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## **Liminal moods and sense-making under conditions of uncertainty**

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### **Abstract**

*Researchers have begun to recognize the importance of intuition and strategies of affectively grounded sense-making, specifically in the context of late modern societies which are characterized by high degrees of uncertainty, risk and rapidly changing environments. In fact, affectivity has been considered one of the most central features of today's permanently liminal forms of life. However, the roles of different varieties of affective experience have not yet been fully taken into consideration. Drawing from Gilbert Simondon's theory of individuation, we here focus on moods specifically and develop a theoretical perspective on how moods functionally contribute to situated sense-making under conditions of uncertainty. We thereby hope to contribute to solving some of the problems psychologists keep having with mood experiences. At the same time, we think that our approach will prove fruitful for studying processes of sense-making in undecided and open (social) environments.*

Keywords: Mood, affect, liminality, Simondon, sense-making

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## Introduction

Research has come to recognize the importance of in-between strategies of intuitive and affectively grounded sense-making for situated cognition and action. As a consequence, affective reasoning is no longer seen as irrational and inferior form of sense-making, but as perfectly reasonable and in many situations necessary strategy. In a review article, Zinn suggests “that instrumental rationality is only one decision-making strategy amongst others and is not necessarily dominant or superior” (Zinn, 2016, p. 348). He argues that “[f]or a number of reasons [...] people would complement or supplant rationality with other *in-between* strategies such as trust, intuition and emotion utilising sources of so-called *tacit* or *experiential knowledge*” (Zinn, 2016, p. 348, emphasis in the original). In trying to understand how actors make sense of what is going on in their everyday environments and develop practical orientations for dealing with the challenges of the everyday, Horlick-Jones, Walls & Kitzinger (2007) thus conclude that one should no longer follow a normative distinction between so called rational and supposedly irrational strategies of decision- and sense-making but that one should attempt to describe the “bricolage of everyday reasoning” (Zinn, 2016, p. 349). With the term “bricolage” they refer to collective and dynamic processes of reasoning which involve a wide range of strategies that cannot be neatly separated into rational=functional versus irrational=dysfunctional categories.

Within a wider, socio-historical framework, many theorists of modernization (Beck, 1992; Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994; Rosa, 2013) have also been emphasizing the importance of undecidedness, insecurity and risk not only as important aspects of personal and collective decision-making, but as structural features of contemporary (Western) societies. In light of these socio-historical diagnosis of contemporary forms of life, Zinn argues that if these theorists are “correct regarding a general societal change towards a *risk society* or *risk culture*, *in-between* strategies are more important when expert knowledge is fundamental but contested in dealing with future challenges. In *late* or *reflexive modernity* people are increasingly exposed to fateful decision-making in everyday life with neither sufficient time nor available knowledge” (Zinn, 2016, p. 349, emphasis in the original). There has been an ongoing debate in the context of modernization theory concerning the question of potentially destructive consequences of social environments that expose actors to high degrees of uncertainty and risk. In his theory of acceleration, for instance, Rosa (2013) discusses the erosion of normatively binding frameworks that can provide orientation for actors in their everyday lives and attests contemporary, highly accelerated societies an increased potential for alienation. Twenty years before, Beck (1992) argued that while risk societies provide actors with unprecedented options for choosing their own fate, the lack of structural securities as well as normative orientations tends to overstrain actors’ capacities for dealing with the undecidedness of late modern life. Thus, stress, depression and practical disorientation would be the inevitable consequence of a structural indeterminateness at the peak of late modernity.

While such theoretical perspectives on modernization provide convincing arguments for analysing macro-level socio-historical developments and processes, they cannot provide theoretical, let alone empirical insight in how actors in today’s society deal with risk and uncertainty on a day-to-day basis. Rosa hints at various possibilities for experientially dealing with accelerated life at points in his work (Rosa, 2013, pp. 224-250), however, this is still a desideratum for further research.

