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Emotion at the Edge

Abstract:
Are emotions internal episodes – psychical or neurological – as is often claimed? Some certainly are; but I maintain that an important class of emotions are "peripheral"; by this I mean that they consist in what we pick up from others' expressions of their emotions in words, gestures, or actions – or from surrounding circumstances of various sorts. These expressions and circumstances contain affect clusters that manifest themselves to us exophanously, literally "showings-forth." I explore both of these basic situations of "the transmission of affect" (Brennan). I also present an abbreviated periphenomenological description of various ways in which emotions have their own peculiar edges, thereby correcting and supplementing the common conception that edges inhere only in physical objects.

Keywords:
emotion, edge, periphery, periphenomenology, transmission of affect

There is a decided tendency to think of emotions as coming from *deep within us* – from the profundity of our being. There, in the psychical and/or physical depths, they are *fully felt*; there too, they *are our own*, exclusively so: others may have elicited or exacerbated them, but once they emerge in our innards they *belong to us,* they are felt as *part of us*. Moreover, as *singular*, they are felt to be uniquely ours: "ours to be in one way or another."[1]

1) Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962), 68. I replace "mine" in this citation with "ours."

This way of regarding emotion is strongly tempting, especially in Western modernity. It characterizes what Descartes called "passions": that is, what we experience as the result of an elaborate internal apparatus that includes the senses, animal spirits, the heart, and the brain. Other modern thinkers have followed suit – notably Søren Kierkegaard, who sees emotions as revelatory of who we are at various stages on life's way, with anxiety spread across all stages. In being anxious, we experience our life in its sheer possibility: as what each of us, uniquely, comes up against when we are confronted with the enigma of our existence. Similarly, the Romantic preoccupation with melancholy (starting a tradition of reflection that eventually leads to Sigmund Freud and Julia Kristeva) presents us with a model of emotion not only as stemming from our personal depths but as something virtually unfathomable in its rootedness in our human subjectivity. For all these thinkers, emotion stems from somewhere within us, however this "within" may be interpreted; consequently, we must think of it and deal with it in its essential interiority.

I

But all such emphasis on emotion as a creature of human and especially individual interiority, tempting and even convincing as it may be, overlooks another entire dimension of our emotional lives. This is its *peripherality*. I point here to the way in which many emotions occur at the outer parts of our experience, and often remain there as well. Such emotions are not situated within us, in some psychical or physiological substrate; they appear at, and often as, the perimeters of our ongoing experience. Their locus is extra-subjective, *out there* rather than *in here*; they are ad-herent rather than in-herent. We certainly feel them, but we take them to be impinging upon us or circling around us rather than upwelling from within us: thus as located *around* or *outside* us rather than *in* us. Let us consider several cases in point.

I receive a telephone call from a friend in Santa Barbara. She tells me of the sudden onslaught of mudslides in that city. In the immediate wake of the fires that have denuded the surrounding hills, these slides were released by a torrential rain last night. They have devastated more than 100 houses – crushing them outright with boulders brought down by the slides, inundating them with swiftly moving mud masses that measure up to 20 feet high; more than 30 people have been killed already. Her voice is tremulous, charged with apprehension, filled with fear – not so much for herself (her house is close to the danger zone but not in it) as for others who are more directly in harm's way. Her fears extend to the future as well: the campus on which she teaches is endangered, and she cannot help but wonder if students will be willing to continue coming to a place that has shown itself to be so vulnerable to extremes of weather as Santa Barbara has become. The intense emotion felt where she is – three thousand miles from where I'm at in New York City – is conveyed instantaneously to me: I not only sense her distress, I *feel it directly*. The brunt of her emotional state – expressed not only in her words ("terrible," "catastrophic") but in the tense pauses between them – get through to me right away: I not only take in her literal words but I sense the emotion which is conveyed by her voice – a complex emotion composed of dismay, terror, and concern for the future. The jagged edges of her distraught emotional state enter into the outer surface of my listening self.

For an emotion to have an edge, it need not be singular or simple; it can be (and often is) composite; but if it is passed on to others, it must have an effective edge. By "effective" I mean that the edge needs to have enough of a shape to be perceived, felt, and understood. It is this shape, amorphous as it may be by objective standards of measurement, that constitutes it as an edge. An emotion, no matter how diversely generated or

currently configured, comes edged, however fluid this edge may be. Thanks to its edge – to its perceived profile – it is transmissible to others across space and time, even across thousands of miles.[2]

