**Feeling Nothing: Numbness and Emotional Absence**

**Abstract**:I argue that it is possible for a subject to undergo experiences of emotional absence, during which she becomes aware of her own failure to be moved by the world around her. Just as a part of one’s body feels numb when it manifestly fails to incur the ordinary sensory consequences of transactions at the surface of the skin, so an individual feels emotional absence when her affective condition manifestly fails to vary in predictable ways as she navigates her surroundings. Experiences of emotional absence, such as feeling numb with shock or grief, feeling unamused, or feeling fearless, are not simply flat or neutral states of awareness, but can bear psychological and epistemic significance for the agent.

**I. Introduction**

Perceptual experience delivers an awareness of the ordinary furniture of the material world – objects with shapes, colours and sizes; sounds with pitch and timbre; odours and tastes of varying intensity and so forth. And, if recent literature is to be believed, perceptual modalities can make us aware of the *absence* of these ordinary sensibilia: we can see empty spaces, holes, and shadows (e.g. Richardson, 2010; Soteriou, 2011); we can hear episodes of silence, quiet pauses, and cessations of sound (e.g. Phillips, 2013; Sorensen, 2009); we can smell fresh air (Roberts, 2014); we can feel something missing, such as the gap where one’s tooth used to be (Cavedon-Taylor, 2017). On these views, it is not that the subject simply undergoes a lack of sensory experience, nor that she comes to judge or believe that she is receiving no input in the modality in question. Rather, she enjoys a perceptual awareness of an absence in her surroundings; a conscious state that is itself distinctive of that modality.

Emotional experiences, too, involve an awareness of ordinary things, albeit one that is complex and dual-faceted. On the one hand, an emotional experience is an awareness of the state of one’s body, and the characteristic forms of change and disruption it undergoes in response to affectively provocative events or circumstances (e.g. James, 1884; Damasio, 1994; Prinz, 2004) – for instance, the churning in the stomach and elevated heart-rate that comes with a surge of fright. On the other hand, emotional experience is an awareness of something out there in the world, and of its evaluative significance (e.g. D’Arms & Jacobson, 2000; Tappolet, 2016) – for instance, the precipitous nature of this lethal drop.

Is there any sense in which, parallel to the sensory cases, we are capable of experiencing *emotional absences*, and if so, what does it take to make these possible? In this paper, I argue that there is, indeed, a rich category of emotional absence experiences, and I offer an analysis of their structure and content, before showing why they are of psychological interest. Firstly, we can set aside the familiar class of emotions that constitute responses to absences in one’s environment, such as the state you are in when you miss or long for a lost companion, or are surprised to see that your car is not where you left it. Here, you are aware of the absence of something from your surroundings, and you experience an emotional disturbance as a consequence of this awareness.

The focus of this paper is a different category of experience; those that are appropriately characterised as involving a felt awareness of the absence of emotional disruption. An experience of this kind, I propose, is – in common with many ordinary emotional encounters – an awareness of one’s embodied relationship to one’s surroundings. It is the experience of the outside world’s failure to have its expected emotional effects upon one; or, equivalently, the experience of one’s own failure to be moved affectively by the outside world. To anticipate, this category includes feeling indifferent towards something; feeling unamused or unsurprised by unfolding events; and feelings of disengagement and dislocation from persons or places.

As in the perceptual case, experiences of emotional absence can be distinguished from the mere absence of the ordinary manifestations of emotional disturbance. They are not episodes in which the agent simply fails to undergo an affective reaction to her surroundings – this kind of prosaic occurrence happens all the time, for instance when we aren’t paying much attention to what’s around us. The phenomena to be described here, in contrast, are those that involve a conscious awareness of a failure to be emotionally disrupted by the world; a failure to be *moved* by the objects, states of affairs, or persons around one.

**II. Bodily absence and feeling numb**

In order to delineate the class of emotional absence experiences more clearly, it will be helpful to consider briefly how an experience of absence might show up in the bodily domain in other ways. A number of possibilities emerge when we reflect upon the notion of somatic and tactile absence perception. It is plausible, for example, that we can feel certain empty spaces, cavities, fissures, and so forth that exist in and between the objects and surfaces to which we have access through exploratory touching. It is possible, too, that we can experience properties of our own bodies, such as being stationary or weightless, that might be understood as absences of the ordinary ‘positive’ aspects of our bodily awareness. And there may be distinctive episodes like the feeling of a lack of ownership of a part of the body (e.g. De Vignemont, 2007), or feelings of a loss of the bodily confidence that characterises our sense of being capable of *doing* things (e.g. Carel, 2013).

I will not explore these options here, but will instead focus first on characterising a state that will offer an informative parallel to core cases of emotional absence: that of a body part’s feeling *numb*. That is, the kind of feeling undergone by an agent when she has sat awkwardly on her leg and it has gone to sleep, or when her hand has been submerged for a time in very cold water, or when an anaesthetic has been administered to her toe prior to surgery. These, I propose, are absence experiences too. They are cases in which the subject does not merely fail to have any sensations in the affected body-part, but instead is aware of her own failure to feel certain impingements by the world upon the body that are occurring at the surface of the skin.