From a risk-research perspective, Horlick-Jones (2005) and Horlick-Jones, Walls & Kitzinger (2007) have been developing a general framework for studying the different strategies that actors might use in coming to terms with ever changing and uncertain environments. They emphasize that the use of different strategies should be studied contextually, i.e., in relation to changing conditions and situations which enable different modes of reasoning and sense-making. Concrete decisions would then be reached processually, involving the aforementioned “bricolage” of strategies and always relationally embedded in a specific situational configuration, which has to be taken into consideration when trying to understand, how actors come to deal with their world. While generally agreeing with Horlick-Jones, Walls & Kitzinger (2007), Zinn (2016) criticizes that the authors do not fully take into account the role of affectivity (emotions, moods, intuitions, etc.) in this process (Zinn, 2016, p. 349). In his own contribution, he consequently focuses on the role of emotion and intuition in open processes of sense-making. This is relevant not only from the perspective of the contemporary turn to affect in the social sciences (Gregg, & Seigworth, 2010), but also in light of the importance that is ascribed to affective phenomena in the context of modernization theory (see for instance, Rosa, 2013, p. 224-250). In this paper, we focus on an aspect that has not been covered in detail by Zinn, namely the distinction between different varieties of affectivity that have been discussed in psychology (Armon-Jones, 1991, Davidson, 1994, Frijda, 1993, Russell, & Barrett, 1999) and how these differences between affective experiences pertain to situated sense-making and uncertainty. We focus specifically on one set of affective phenomena, which have proven conceptually challenging in the psychological literature: *Moods* have been described as a functionally and phenomenologically distinct form of affect (Frijda, 1993, Parkinson, Totterdell, Briner, & Reynolds, 1996); however, researchers have not yet been able to come to a conclusion on how to interpret the specific features of moods. We argue that - in contrast to emotions, emotional episodes, sentiments, and other shades of affectivity - the distinct features of moods relate to their specific functional role in the context of sense-making and relational orientation toward (undecided) situations. We find preliminary evidence in recent experimental results which link moods to uncertainty and the undecidedness of a situation (Eldar, Rutledge, Dolan, & Niv, 2015, Raoult, Moser, & Gyax, 2017). The latter find experimental evidence for mood as a “cumulative expectation mismatch”. However, both approaches pay little attention to the conceptual problems that psychologists have been having with moods. These problems concern two distinct (but ultimately interrelated) features of moods. One is the intentional structure of moods, the other is their peculiar phenomenal character. Both originate in the fact that we experience moods different from targeted emotions. As Frijda (1993) describes, emotions are usually short-term, targeted affective responses to more or less specific events or objects we encounter. In contrast, moods usually evolve over longer periods of time while lacking a specific target. Thus, respondents often describe their current mood state as being about nothing (in particular) or everything, the whole world, or the like. Mitchell discusses the problematic of mood-intentionality in an informative paper (2019) and based on his critique of existing approaches, we argue that moods are not about a situation already decided, but about a process of becoming situated. In our approach, we build on Simondon’s concept of the ‘affectivo-emotive’ which links affectivity to open processes of individuation and - within these - specifically to the persistence of preindividual potentials which have not yet been incorporated in a stable relation between a subject and its associated milieu.

In this paper, we argue that moods - understood as liminal affective processes - are indeed highly relevant for understanding liminal practices of sense-making and action. We furthermore argue that moods are part of pre-reflexive experiences which oscillate between a passive receptive pole and an active-emotive pole. While the former constitutes an awareness of conflicting potentials for becoming situated (the preindividual in Simondon), the latter pole expresses an orientation toward the resolution of preindividual ambivalence through the actualization of a temporarily stable relation between subject and environment. The occurrent phenomenal profile (the experienced mood “state”) can consequently be understood as an embodied, evaluative feeling of how one is doing in the process of becoming individual.