This transmission is not confined to one-on-one conversations. Sometimes we "pick up" an emotion from a crowd of people we have just joined – say, their sadness. We may not know exactly from where in particular this sadness stems; all we know is that it is *held out* to us, as if proffered to our attention. As we first encounter it, it is at the periphery of our consciousness. As such, it is decidedly *liminal*, a threshold even if we need not pass through it, much less fathom from whence it comes. Its emotional locus is peripheral throughout: outside myself but also outside other members of the crowd from whom I take up the emotion. But such picking up by the edge, at the edge, occurs not only in the midst of crowds whose "collective effervescence" (Emile Durkheim) fosters such edge effects – a sometimes in ways that are felt to be irresistible by those who take them in, as at the Nuremburg rallies. Readers of novels are accustomed to the quite different situation where the reader feels that she can experience the emotions of certain characters quite directly: say, Swann's jealousy in *Remembrance of Things Past*. From perusing the pages of Proust's novel we actively sense – we enter into – the emotional state of Swann.

In each of the cases just mentioned – whether in cell phone conversations, direct pick-up from a crowd of which one is part, or from fictional characters, we witness an extraordinary situation in which *we experience emotions that are not our own*.[3] They do not belong properly, much less exclusively, to myself as the subject who undergoes them. It's true that the way I subsequently process them – take them *in* rather than take them *up* – is something that does belong to me. This is the *endogeny* of emotion and is to be distinguished from the *exophany* of emotion: its overt manifestation. Such *exophany* is what happens at the edge of any subjective process, and it cannot be reduced to the endogenous working of this process. It may well induce *exogeny* – generation from without – but in and by itself it is sheer showing, an emotional display.

II

The edges of my emotional life intersect with the edges of the emotional lives of others, real or fictive. It is a matter of an edge-to-edge situation, and as such it is the emotional analogue of other edge-tight situations – for instance, the experience of being "up against the wall," as when migrants find themselves confronted with a massive structure that abruptly forecloses further movement forward; or, more mundanely, when the tire of the car I am parking cozens up to a curb. The difference between the two ways of being edge-to-edge is that the edges of physical structures are more or less unrelenting – forcibly so with walls and street curbs, less so with the way the edges of my body fit within the clothes I am wearing. In all such cases, however, the material structure of one set of edges is contiguous with that of another set. Whereas with emotional edge-to-edge situations we are dealing with something essentially labile: something that is as likely to involve subtle suffusion as direct confrontation. Edges in these circumstances may have "character" – allowing us to identify them as emotions of a given *kind* (anger, fear, joy) – but they do not have a structure that directly reflects the materiality of their actual composition. Moreover, they are *yielding*: not merely as giving way to insistently applied pres-

2) By saying that emotion has an edge, I realize that I'm flying in the face of commonsensical views that attribute edges only to what is robustly physical. It is my contention that edges occur in many guises – some psychical (including emotions), some eventmental, some cosmic (e.g., edges of storms), and still others. My book *The World on Edge* represents a detailed effort to argue for the multiplicity of edges, and of types of edges, in human and animal experience. See: Edward S. Casey, *The World on Edge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), esp. Part One and Part Three.

3) I owe this formulation to Aaron Bernstein in his essay, "Anxiety," 7: "I am experiencing emotions that are *not mine*" (his italics). (Aaron Bernstein, "Anxiety," unpublished essay 2017).

sure but as reflecting the actual circumstance in which I and others are mutually embroiled, communicating at each others' edges in ways that are not mere records or registrations of an encounter but that incorporate the encounter and modify it in ways that are variously synchronized.

Take my experience of the Women's March in New York City in January, 2017 – when I found myself profoundly moved to be part of an enormous mass of people who were experiencing, *together*, a common revulsion at the election of Donald Trump. It was not that everyone in this mass of half a million marchers was experiencing exactly the same emotion; instead, it was a situation in which an emotion roughly characterizable as "chagrin" was being *shared out*, however diversely it was taken up by individual marchers. Such sharing-out occurred at the edges and through the edges of the marchers – not just because they were walking shoulder-to-shoulder *en masse* (this was a material condition of the experience) but because their emotional experiences were often deeply confluent. This was especially evident in the phenomenon of the swelling non-articulate collective outcries that were passed on by the crowd: coming from behind, moving through the part of the marchers where one was situated, and then passed on to those in front. At each stage, these outcries were conveyed by the edges of the acoustic mass that moved through the entire crowd with a rhythm and a wave pattern of its own. The result was that one complex but coherent emotion emerged from a heterogeneous conflux of intersecting emotional intensities that interacted at their edges, both those that were near and those farther away. All this was situated in an extraordinary interplay of near and far spaces for which no precise spatial metric could be given. The marchers felt themselves to be immersed in a densely qualitative matrix of emotional intersectionalities that put on dramatic display what Theresa Brennan has analyzed under the heading of "the transmission of affect."[4]

III

In addition to such collective situations of affective transmission, there are peripheral emotions one undergoes on one's own: for example, a pleasant state of mind as experienced in the lilt of a day in which most things have gone right. We feel uplifted, alleviated emotionally even though we cannot trace this to a single cause. This is not a matter of an intensely affirmative emotion such as joy – which for Spinoza is the emblematic example of a positive affect (one that increases our "force of existing" in and by itself). Rather, the pleasure seems to float around us, to surround us as it were. It is directly related to our experience of the day and seems to descend on us and surround us as an alleviating force.