Note that a numb appendage is not itself experienced as missing. It has not vanished as an object of awareness,[[1]](#endnote-1) and the feeling of numbness does not at all incline the subject to believe that the part of the body in question is absent. Moreover, a numb region is not (necessarily) felt as housing any particular ‘positive’ sensational quality, such as pins-and-needles, although a feeling of numbness can often transition into something like this as time passes. Where the region *does* suffer a prickle, twinge, or tingle, say, these qualitative aspects neither exhaust nor constitute the feeling of numbness. Lastly, feeling numb is not to be equated with a mere absence of feeling. If I put my non-numb hand in the air and attend to its condition ‘from the inside’ (that is, without touching or looking at it, and not simply by thinking about it), and it is not suffering from a pain or an itch, and it is not abnormally warm or cold, then this absence of feeling does not suffice for it to feel numb. We might say, instead, that it doesn’t feel any particular way at all, or perhaps that it just feels to be *there* – exactly how to characterise the feeling of bodily presence need not detain us here (but see, e.g. Anscombe, 1962; Bermudez, 2011). Given this, to say that a numb hand does not feel any way at all would not suffice to distinguish a numb hand from a regular, unperturbed one.

To feel numb, a part of the body must be acted upon, and it must manifestly fail to incur the ordinary sensory consequences of an action of that type. A hand or a leg feels numb, that is, when it is pressed, or tapped, or scraped, and these interventions do not go on to induce their ordinary felt effects – namely, feelings of being pressed, tapped, or scraped. The impingements that give rise to a feeling of numbness can be self-induced, as when we stroke one hand with the other, or move the numb appendage into contact with the world. Or they can be other-induced, as when someone else pricks the surface of our skin or squeezes the affected region. The subject must be aware that her body part is being acted upon in one of these ways – indeed, it is possible to be unaware that a part of the body is numb when an impingement upon it goes unnoticed – and this awareness can come in many forms: visual, tactile, kinaesthetic, and so forth. For example, a finger can feel numb when one *sees* its being stroked by another individual, or when one *feels* its being pressed against a surface, or when one *senses* its being caused to move by an external impact.

When our bodies are acted upon in these ways under ordinary conditions (when they are subjected to impacts, proddings, strikings, scratchings, and so forth), we are made aware of this by means of our tactile and somatosensory channels, which enable us to feel these events’ occurrence. It is important to unpack the phenomenology of experiences of this sort, so that the comparison with a feeling of numbness can be depicted most clearly. Feeling an impact from outside of the body differs from merely feeling a sensation *in* the body. In the latter case, such as a pang of hunger or an ache in the deep viscera, the experience is interoceptive: it is felt as occurring within the confines of the body. Hunger is felt as a disruption in or around the stomach, and an ache may be felt inside the cavity of the chest, for example. The cases of interest to the current discussion, though, have an exteroceptive aspect. They present the world as coming into contact with, and impinging upon, the body’s boundary (see, e.g., Mattens, 2017; Ratcliffe, 2008; Richardson, 2013). They are episodes in which the subject is aware of the way in which her body is being affected – aware of being pricked or prodded, knocked or pinched. As Berit Brogaard (2012, p.38) puts it, “tactile experiences are not conjunctions of bodily sensations and a perception of an external object having a certain property. They are perceptions of an external object causing certain bodily reactions”.

This exteroceptive character shows up, too, in a body part’s feeling numb. What is felt is not simply an absence of sensation in that region, but a failure of events in the outside world to cause their typical sensory consequences. We are aware of a pinching that doesn’t yield the feeling of pinching; or a pricking that doesn’t engender the feeling of pricking; or a scratching that doesn’t produce the feeling of being scratched. Experiencing numbness is thus essentially diachronic and interactive in character. It involves an awareness of an impingement upon the body from outside of its own boundaries, and of this impingement’s failure to feel the way that it usually does. In undergoing an experience of numbness, the subject’s sensorimotor expectations are thwarted: there is a disruption to her implicit sense of how her bodily contact with the world is apt to feel.[[2]](#endnote-2)

We can bracket the experience of numbness alongside other encounters with absence such as the perception of silence or darkness, not because a body part appears to be missing, nor because the subject perceives a complete absence of events at the boundary of the skin, but because there is an awareness of a lack of the ordinary sensory effects of contact at that boundary. The agent with a numb body-part notices a discontinuity in how the world is encountered with that body-part: something is felt to be missing from the ordinary order and flow of sensory experience. In this sense, a feeling of numbness resembles temporary hearing loss, which can involve a similarly uncanny sense of disconnect between what is perceived and what is expected to be perceived. When one is deafened by a loud bang and one continues to see sound-making events in one’s surroundings, one is aware of one’s auditory expectations being confounded; the world is manifestly not having its anticipated sensory effects upon one.