In building our argument, we move as follows: in the first section, we set the stage by arguing, how liminality and uncertainty are in fact increasingly relevant features of contemporary (Western) societies. Against the backdrop of this broad social-theoretical framework, we turn to recent approaches to sense-making under conditions of uncertainty and risk and the role that affectivity plays in processes of coming to terms with undecided situations. Specifically, we discuss Raoult et al.’s (2017) theory of mood as cumulative expectation mismatch and show, that while their approach is interesting for its recognition of the intrinsic connection between mood as a processual phenomenon and contexts of uncertainty, they do not fully take into account the complexity of mood experiences. In the following section, we revisit the conceptual problematic of mood experiences and present our own approach. In doing so, we make use of Simondon’s concept of an ‘affective-emotive’ and discuss its role within the theory of individuation as presented by Simondon.

In the last section we return to the question of liminal decision-making by showing, how a Simondonian concept of moods as transitory experiences of becoming (individual) might be used as a conceptual lens for studying liminal practices and experiences. Concluding our paper, we propose some lines for further research as well as potentially rewarding fields of application.

## **1. Liminality and uncertainty in late modernity**

For some time, modernization has been understood through a paradigm of bureaucratic rationalisation (Weber, 1978). Following this paradigm, modernity is to be characterised by a high degree of rational planning, organisation and bureaucratization in different spheres of society. In dealing with the rigid normative demands and rules of such a situation, expert cultures would develop as (relatively small) classes of experts would be equipped and educated to make informed decisions based on the intelligible evidence gathered from a transparent social structure. At the same time, a (comparatively large) number of lay persons would be excluded from rational decision-making processes, simply because their practices of sense-making would be ill equipped to deal with an overflow of information. Within this paradigm, decision-making itself is regarded as either rational (based on an intelligible organization of society) or irrational. Irrationality here would mean that agents would simply not possess the information or problem-solving capacity for dealing with an (in principle) transparent socio-structural apparatus. Thus, lay person’s attempts at sense-making would be strictly inferior to those of experts.

This paradigm of rationalisation has been criticised by social theorists like Beck (1992), Beck, Giddens, & Lash (1994), Bauman (2012) and Rosa (2013). Despite the conceptual differences between their respective approaches, all these authors share the conviction that

late modernity is no longer to be characterised as becoming increasingly homogenous, structurally coherent and rational, but that societies are becoming more and more complex, ambivalent and structurally open to situations of indeterminacy, risk and uncertainty. This is reflected in theoretical labels like ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992), ‘reflexive modernity’ (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994), or ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman, 2012).

With regard to agent’s practices of sense-making, Thomassen (2014) has been arguing that late modern societies force actors into processes of permanent liminality. Using a concept that has originally been developed in the context of ritual theory by van Gennep (1919) and later Turner (1969) and that is being deployed by Sczakolczai (2009, 2017), Greco & Stenner (Greco & Stenner, 2017, Stenner, 2017), liminality refers to a phase of transition between (relatively) stable social arrangements and subject positions. Traditional examples for liminal transitions would be the passage from childhood to adulthood, or from bachelor\*ette to married person. While these examples would indicate a primacy of social status positions and a merely intermediary role of liminal phases, Thomassen (2014) as well as Greco & Stenner (2017) argue that under late modern conditions, liminality is becoming more and more predominant throughout the life span of the individual but also groups and social communities. For instance, contemporary professional careers are no longer defined by an occupational profile, let alone one’s affiliation with one company, but by a succession of project-like (in plural!), more or less extended phases of reorientation, training and searching for the next opportunity. Thus, liminal transitions from one job/training setting to the next are becoming increasingly important, while phases of relative stability tend to be experienced as resting points on a tumultuous path (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016).