There is nothing dramatic, much less melodramatic, in the kind of circumstance I have just described. Just for this reason, we rarely thematize it. Indeed, we often lack a distinctive name for such a situation, and for this reason it, and a host of other such non-dramatic peripheral emotions, have been passed over in many previous discussions of emotion – as if not worth our concerted attention. Yet they call for scrutiny as showing us a dimension of our emotional life that is rarely explored as such: that of emotions at and as an edge, emotions in their peripherality. Such emotions are "edgy" – by which I do not mean such as to put us *on edge*: to make us uneasy, nervous, distractable. Rather, being emotionally edgy in the sense to which I here point is a distinctive manner in which our emotional life is lived at the periphery of our fully engaged experiences. Such emotional edgefulness is literally ec-static, construing this latter term not as anything delirious or captivating but as literally taking us *out of ourselves* – out of our habitual self-repeating selves. They also take somewhere else than where deeply felt emotions take us. For they come not from within us but *from without*, and as such they transport us outside inured ways of being in the world that render us emotionally obtuse and insensitive. How can we understand better this emotional elsewhere, this outer edge of our affective lives?

4) See: Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

IV

An important caveat: just because emotions, gentle and strong, are often conveyed to us through their edges, and reach us through our own sensory edges, does not mean that they are superficial phenomena. "Peripheral" does not signify trivial or inconsequential. Just as Paul Cézanne brought Mont St. Victoire to our collective attention by an adroit interplay between the colors and edges of this mountain – showing its majesty in paintings that can be considered masterful edgeworks – so the edges of emotions, like the arc of bodily gestures, often contain in compressed form a sense and force of emotion not otherwise accessible. Far from being mere indicative signs of experience and meaning, the edges of emotions are *telling*: they tell us things we might not otherwise know. The alarm in the voice of my Santa Barbara friend was *all in its edge* – in the expressive configurations of her words she talked to me on the cell phone. She didn't have to say to me explicitly "this is important" or "this is dire": these tacit messages were contained as compressed within the emotional edges of the words she spoke and in the pauses between them. It was on the very emotional surface of her speech – taking "surface" to be a coherent site of edges – that the depths of her alarm became evident.[5]

If St. Augustine could speak of the "innumerable dens and caverns of memory," we can say of peripheral emotions something like the reverse: these emotions are found in the openings and at the surfaces of felt meaning. This meaning, whatever its origins and history, is brought to a mode of manifestation set forth by edges: the edges we hear, the edges we see, and the edges we imagine – all of these, all at once, in a dense but coherent amalgam of emotionality. Looked at this way, emotions, far from being "messy" as we are tempted to say, come to us with a precision all their own. I maintain that this precision – implicit as it often is – is due largely to their edge-structure.[6] For it is in their edges that emotions come to their fullest expressive being.

At the same time, emotional edges are capable of taking us beyond themselves. They invite their own transcending, taking us to places unknown and unanticipated. Listening to my friend on the phone, I actively imagined what it would be like to be buried in a sudden mud slide – how to cope with it if it were to enter my own home, driving me onto the roof. Edges, including emotional edges, have an *other side* to which we can gain access by an active emotional imagination. We can enter thereby into entire emotional edge-worlds that are *somewhere else* than in the immediate affective present. In this way the "fixities and definites" of customary emotional life are at least momentarily transcended, and we are *shown elsewhere*. This is not to deny that certain emotions are radically delimiting, foreclosing the actions of transcendence to which I have just pointed. Depressive moods, for example, tend to be constrictive in character and act to immerse us fully in them. But I am here emphasizing the way in which many other emotions take us beyond themselves into another psychic space, thanks to their self-eclipsing intentionality.

Jean-Paul Sartre considered emotions as efforts to transform, magically, certain circumstances that impede us.[7] But he missed the very specific means by which this can happen: the edges by which we both grasp the immediate emotional import of the situation and through which we can enter into worlds not otherwise accessible. These worlds are sometimes imaginary and thus purely possible but sometimes they are perfectly real – as when we begin to suspect the existence of a paranoid mind-set underlying an insistent series of ungrounded accusatory remarks. But we couldn't get to this concealed mind-set except through paying attention to the expressive edges of these very same remarks – to their articulatory structure.