It is this picture that will be deployed, in the next section of the paper, in order to characterise the parallel phenomenon in the domain of affectivity: a kind of experience during which one is aware that the world is not having its anticipated *emotional* impact upon one. Once again, what is experienced as absent is the effect of an impingement from outside of the body, where one becomes aware of a failure to be *moved* by the way the world is, in respect of the bodily disruption that typically characterises an emotional encounter.

**III. Emotional feelings**

In order to motivate the claim that there is an illuminating parallel between the experience of bodily numbness and certain phenomena of absence in the emotional domain, we need to say something about how ordinary emotional experiences are to be understood. A number of competing theoretical treatments of the emotions exist, of course. Some emphasise emotions’ cognitive content and define them as evaluative appraisals of significant objects and events in the environment (e.g. Lazarus, 1991). Others highlight the felt character associated with emotional feelings (e.g. Whiting, 2011). Still others adopt a componential approach that takes an emotion to be a complex of psychological, phenomenological, and somatic properties (e.g. Scherer, 2009). For present purposes, we need not take a stand on which features, if any, make up the essential nature of emotion. All we require is the proposal that many familiar episodes of emotional awareness have a characteristic qualitative structure, to be described below, and that this permits a category of emotional absence experience to be identified. If there are emotions that are better defined in terms of their semantic properties, or by non-bodily cognitive feelings, or purely dispositionally, then these are apt to resist the model of absence experience to be developed here.

I adopt the common view that emotional experiences tend to involve an awareness of the pattern of changes to the body that typically occurs when something of personal significance – something fearsome, something offensive, something shocking – is encountered (e.g. James, 1884; Prinz, 2004; Colombetti, 2014). A core aspect of an experience of terror, for example, is the feeling of one’s body undergoing a disruption: the elevation of the heart-rate, the constriction of the throat, the shortening of the breath, and so forth. Moreover, these bodily feelings often involve an awareness of various urges, appetites, or dispositions to act (e.g. Frijda, 1986; Sheets-Johnstone, 1999). The vertiginous edge of a precipice inspires the urge to retreat, for instance; an urge that may require an effort of will to suppress. Conversely, a state of delight or affection can involve a feeling of being drawn to a person or thing. Additionally, an emotional state can involve a particular focused grip upon the attention. Something intimidating or awe-inspiring, for instance, can exert a felt pull upon one’s gaze or bodily orientation – it is something from which it is difficult to tear oneself away.

I will take embodied feelings such as these to be a typical – if perhaps not essential - feature of what an emotional experience is like for its subject. Indeed, for many standard cases it is difficult to imagine a vivid, felt emotional reaction to provocative events lacking at least some kind of awareness of bodily disruption. For brevity, we can refer to the somatic and behavioural disruption undergone by the agent when she has an emotion in terms of her being and feeling *moved*. Usually, we reserve this term for cases in which the emotion in question is one of peculiar delicacy or poignancy (you might be moved by a work of art, for example, or by scenic nature), but here it will be taken to apply to instances of affective perturbation more widely – that is, where the agent’s encounter with some provocative event or object results in a felt disruption to her bodily condition and behavioural orientation. For example, being stunned, astonished, or brought to tears; finding something amusing; becoming excited; or being repelled.

Just as tactile experiences can make us aware of the transactions that occur between external things and the surface of skin, emotional experiences can ensure that we are conscious of our embodied encounters with things of evaluative significance. Experiences of embodied affectivity are episodes in which we are aware of the ways in which provocative and significant goings-on in our surroundings impact upon our bodily condition and our behavioural dispositions. An emotional awareness of bodily changes - such as tensed musculature, a racing pulse, a knotted stomach, or sweaty palms – tends to be one in which those changes are felt as reactions to external events; as effects of an encounter with something scary or exciting, for example. Feelings of being moved, like tactile feelings in the tips of the fingers for example, can be feelings of a causal interaction with the outside world (see, e.g., Barlassina & Newen, 2014; Brogaard, 2012; Damasio, 1994), wherein we become aware of our affective relation to our surroundings. Sometimes, our experiential focus is on the state of disruption that lies within our own body; sometimes it concerns the external cause of that disruption. An experience of being moved by a sudden, incongruous event, for instance, is at once an awareness of a bodily reaction of surprise and an awareness of something surprising.

On this account, emotional experience – the experience of being moved by the events that transpire in one’s surroundings – is a pervasive feature of our lived, embodied contact with the world. We are continually moved along a variety of affective dimensions during the course of our ordinary dealings with things. Spaces are encountered as welcoming or hostile; persons and groups as warm or cold; habitats as offering obstacles or opportunities, and so forth. A situation can be comforting, threatening, inspiring, peaceful, depressing, etc., where each involves the subject being moved in a more or less subtle way, and feeling this embodied response unfold over time.