From this the question arises, what allows agents to deal with the increasingly liminal aspects of life? After all, the demands on agent’s cognitive, affective, and practical abilities should be expected to differ in a situation of liminality, uncertainty and ambivalence as compared to one of relatively stable normative guidelines and structural determination. There have been different attempts to distil structural features of liminal experiences on a macro-level. Rosa for instance discusses structural determinants of experiences of alienation, but also typical figures of self-world orientations such as ‘the drift’ and ‘the surfer’ which would allow actors to find at least minimal orientation while skilfully navigating a constantly moving stream of experiences and circumstances (Rosa, 2013, pp. 224-250). Some of the difficulties social scientists keep having with contemporary forms of liminal experience might have to do with a tendency that Virno (2004) criticizes in modernization theory, namely to approach the openness of contemporary forms of life through contrasting them with the normative stability of pre-modern society. In such a perspective, openness and liminality are often seen primarily through a lens of loss (the loss of orientation, certainty, security, etc.). Apart from the problem that such a perspective risks misrepresenting both pre-modern and contemporary self-world relations (think, for instance, of the presumed “security” of the early modern family and the so called erosion of family values), Virno argues that any attempt at understanding contemporary forms of life based on a conceptual framework suited to previous social forms, must inevitably miss the novel aspects of today’s experience. Virno thus urges to give up not only on certain conceptual tools but on the whole framework of modernization as a meta-narrative for understanding contemporary life. In his own attempt, he focuses on the affective dynamics of (collective) experience in societies after modernization thus pointing toward the importance of non-rational modes of sense-making. Similarly, Paul Stenner has been emphasizing the importance of pre-reflexive, embodied and affectively grounded

experience in today's liminal environment (Stenner, 2017). In Stenner's work, the affective dynamics of experience is embedded in a process theoretical framework based on the work of Whitehead (1985) and Langer (1948). In Whitehead's terms, non-rational, imaginative and affective forms of sense-making are not to be seen as alternatives to reflexive reasoning and conceptual comprehension, but as aspects of processually unfolding encounters with the world, where any act of cognition (as well as motivation, action, etc.) presupposes a pre-reflexive encounter with the world, a prehension of meaning which is based on an affective coupling. At the same time, just as cognition processually presupposes pre-reflexive sense-feeling, conceptual comprehension enables new possibilities for future encounters with the world in an ongoing, relational process.

This focus on different modes of sense-making as part of a primordial entanglement between an affectively concerned agent and her environment brings us full circle to Horlick-Jones, Walls, & Kitzinger's (2007) bricolage concept of sense-making. Their point of departure is mirroring the above mentioned distinction in the context of bureaucratic expert cultures. The traditional stance was to equate expert knowledge with rationality, while treating lay person's knowledge as synonymous with irrationality. Horlick-Jones, Walls, & Kitzinger (2007) have argued that this picture is inadequate under conditions of increasing structural undecidedness in contemporary societies for a variety of reasons. In short, neither is it useful to think of lay people's strategies of sense-making as simply irrational and thus inferior, nor do experts rely on purely rational considerations when deciding about uncertain outcomes. Thus, Horlick-Jones (2005) concludes that "the diversity of risk-related reasoning practices [involving a strategic coupling of expert and lay practices and experiences, comment by the authors] needs to be recognized as an important topic for investigation in its own right" (Horlick-Jones, 2005, p. 254, emphasis in the original). To this end, Horlick-Jones, Walls, & Kitzinger (2007) have been developing a categorial schema for analysing different sense-making strategies on a collective level, which involve experts and lay persons in their shared struggle for making sense under uncertain and ever changing environmental conditions. While their work provides an important starting point for researchers interested in how we practically deal with risk and uncertainty in everyday situations, it has been noted by Zinn (2016) that this approach by and large ignores the important role of affectivity (e. g. emotions, feelings, etc.) processes of sense-making.