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5) On the difference between edge and surface, see: Casey, *The World on Edge*, ch. 2, "Edges and Surfaces, Edges and Limits."

6) See: Eugene Gendlin, "Implicit Precision," in *Saying What We Mean: Toward a Responsive Order*, eds. Edward S. Casey and Donata Schoeller (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 111–137.

7) See: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Routledge, 2002), 40, 56–57, especially 56: when emotional, consciousness "abruptly transmutes the determinist world in which we live into a magical world."

V

In conclusion: a last distinction, an intermediate point, and a larger lesson.

A last distinction: We need to distinguish specifically peripheral emotions from the peripheral dimension of all emotions. The former refers to those emotions that are most explicitly and fully realized at the outer edges of our ongoing lives: especially those that come from being in the company of others where their transmission is favored (as at the Women's March) but also when I am by myself and feeling emotions that seem to come to me from a non-locatable elsewhere (e.g., a pleasant day). At the same time, all emotions have peripheral features – that is to say, their own distinctive edges in space and time. As such, they call for a close periphenomenological description that pays special attention to their very peripherality – all the ways in which they realize their edgewise being, their forming, being at, and (on occasion) exceeding their own edges.[8]

An intermediate point: Edges are not to be confused with limits. Limits are determined in accordance with pre-established standards and practices: the limit in infinitesimal calculus, the limits of pure reason, international borders, speed limits, and so forth. Where a limit is imposed, an edge is *ex-posed* – located on the outside of things and events in such a way as to reflect that of which it is the edge. In many non-emotional situations, an edge is an end-phase, a place of fading-out – where something *runs out*: e.g., the edge of this table on which I write. Emotional edges, however, not only peter out or perish, they *show* that of which they are the edge in striking and revealing ways. They are (in the concept I introduced earlier) *exophanous*: literally, "showing out." To that extent, they carry their bearer forward into our recognizance. They are de-limitative, expansive, distended. They are the revelatory profiles of emotional experiences themselves: where and as they manifest themselves – not only to others but to ourselves as well. I sometimes discover how I feel by the way I express my emotion on a given occasion ("I didn't realize how angry I was with him until I said those nasty things": here the shout-out is a show-out). Emotions then are, quite literally, *e*-motions: they move my "thinking-feelings" (in Massumi's term) out into the world, and they do so primarily by exhibiting their edges.[9]

A larger lesson: Not only do emotions have distinctive edges but the fact that this is so suggests that emotions themselves need to be understood differently. Negatively expressed, emotions are not just subjective states, mere passing episodes – in short, something merely transitory and trivial, mercurial and passing. Much less are they the opposite: fixed and predictable as if they were tokens of types. Instead, they are the kind of thing that flourishes in a third space that is neither fiercely subjective – the "inner self" that shies away from detection – nor transindividual: as with a disembodied spiritual self that is reputed to rise above emotion. They occupy an intermediate space: an in-betweenness (*bayniyya*) in Ibn Arabi's word.[10] In that space, they

8) By periphenomenological description, I mean an extension of classical forms of phenomenological description (e.g., those found in Husserl or Merleau-Ponty) to an attentiveness to what exists *around* or *on the margin of* a given thing or event. In devising this technique, my aim has been to de-emphasize undue stress on what is found in the central mass of the same thing or event – an effort that is often allied with a search for its essence. I here follow the general counsel: "by indirection find direction out." In practicing periphenomenology, I also pursue what I call "the logic of the less": from what is apparently minor or superficial, one can gain insight not otherwise attainable. On periphenomenology see: Casey, *The World on Edge*, 53–56, 300;–1, 315–16, 367; on the logic of the less, see ibid., 4–5, 335–36, and Edward S. Casey *The World at a Glance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 439–48.

9) On "thinking-feeling," Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (New York: Polity Press, 2015), xi, 15, 61.

10) See: William Chittick, "The in-between: Reflections on the Soul in the Teachings of Ibn 'Arabi," in *The Passions of the Soul in the Metamorphosis of Becoming. Islamic Philosophy and Occidental Phenomenology in Dialogue*, vol. 1, ed. Anna Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht: Springer, 2003), 101–114.

are neither wholly stable nor are they entirely in flux. Instead, they are *events with edges*: where edges give the requisite determinacy for an emotion to be expressed and recognized as such, to be nameable (however imperfectly), and to have sequelae in the life of the subject. And these same edges are the means by which we get in touch with our emotions, and through which these emotions show themselves to us and to others – just as we pick up others' emotions through the edges of their proffered words and gestures.

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