This pervasive pattern of emotional responding tends to evolve in ways that are predictable from the agent’s point of view, in terms of her grasp of how she usually feels towards her surroundings, and of what it is fitting to feel.[[3]](#endnote-3) For instance, one who has built a cosy home expects to be comforted by it; one who has a fear of flying expects to be made anxious upon boarding a plane; one who risks losing money expects a degree of disappointment at a poor investment, and so forth. That we have such expectations is evidenced by meta-cognitive reactions such as the surprise we feel when we undergo peaks or troughs of emotion that have greater than ordinary or warranted intensity. We often *notice* when we are more excited or nervous than usual, for instance, and we can be *taken aback* by the sudden vehemence of our anger or frustration. Emotional expectations, like our implicit grasp of sensorimotor contingencies (Noë, 2004), need not be belief-like, articulable, or reflective in character. Often, they show up in our bodily preparedness and the ways in which we hold and conduct ourselves, as when we wait for the gratifying punchline to an anecdote, brace ourselves to face something intimidating, or orient our gaze towards sights of potential interest.

The instances of emotional absence experience to be outlined in the following sections of the paper occur when these expectations are confounded,such that the world fails to have the impact upon her affective condition that is usually has. When an individual undergoes a conscious episode of this kind, she becomes aware of being *unmoved* by the state of the world around her – she experiences *not having* a particular embodied affective response to the objects, events, or persons that are the ordinary exogenous sources of emotional responding. In the experience of emotional absence, like the experience of bodily numbness, there is a failure to feel what one ‘ought’ to feel given the situation one is in. Emotional expectations, we will see, are of greater complexity than the sensorimotor expectations that are disrupted when we feel a numb hand or foot. One anticipates that the flow of one’s affective experience will vary according to a range of contextual, environmental, and social factors.

**IV. Emotional absences**

In what follows, I will introduce three broad categories of emotional absence experience. The first comprises cases where there is a persistent, global failure to be moved by one’s surroundings; the second those in which there is a felt absence of a particular, determinate emotional response; and the third scenarios in which what is experienced is the coming to an end of an affective condition. These categories allow us to better understand the nature of some quite ordinary mental state attributions, such as the description of a person as emotionally numb, or as fearless, unamused, or unsurprised.

Consider the emotional state that is endured by someone who is – our everyday psychological attributions allow us to say – *numb* with shock or grief.[[4]](#endnote-4) Such a condition can involve a persisting failure to be moved by the things that normally engage one emotionally: a failure to be amused or excited by typical sources of entertainment; to find solace in the usual sources of comfort; to be drawn to companions who tend to solicit feelings of warmth and tenderness; and so forth. Here, there is a prolonged and general pattern of emotional absence – a systematic loss of the qualitative ups and downs that usually colour an individual’s affective landscape. Not only is there a lack of the physiological disruption that typifies our emotional reactions, such as elevated heartrate or blood pressure, it’s also that urges, appetites, and grips upon attention and behavioural orientation are missing. One who is emotionally numb finds herself cast adrift from a world that used to be affectively engaging, emotionally disruptive, and a source of significance and value.

We are in a position to see, however, that it would be inaccurate to characterise such a scenario as one in which the subject simply fails to undergo certain emotional feelings during the period in question. Rather, the agent’s emotionally numb condition should be understood as one during which she is disposed to feel unmoved by the state of the world around her – just as for one’s foot to be numb is for it to be disposed not to feel its usual way in response to impingements upon its surface. Compare the condition of emotional numbness to my own present affective state. I am currently not undergoing feelings of amusement, tenderness, comfort and so on, and there is no special draw on my attention or bodily activity. Despite these absences I do not feel emotionally numb, because I am not at present aware of a systematic mismatch between the presence of things that ought to be affectively significant for me, and the absence of my emotional response to those things.

Suppose that the grieving subject, in trying to alleviate her emotional condition, attempts to enjoy a favourite film, or to be inspired by the drama and beauty of a natural scene. Normally, such encounters evoke embodied affective responses – laughter, tears, or a lump in the throat as the film’s narrative unfolds; a widening of the eyes, a release of tension, and an intake of breath at the scenic vista; and so forth. And, on the view of emotional awareness with which we are working, these bodily disruptions tend to be experienced as affective consequences of a worldy encounter. What is felt in the body is felt as a reaction that is caused by what is perceived – one has an experienced, embodied response to how the world appears to be.

For the individual who is emotionally numb, though, not only do these bodily changes fail to arise, their failure to be elicited by what is perceived is itself something that can come to the subject’s conscious attention. She can become aware of an absence of the reactions that she tacitly expects to have – a lack ofany urge to laugh or cry; any impetus to act; any inclination to widen her eyes or to gasp in delight. She can attend to the stillness of her face; the undisturbed monotony of her breathing; her lack of appetite for further engagement with what she is witnessing. Moreover, as with the somatic changes experienced during an ordinary emotional episode, the individual experiences the unmoved, undisrupted condition of her body as constituting her response to the events and objects that she observes: she feels untouched *by* the poignant narrative of the film; uninspired *by* the natural scene. Where her failure to feel ordinary positive affective qualities extends also to her interaction with other people, she may experience not being drawn to her loved ones; not being engaged by another’s conversation; or being indifferent to another person’s good or bad fortune.