Zinn (2008, 2016) discusses the potential contribution of emotions to decision-making at some length, referring to psychologists having found a growing number of emotion categories that correlate with different aspects of decision-making (Zinn, 2016, p. 353-356). He mentions basic psychological emotion categories such as anger, shame, and disgust; however, on a conceptual level there are issues with relying on manifest (i.e. verbalized) emotion categories when dealing with decision-making processes under conditions of uncertainty. For instance, the distinct affective evaluation of undecided situations is often not (yet) transparent to agents living through them, which raises questions about the reliability of self-report data. This is specifically the case, when respondents are asked to choose from a list of pre-defined emotion categories to describe their affective state. In open response formats, respondents tentatively explore different descriptions of how they are feeling and these descriptions do not always fit neatly into traditional emotion categories. While Zinn refers to canonical psychological emotion categories, he also includes hope, faith and belief in his triangular model of decision-making strategies under conditions of risk (Zinn, 2016, pp. 356-359). It is unclear, whether these should be considered emotions in the same sense as the aforementioned anger, shame, etc. Zinn's overall aim is to argue,

that different aspects of affectivity are indeed relevant (and necessary) for understanding sense-making and decision-making; however, he does not specify, whether different emotions (or different classes of affective experiences) might have different functional roles with regard to an actor's overall orientation in an uncertain environment. From a phenomenological perspective, the functional role of hope for instance, has been discussed by Ratcliffe in the context of his concept of 'existential feelings' which he regards to occupy a distinct position in the experiential field of an agent (Ratcliffe, 2013). Existential feelings are thus ontologically fundamental modes of encountering the world. Drawing from Heidegger (1993), Ratcliffe (2002, 2005) argues that any intentional directedness toward occurrent situations in one's life already presupposes a fundamental feeling of connectedness. Certain clinical syndromes, such as depression (Ratcliffe, 2010, 2013) show the importance of a fundamental sense of being-in-the-world. At the same time, Ratcliffe makes it clear, that the function of this kind of fundamental affective attunement to the 'world' in its most general sense is distinctly different from emotions targeting specific events or objects encountered within the already established horizon of a life-world. With regard to Stenner's (2017) relational perspective, existential feelings would much rather pertain to a most basic level of affective concern (thus grounding any specific practice of sense-making in a primordial feeling of belonging) than to any specific act of comprehension. Consequently, a social-psychological understanding of the interrelations between different affective experiences and processes of sense-making and action must take the conceptual differences between these varieties of affect into account. We intend to contribute to such a conceptual differentiation by taking the particular distinction between emotions (such as fear, anger, disgust, and the like, to which Zinn refers) and moods (Frijda, 1993) as a starting point in the following section. We will then show that moods are indeed a distinct and functionally important aspect of liminal practices of sense-making.

## 2. Emotion, mood and sense-making under conditions of uncertainty

Various psychological theories of emotion and specifically cognitivist approaches that situate affectivity within a general theory of sense-making (Oatley & Johnson-Laird, 2014, Scherer, 2005) describe emotions as targeted responses to identifiable objects or events that one encounters. As such, emotions are typically characterised by a combination of an antecedent (the event triggering the emotion), a distinct experiential quality (how the triggering event is experienced through the emotion), and a motivational tendency associated with the emotion so felt (an orientation toward the stimulus-event, often in the form of an action motivation). A classic example for an emotion would therefore be that I experience fear upon facing a large, black dog, baring its teeth at me. There has been an ongoing debate on the question, whether emotions rest on a conceptual comprehension of the stimulus event in the sense of a propositional judgment about the object encountered. Some argue that an emotional evaluation of an event can (in principle) be formulated propositionally, as in the sentence "This dog is frightening". Others argue that emotions do not rely on a propositional structure. Helm (2002), e.g., regards emotions to be felt evaluations, that is, immediate bodily feelings that provide a pre-reflexive sense of how we relate toward a situation. For our general line of argument, however, the question whether emotions require reflexivity or merely involve a bodily felt qualification of an event is secondary. In both cases, emotions are thought as intentionally directed at specific objects in one's experiential field and in both cases emotions are typically experienced as

immediately following the occurrence of the object. Usually, the emotional response is conceived of as ebbing off soon after the affective event. In this regard, Frijda (1993), for instance, refers to the distinction between an initial emotional response and potential longer lasting residual effects of an emotionally relevant event. Such after effects would occur only, if the initial emotion exceeds a certain intensity (and thus cannot be dealt with in time), or if the original emotion eliciting event is reinforced by consecutive stimuli. One can see that the experiential quality of an emotion proper is directly determined by the evaluative import of the triggering event.

