feelings in the constitution of the “sense of reality” or the lived relationship of “being in the world”. Whether the context is normal or pathological, the presence of a negative existential feeling reflects a significant change in the lived relationship between oneself and the rest of the world. The question is what influence such a change bears on the subject’s sense of reality or being in the world.

According to Ratcliffe, some existential feelings suffice to upset or shake the subject’s sense of reality. He writes that such feelings “often seem to be inseparable from distortions and diminutions of a sense of reality and of belonging to a world” (Ratcliffe 2008, 3). Ratcliffe adds that in pathological cases, the patients’ delusions are less beliefs conceived as propositional attitudes than *expressions* of a fragmented sense of reality.

I would like to suggest a slightly different perspective from Ratcliffe’s. First, I do not see any obstacle to considering at least some delusions as beliefs with (often not very specific) propositional contents.⁹ These beliefs result from negative existential feelings which, like other kinds of feelings to be found in non-pathological cases, constitutively involve doxastic inclinations.

Second, I dispute the claim that negative existential feelings always generate a disorder of the sense of reality. Such a disorder has to do with the impression of a *failure of coherence* among the subject’s feelings, sensory experiences, and cognitive background (her beliefs and knowledge). The subject does not feel “being in the world” when she has

⁹ A defence of this claim can be found in Bayne and Pacherie (2004).

difficulties in coping with reality in a coherent way, because of more or less persistent cognitive dissonances.

Obviously, many psychiatric disorders involve a deficient sense of reality. For instance, in schizophrenia, the absence of coherence among different sources of information (sensory, affective, and cognitive) at the subject's disposal is lived with difficulty, and pertains to her recurrent impression of being detached from the world and derealized. In this respect, the status of the Capgras delusion is less clear. At least some of the patients do not seem to experience a failure of internal coherence which would motivate them to revise some of their beliefs. On the contrary, they seem to have restored some pseudo-coherence by re-interpreting their visual experiences: "This person looks like my wife, but she is not my wife". Roughly, schizophrenia makes the subject oscillate between different experiential frames of reference, whereas the Capgras delusion seems to force the substitution of the ordinary experiential frame by another experiential frame according to which, as suggested above, the patient's relative is not part of the visible world anymore.

The impression of a cognitive dissonance can be considered as a kind of negative existential feeling. When the subject has such an impression, her sense of reality or being in the world is altered, and can produce, in extreme cases, delusive beliefs. However, delusive beliefs can also result from negative existential feelings, such as feelings of strangeness, in the absence of cognitive dissonance, as I have just suggested with respect to the Capgras delusion.

Moreover, an impression of cognitive dissonance can also result from a *positive* existential feeling. Patients with the Fregoli delusion declare that they often encounter in various places familiar persons (their wife, their father, etc.) who are cunningly disguised. As in the Capgras delusion, it is plausible that one of the key components of the Fregoli delusion

is a disorder of the mechanisms underlying perceptual identification. Fregoli patients have an *exaggerated* affective response to unknown faces. In itself, this response is best conceived as a positive existential feeling. If there is an additional negative affective element, it can only come from a higher-level impression, namely that of a dissonance between the patient's feeling of hyper-familiarity, her visual experience and her background beliefs and knowledge. Such cognitive dissonance might still be experienced by less delusive patients, but it is arguable that once the delusion is fully in place, some pseudo-coherence is restored and no cognitive dissonance arises anymore.

Freud's feeling of uncanniness clearly results from a cognitive dissonance which can shake our sense of reality. When we feel the anxiety-inducing strangeness of a human-like automaton or a wax figure, our sense of reality may break down for one moment, albeit without separating into fragments. To the extent that the feeling of uncanniness is tied to a cognitive dissonance involving familiarity, it is so to speak an existential "meta-feeling". It results from the impression of a cognitive dissonance between a feeling of strangeness and implicit expectations about the presence of a familiar thing or situation.

6. Conclusion

Our discussion has targeted a negative existential feeling due to a failure of familiarity, namely the feeling of uncanniness highlighted by Freud. I have analysed a central component of such a feeling, namely experienced strangeness, and shown that it is a distinctive phenomenological experience, which does not reduce to a mere absence of familiarity (even if the subject is aware of it). I have emphasized the constitutive role of feelings, especially existential feelings, in the fundamental organization of our beliefs and behaviour. Finally, I

have argued that the feeling of uncanniness is best conceived as an existential meta-feeling, which results from a cognitive dissonance between expected familiarity and actual strangeness of the relevant situation.¹⁰

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¹⁰ I would like to thank the Editors for penetrating comments about a previous version of this essay. I have tried to take at least some of them into account here.

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