Just as one’s numb foot or finger is the subject of a particular kind of bodily absence experience when transactions at the boundary of the skin manifestly fail to elicit their anticipated sensory consequences, then, an experience of emotional absence occurs when perceived events that would ordinarily evoke an affective response manifestly fail to do so. What the emotionally numb subject becomes aware of is her embodied affective state failing to vary along expected dimensions – for it to remain largely flat and unperturbed even as she faces provocative events and states of affairs. On the one hand, patterns of bodily disruption are experienced as missing: there is a felt lack of change to heart-rate, breathing, muscle tension, and so on. On the other hand, behavioural urges are experienced as missing: there is an awareness of one’s failure to be drawn towards things that would normally attract or interest one, for example. Feeling systematically unmoved is thus not simply a matter of failing to feel anything occur inside of one’s body; it is a feeling of remaining undisturbed by what is happening in one’s surroundings. Moreover, it is not merely a judgement to the effect that she has not been emotionally disrupted; it is something that shows up within the flow of her conscious awareness of how she is related to the world as an embodied agent with an evaluative perspective. She is conscious of her failure to react in the ways that tend to characterise an emotional encounter; things that ought to disrupt her, bodily, are met instead with unarousal, and she feels a lack of the behavioural pushes and pulls that typify our affective engagement with our surroundings. The experience is thus not only one that concerns the state of one’s body. Things in the world may also be of salience, in terms of their failure to grab one’s interest, to seem appealing or unpleasant, or to otherwise move or perturb one.

The failure of one’s emotional condition to evolve in the ways that one knows to be appropriate to the events and objects one perceives can, as with the case of a body-part’s numbness or with temporary hearing loss, be uncanny and disconcerting. The experience of the absence of affective disruption is an awareness of one’s emotional expectations being confounded. When our tacit sense of how our emotions ought to unfold is persistently falsified, it can be a source of disquiet, or a troubling sense of incongruence. The recognition that we are not responding with anger, for example, in the face of events that warrant this emotion, can feel out of character; and a failure to be attracted to and absorbed by forms of behaviour that one normally finds enticing can be curiously cold. Moreover, an awareness of being unmoved that develops in the course of interpersonal dealings with those who are close to one (feelings of a loss of warmth, a loss of comfort) may contribute to feelings of isolation and dislocation. If a partner, loved-one, or community manifestly fails to elicit feelings of affection and closeness, for example, this can strike the agent as something that is out of gear with her ordinary, familiar pattern of affectivity. Feelings of alienation, or a lack of connection to others, can thus be understood as a subspecies of emotional numbness, wherein there is a prolonged, manifest failure to be moved affectively by the people around one.

In contrast to pervasive or global states of emotional numbness, there are occasions on which there is a particular, isolated encounter with the world that generates a feeling of emotional absence. Rather than finding oneself cast adrift from the full pattern of ordinary affective engagement with the world, such cases involve a felt failure to be emotionally moved by only an individual aspect of it. Consider *compassion fatigue*, a condition that arises when one has exhausted one’s ordinary reserves of goodwill and fellow-feeling, but is faced with another appeal to one’s good nature (say, a request to donate time or money to a charity). A subject who suffers from compassion fatigue will, again, *be* unmoved by the appeal – she will fail to respond with concern, pity, or empathy – and this failure to be moved is something of which she can become aware. To undergo an episode of compassion fatigue is not simply to have no emotional feelings at all over a period of time, it is to experience one’s own embodied reaction to the world as one of remaining-unperturbed, in the face of circumstances that would usually move one affectively (by comparison, *I* am not currently feeling any pity or fellow-feeling, but I am not experiencing an episode of compassion fatigue). This emotional absence is experienced when one becomes aware of one’s failure to be moved by an ordinary object of compassion; a particular gap in the unfolding flow of affective responding to the world.

Or imagine that you are a member of the audience at a stand-up comedy performance, and you find that the jokes are profoundly unfunny, even though those around you are responding to them with clamorous mirth. Here, it is your being *unamused* that shows up in experience. Where an experience of amusement is one during which one is aware of being made to laugh by some goings-on in the world, an experience of being left unamused is one in which the transaction that enters one’s awareness is that of not being moved to laugh by such goings-on. You become aware of your own failure to respond affectively to the comedian’s routine – aware of having no urge to laugh or smile, no feeling of tension and release as punchlines are set up and delivered, no sustained grip on your attention, and so forth. In scenarios like this, the emotional expectations that are confounded are mediated by the reactions of those around one. It is the laughter of one’s neighbours, in addition to one’s grasp of what a comedy routine sets out to do, that heightens one’s sense that the context warrants amusement. The feeling of being unamused, then, arises from the dissonance between the expected reaction and one’s own unperturbed condition.