Thus, the intentional relation between the agent and the emotion eliciting event is crucial for understanding the emotional experience, both content-wise and with regard to phenomenological quality. In both regards, mood experiences differ considerably from emotional responses like the one in the dog-example. First, moods seem to lack an intentional directedness at specific events or objects. As we mentioned in the introduction, respondents often describe their moods to be about everything, nothing in particular, or even anything and nothing. Even if one were to be able to point out features of one's situation that seem subjectively relevant for the mood experience, this connection is usually rather loose and prone to shifts over time<sup>1</sup>. The apparent lack of intentional directedness of moods has been interpreted differently in the psychological literature. Mitchell (2019) discusses these options and finally proposes to conceive of moods as being intentional after all, but in the specific sense of providing a global assessment of one's overall relation to the world. We will return to this point below. For now, it is important to note that in contrast to emotions, moods lack an immediate and identifiable orientation toward an object or event. Thus, their contribution to processes of sense-making cannot be that of an affective judgement or felt evaluation of any particular object, but must be sought in a more general form of sense-making. The second discerning feature of moods is their particular phenomenal quality, that is, the way they are felt and experienced by actors. This differentiating criterion is mentioned frequently in the literature, however, its discussion is mostly restricted to moods extending for longer periods of time and generally being experienced as low intensity affective states that often linger on the edges of consciousness instead of being dominant in one's experience of what is going on. Frijda (1993) considers some of the relevant empirical evidence, coming to the conclusion that moods are best characterised as global and diffuse affective states which affect the way one thinks, feels, acts and perceives the world in an encompassing sense. It has been precisely the globality of mood experiences that has led researchers from the phenomenological tradition to describe mood as affective attunement which shapes the whole field of experience in accordance with its particular affective profile (Elpidorou & Freeman, 2015, Freeman, 2014). Following Martin Heidegger (1993), phenomenologists have employed a categorical distinction between occurrent moods – i.e., everyday instances of consciously felt mood –

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<sup>1</sup> We cannot discuss this in detail here, but consider being at a particularly lively party feeling cheered up and adventurous. In such a situation you might be tempted to point at different features of the situation in succession: that the music is particularly enjoyable, the snacks and drinks taste delicious and the conversations are spirited. Still, you would most likely not be able to point at one particular aspect of the situation being responsible for your mood. And it might even occur to you that the same music has failed to impress you that much on other occasions, that you usually don't care so much for this particular drink, etc.. All of this raises the question, whether your specific experience of situational features is really the reason for your cheeriness, or whether, in contrast, it is your mood state that *colours* the situation in an unusually bright tone.



and fundamental moods as experiential frameworks that need not manifest themselves consciously but provide a most basic tonality for all of an agent's experiences of and practical orientations toward the world (Elpidorou & Freeman, 2015, Slaby, 2017).

For our ensuing argument, one other aspect of the experience of moods is of specific importance: Moods are prone to shifts and (often quite sudden) changes. This is evidenced by everyday language ("mood swings", being "moody", etc.) as well as first-person accounts of moods. Nevertheless, the oscillating and ephemeral character of moods has been relegated to a side consideration in most of the literature. When considered at all, these oscillations have been discussed either in the context of the rhythms of physiological affect (which we would distinguish from the phenomenally rich experience of mood proper), or in the context of mood regulation (Parkinson, Totterdell, Briner, & Reynolds, 1996). As an exception, Kenaan (2017) recently suggested to think of moods as experiences that are intrinsically open to change. With regard to first-person experiences of mood, Kenaan provides the following highly insightful assessment:

Our moods are commonly experienced within a horizon of a future change and against the background of the mood-changes we have already undergone. As such, the experience of moods typically involves inbuilt dimensions of plurality and relationality. The mood we're in is always one option among others, always related to other moods (our own moods but also, of course, the moods of others). And, thus, even in times in which we feel captivated by a mood and find it difficult to envision the possibility of a mood change, the option of change is nevertheless structurally part of the horizons of our being in any given mood. (Kenaan, 2017, p. 1474)

Understood this way, the experience of moods opens up our field of experience to alterity and change. In Kenaan's view, it is a crucial aspect of the way we experience moods that they refer us to alternate potential ways of encountering the world as well as to past and (potential) future affective encounters. Thus, moods themselves involve a sense of difference, rather than pertaining to a specific static situation we are in at a certain moment in time. This is why Kenaan arrives at the conclusion that it might be necessary to give up on the idea that moods are "static self-sufficient and self-enclosed consecutive states" (Kenaan, 2017, p. 1478) at all. Instead, moods should be considered as part of a holistic "transmutation" (Kenaan, 2017, p. 1478) of the actor's way of being. The changing of moods would correlate to changes in one's overall attunement to the world. An interesting question in this context regards the intentional status of changing moods. We have seen in our above discussion of mood-intentionality that Mitchell tries to solve problems of previous mood theories by arguing that moods have whole-world intentionality (Mitchell, 2019, p. 123). In his view, moods are directed at the whole of an agent's (current) environment, presenting it in a specific evaluative light. Thus understood, moods would provide felt evaluations that would be directed not at specific events or occurrences within a given field of experience, but at the field of experience as such. As Mitchell puts it, they would be intentionally directed at "one's total environment, understood as encompassing the broadest set of relations (and potential relations) between self and world, and so as necessarily open-ended" (Mitchell, 2019, p. 124). In light of Kenaan's theory, what is of particular importance in this quote is the reference to the inherently open ended nature of mood's intentional object. In this regard, mood's oscillations reflect dynamic changes in the overall relation between an agent and this broad horizon of experience. Thus, the changing of moods would refer to the fact that we ourselves are not fixed in our experiential relation

to the world, but constantly on the verge of changing, developing new relational orientations toward our environment. Regarding the general topic of this paper, moods could then be understood as an affective barometer of change, thus assuming a functional role in the context of liminal experiences, by presenting (through their inherent changeability) the processual dynamics of going through liminal experiences as they happen.

However, we like to propose a slightly different interpretation of mood's changeability. For Mitchell, what is presented in the specific mood experience is a specific dynamic configuration which involves an agent in her relation to her total environment. The evaluative apperception of the mood experience is thus directed at a specific way the world is. In the following section, we alternatively suggest that moods, while indeed being directed at the totality of one's relation toward the world, are so not by warrant of evaluating a given set of (manifest) relations between agent and total environment, but by warrant of evaluating a discrepancy between the manifest and the potential within self-world relations. In order to make this claim plausible, we draw from Simondon's theory of individuation and specifically from his concept of the preindividual (Simondon, 1992, 2007, 2020).

### **3. A Simondonian perspective on mood as transitory affective process**

Recently, Raoult, Moser, & Gygax (2017, p. 1) have argued that moods might be about a "cumulative expectation mismatch" between a manifest outcome in a decision situation and what agents expected the outcome to be. They argue that moods are prevalent in situations, where an agent's estimation of potential outcomes differs from the outcome of a decision. In a similar way, Eldar, Rutledge, Dolan, & Niv (2015) discuss moods as representations of momentum, arguing that moods are not so much directed at a particular state of affairs, but at the dynamics of discrepancies between expectations and subsequent decision outcomes in an ongoing sequence. In such cases, respondent's affective experience would be determined not only by the surprise of an unexpected outcome as such, but by how the discrepancy between estimations of potential outcomes and actual outcomes would develop over a series of situations. In both cases, moods seem to be linked to the in-between of situations and provide an affective record of the gap that opens between them. Though this is beyond the theoretical scope of the authors, we hold that these studies – despite their methodological focus on quite narrow decision situations – can be interpreted as indicating the relevance of a discrepancy between the actualization of an event and potential alternatives for the experience of moods. Thus, the evaluative apperception of mood would not only be directed at the total relations between an actor and her current environment, but also about a relation between a potential relational configuration and the way it actually manifests in time. The intentionality of moods would then have to account for two theoretically distinct meanings of the term relation. On the one hand, it would have to account for the relation established between the experiencing agent and her total environment (this would be Mitchell's position). On the other hand, the term relation would also refer to a relation between potential and actual in the sense that the whole of one's relation toward the environment as currently actualized would be evaluated in light of potential sets of relations toward the same environment. What the specific experience of mood would then present in an evaluative light would be a discrepancy between these two