In some cases of individual emotional absence, what is especially salient to the subject is a lack of the engagement of urges or appetites. To feel bored or listless, for example, is – at least in part – to encounter things as not holding their usual allure. The listless person does not find pleasure or interest in her surroundings; things do not have their usual affective and motivational appeal. This condition resembles a more minimal form of the global experience of emotional absence that characterises shock or grief, although boredom can be penetrated to an extent that these more serious states cannot, and is more susceptible to voluntary regulation. Note, too, how boredom differs from a state of feeling calm, even though both of these involve an absence of emotional perturbation. In the former but not the latter, you actively find things uninteresting, as we might put it. There is an awareness of your failing to be grabbed or moved by what your environment contains.

Often, an individual experience of emotional absence transpires in the course of one’s dealings with another person. Consider the case in which an agent has forgiven someone else for a past misdeed, and feels an absence of resentment towards them; or when he has finally achieved the process of ‘getting over’ someone with whom he has been romantically involved, and feels an absence of longing for them; or when he has warmed to a person and feels unintimidated by them. In each case, when the subject encounters the person in question, part of what he experiences is being unmoved by their presence and attributes – he notices no simmering anger, no tug on the heartstrings, no flush of embarrassment. The agent’s awareness of his undisturbed bodily state, as he experiences an interaction with the former object of an emotional attitude, is an awareness of the other person’s failure to move him in the way that they once did, and of his own ability to navigate the encounter without the affective disruption that he used to feel. As such, this experience of emotional absence may be refreshing, or empowering: it may settle for the agent that he has escaped from an earlier pattern of negative or destructive emotion, and that he is now free to have dealings with another person that are unconstrained by animosity or embarrassment. While his unperturbed affective condition may still strike him as out of the ordinary, for instance if his prior emotional attitudes were long-held, it need not be a source of particular disquiet.

Some experiences of emotional absence involve an awareness of an affective state’s coming to a finish. Consider how it feels for a lengthy period of worry or anxiety to end. Suppose that one receives good news after a health scare, for example, or that a long-term financial gamble pays off. One’s initial emotional reaction may be a surge of pleasure or relief – a feeling with a positive hedonic character that is experienced, perhaps, as a qualitative rush within the body. Once this initial felt reaction has run its course, however, one’s affective condition is better specified as an experience of emotional absence. The sense of buoyancy or freedom that one enjoys as a result of being released from the strictures of prolonged negative emotion like anxiety is the feeling of no longer being in the embodied condition of that emotion. No longer being tense, restless, or jittery; no longer having one’s attentional focus drawn to the object of one’s worry in thought and action; no longer having a churning gut, taut musculature, or spiking adrenaline. It is not simply that an episode of bodily disruption has come to an end; it is that one becomes aware of the undisrupted state of one’s body, as a cessation of one’s earlier emotional activation. The experience of the absence of anxiety, then, is not to be identified with a simple absence of anxiety (just as the auditory experience of silence, for instance, is not to be identified with the simple absence of auditory experience) – it is an awareness of one’s own newly-unmoved bodily status.

Or suppose that a person is about to undertake a challenging or daunting task, such as going on stage for the first time or interviewing for a dream job. And suppose further that she conquers her nerves, bringing an anxious bodily state under control or denying it the chance to continue. She may, as she takes on the challenge, feel *fearless*. She feels, on the one hand, her bodily condition failing to erupt in the ways that characterise a state of alarm or apprehension - she feels her breathing and heart rate remain steady; her stomach fail to knot or lurch; her hands stay tremble-free and her palms dry. And on the other hand, she feels herself becoming unconstrained in what she can do, no longer being limited in her actions by an urge to stay tense or coiled up, or to resist eye-contact with others. Her relation to the world has changed, in the sense that she is no longer inhibited by her surroundings, and it is this transformation that characterises this experience of emotional absence. What is made manifest to her, in this case, is her failure to be daunted or perturbed by surroundings that might be expected to impinge upon her affectively. Far from being uncanny or a source of concern, this felt condition may be one in which the agent takes some satisfaction or pride – it is desirable, under these circumstances, to have mastered negative, potentially deleterious emotions to such an extent that one notices their absence.

A variety of emotional absence experiences are possible, ranging from widespread states of emotional numbness to more narrow instances in which it is a particular affective response whose absence enters the subject’s awareness. Each involves a disruption to - or a pause within - the diachronic flow of affective responsiveness that typifies our ordinary engagement with our surroundings. Agents like us are sensitive to interruptions, discontinuities, and non-appearances of these kinds in virtue of having implicit, embodied expectations that concern how our emotions will, and ought to, manifest themselves as we move through the world. Both the person with a numb hand and the person who undergoes an emotional absence will find that something is missing from their experienced relationship with the environment.

**V. The significance of emotional absence experience**

The above discussion has identified a category of experiences in which what the agent is made aware of has a two-fold character: on the one hand, she is conscious ofher own failure to be caused to have an embodied emotional response by happenings in the world around her; on the other hand, she is aware of those happenings’ failure to impinge upon her in an expected pattern of ways. Unlike familiar emotional experiences, there is no suite of bodily and behavioural disturbances – no lurching stomach, rapidly beating heart, shortening of the breath, face-pulling, or urge to conduct world-engaging action. This does not mean that the body disappears from view, however; instead, its undisturbed condition is experienced as an absence of emotional perturbation. Where an individual is emotionally numb, this condition is felt as a pervasive failure to respond affectively to the things around her; things that would usually draw her interest, and yield a qualitative payoff. In more narrow cases, the agent is aware of a specific absence such as a lack of amusement, surprise, or affection. When an emotional state comes to an end, too, the subject can be aware of her newly-unperturbed condition, including her freedom from that emotion’s behavioural constraints.

In what ways, we might ask at this point, are experiences of emotional absence significant for the agent who undergoes them? This is the question that will be addressed in this concluding section, where it will be shown that emotional absences can bear psychological, epistemic, and behavioural significance for the subject in many of the ways that ordinary emotions can. Notice, first, that being in a state of emotional absence – like feeling a period of bodily numbness - is something that can *strike* an agent at a time, as a condition that matters to her. It is an absence to which her attention can be drawn, and which can show up to her as surprising, troubling, or unwelcome. When one finds oneself unexpectedly unmoved by a familiar setting, for example, or by someone for whom one usually feels warmth or desire, this state can be a source of concern. The unfolding pattern of ordinary affective responding – the flow of emotional experience that is expected, and often sought out, by the agent – has been disrupted in such cases; it fails to evolve in a predictable way, and the subject is made aware of this failure. The absence of a particular emotional response at a time can also induce more complex psychological attitudes, for instance in a scenario where one comes to feel guilty about one’s failure to experience what seems to be a socially appropriate level of grief or anger, say, or where one is pleased to feel an absence of anxiety or resentment.

A state of emotional absence, then, is not something that can always be ignored – it is not simply a flat or neutral condition that has no impact upon the subject. In being a source of concern for the agent, experiences of emotional absence can be suitable targets of the familiar strategies of emotion-regulation that we deploy to alter, maintain, or give shape to our affective condition (see, e.g., Gross & Thompson, 2007). We routinely take steps to regulate our emotions, by altering our environment or our relation to it (for instance, by taking ourselves out of a stressful situation); by making cognitive changes (for instance, by coming to evaluate something in a new light); or by modulating our bodily activity (for instance, by slowing our breathing, or relaxing our muscles). Usually, these are put into action in order to reduce the feeling of some unwanted emotion, such as fear or embarrassment, or to promote some positive emotion like joy or hope. But a state in which there is a felt absence of emotion can prompt the deployment of regulative mechanisms as well. The grieving person, for example, may act upon her environment in order for it to elicit an emotional effect upon her, when she has felt nothing for too long. Someone who feels an absence of warmth or affection towards a familiar other, say, may alter her cognitive or imaginative state so as to rekindle her usual emotional reaction to that person. And someone who is unmoved by a performance or event – such as a theatre production, or a funeral - may try to work her body into a state of activation that befits the missing emotion, for instance by smiling or laughing, or by bringing herself to tears. Conversely, an individual may take regulative steps in order to induce a state of felt emotional absence or numbness, for example through the use of alcohol or drugs, if she wants to ensure a period of relief from the endurance of painful or undesirable feelings. A state of emotional absence can frustrate or resist such attempts at self-regulation, in which case the agent can find herself in a state of being unmoved that she cannot shake off, dislodge, or diminish. The absence can be recalcitrant in the way that a stubborn emotion can be, when it resists rational revision: the agent may know that her situation warrants a certain vivid emotional reaction, but find herself unable to escape her unperturbed condition.

Emotional absence experiences can bear epistemic significance for the subject, too. Ordinary emotions play a role in informing us about the state of the world and about our own condition, including our values, concerns, and interests. If I undergo a feeling of anger, for example, it can reveal to me my evaluative take on the situation – that there is something at stake that is of importance to me, for instance. Sometimes, an unexpectedly strong or enduring emotional state can disclose a concern or care that I didn’t know I had – as when I miss home more than I had anticipated, or feel a surprising depth of resentment towards a person I thought I had forgiven. A felt emotional absence can play a similar epistemic role in making one aware of things that do and do not matter to one. It is possible to learn from an episode of emotional absence that, for example, one’s affection for a person has cooled, or that one is no longer worried about the consequences of a decision. Further, an awareness of emotional absence can reveal something about one’s preferences and values – for instance that one no longer enjoys a certain kind of comedy, or that one’s taste in literature is not as sophisticated as one had thought. Or it can reveal a dissonance in one’s self-image, for example that one is not the hot-headed, passionate character one had viewed oneself as, or that one’s sympathy for others has limits. One’s manifest failure to respond with an emotion can disclose one’s character in the just the same way that the presence of an emotional response can.

Note, however, that experiences of emotional absence do not always improve their subject’s epistemic position in these ways, and may indeed leave her confused or uneasy. In undergoing the experience, a subject becomes aware of the relationship she bears to her surroundings – a relationship that involves a failure to be moved, affectively, by external goings-on. But the experience need not settle the question of who or what is responsible for this failure: does the emotional blame lie with *me*, the subject might ask, or with the outside world? Have *my* tastes in art or comedy changed, for example, or is the material really that bad? In interpersonal cases, too, the subject may feel an absence of warmth, attraction, or intimidation, say, but be unable to tell whether the emotional blockage is due to an alteration of her own cares and concerns, whether temporary or permanent; to a change in the person with whom she is interacting; or to some combination of the two. The source of emotional absence is not always made manifest to the subject of experience, and this ambiguous character may contribute to a sense of uncertainty or detachment.[[5]](#endnote-5)

**VI. Conclusion**

A great deal of our philosophical – and folk-psychological - thinking about our emotional lives lays its emphasis on the kinds of peaks and troughs that are associated with our most vivid affective experiences, such as euphoria and despair. Much of our emotional contact with the world involves being disrupted in a variety of bodily ways by our surroundings, and becoming aware of that disruption – being made to laugh; being brought to tears; being transfixed or repelled; and so forth. I have framed these embodied responses in terms of the subject’s being *moved* by the things around her, where this includes somatic effects like a raised pulse or blushing cheeks, and behavioural urges and appetites like being drawn towards or away from a person or object. It is common to be moved in these ways as we navigate material and social settings, and they tend to be coloured with a hedonic tone; the bodily conditions of shame or envy feel bad, for instance, while those of awe or delight feel good.

The lesson of this paper is that we should not neglect the class of cases in which we are *unmoved* by our surroundings, and so do not enjoy an emotional peak nor endure an emotional trough. In instances of emotional absence experience, what we become aware of is our own failure to respond to the world with a profile of bodily and behavioural effects. Whereas perceptual experiences of absence involve an awareness of something missing from the external environment, an emotional absence is akin to an episode of bodily numbness: what is felt to be missing are the ordinary affective consequences of one’s interaction with one’s surroundings. There occurs a failure to be impinged upon by events at the boundary of oneself and the world, and an awareness of the absence of the kinds bodily and behavioural disruption that is typically caused by affectively significant events and states of affairs. Finding oneself unmoved by the world can take the form of an inability to take pleasure in things, or to find them interesting or amusing for example; or it can be a deeper and more systematic loss of affective engagement, such as that found in a prolonged period of grief or shock. In the latter scenario, especially, the subject of experience incurs a sense of disconnectedness from her surroundings, as the emotional effects she expects to undergo fail to materialise in familiar ways. In more narrow cases, it is a particular emotional response that is experienced as missing, or as having come to an end – for instance, when we find something unfunny, unsurprising, or unappealing, or when we feel a bout of anxiety come to completion.

Experiences of emotional absence are not simply episodes in which we have no affective experience at all, and they are psychological states that can bear significance for the agent who has them. A person who experiences being unmoved by what is happening around her can find that condition unsettling or uncanny, in the way that a temporary loss of hearing or bodily sensation can be, or she can find it liberating or empowering if the missing emotion is one of which she is glad to be free. The way in which our emotional experience unfolds as we encounter the world matters to us, and to the way that we conceive of ourselves. One might hope and expect to be moved by another’s suffering, for example, or by a poignant work of literature. One might expect to be angered by injustice, say, or to find warmth and solace in the company of a loved one. Emotional absences are experienced when the agent’s embodied affective condition fails to register a response of these sorts, and she becomes aware of this failure.[[6]](#endnote-6)

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1. Cavedon-Taylor (2017) proposes that the absence of a body part can be experienced through an update to the body schema. Feeling a numb body part does not fit this model: it’s not an experienced change in morphology. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Feelings of numbness can come in degree. Sometimes, your hand feels completely numb, sometimes it feels partially numb. In the latter case, one’s somatosensory expectations are again confounded: what is felt when the hand incurs an intervention from outside diverges from what is expected to be felt, but it is not the case that the intervention has *no* sensory consequences. A partly numb hand can feel a bit of pressure; a bit of pricking; a bit of scratching, and so forth. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See, e.g., D’Arms and Jacobson (2000) for discussion. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. I intend for the experiences to be outlined here to be understood only as one possible element among the many that may characterise such an individual’s mental state. See, e.g., Prigerson *et al* (1995) for discussion of the varied symptoms of grieving, and Goldie (2011) for an account of how grief unfolds over time. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Goldie (2012) discusses the related case of our intellectual life “going cold” on us, during which we feel the absence of cognitive emotions like curiosity, fascination, and delight in discovery. This condition, too, can be “deeply debilitating” (p124), and leave us facing difficult questions about how to act in order to remedy our torpor. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for bringing this paper to my attention, and for highlighting the cases in which the agent cannot locate the source of emotional absence. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. I would like to extend my thanks to Giovanna Colombetti, Joel Krueger, the audience of the 2016 meeting of the European Philosophical Society for the Study of Emotion, and an anonymous referee for this journal, all of whose comments and suggestions improved the paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)