sets of relations in a processually unfolding sequence. In the following subsections, we turn to the work of Simondon in order to present a theoretical background for this complex idea.

### 3.1. Into the unknown – life as open process of individuation

Our interpretation of the research presented at the start of this section has led us to consider a peculiar double intentionality of moods, which is founded on the two meanings of the term relation – one time referring to a relation between actor and environment and one time referring to the whole of this relation as such being situated in a processual relation between potentiality and actualization. Our main source of inspiration for this comes from Simondon's work on individuation, which is just now becoming more widely recognized in psychology (Wrbouschek, & Slunecko, 2020) and the social sciences (Combes, 2013, De Boever, Murray, Roffe, & Woodward, 2012). Better known for his work on the philosophy of technology (Simondon, 2011), Simondon spent much of his career developing a conceptual framework for studying ontogenesis (Simondon, 2009), i.e., the unfolding of individual and collective life. For Simondon, life unfolds through an open process of individuation. Thus, the processual emergence of novel relations between the living being and its associated milieu should be considered primordial to any notion of the individual as a self-enclosed entity or being. Conversely, Simondon aims to understand “the individual from the perspective of the process of individuation rather than the process of individuation by means of the individual” (Simondon, 1992, p. 300). While Simondon's philosophical project is aimed at developing a conceptual framework that would allow the study of individuation in living beings in general, we limit ourselves to human beings and specifically to what Simondon calls psychic (and collective) individuation (Simondon, 2007).

Simondon's key concept is the preindividual (or: preindividual reality). In order to avoid founding individuation on the idea of a pre-formed substance or deriving it from a first principle beyond the process of individuation itself, he draws from thermodynamics and posits that individuation is driven by a charge of potential energy which is borne by living beings throughout each cycle of their ontogenesis. Preindividual reality is defined by Simondon as a situation of tension within a system at the limit of becoming structurally determined (Simondon, 2007, pp. 14-16). It is the fundamental mark of life that it always contains an excess of potential which allows it to develop beyond its current state but which at the same time destabilizes the formation of a stable relation between the living individual and its environment. A preindividual situation is marked by the simultaneous existence of a multiplicity of potential trajectories for becoming individual. As the realization of certain potentials is always at odds with realizing others, preindividual reality is highly unstable as the conflicting potentials endanger the integrity of the system as a whole. Thus, a resolution of the conflicting tensions within the system has to be brought forth. The process through which this is achieved, is called individuation by Simondon. Regarding Simondon's use of the notion of potentiality, note that he regards preindividual reality as a reality of the living being as much as is its current manifest relation toward self and world. Thus, the potential is not only abstractly possible in the way that a retrospective reconstruction of alternate realities (“what else could have been”) would be, but constitutes a real problematic borne by the living being throughout its life course. Put this way, Simondon's theory of individuation is one of a constant problematization of the living being by an inherent aspect of its own existence (Simondon, 1992, p. 306-307).

For psychologists, it is important that talking about the preindividual as real potential instead of abstract potential implies conceiving of preindividual reality as experientially and practically transparent. Thus, the relation between one's multiple potential trajectories of becoming and one's current relations toward the environment has to be considered in any conceptualization of psychic activities, mental acts, etc. This becomes even clearer, once one factors in that – according to Simondon – individuation cannot be conceptualized as a once- and-for-all settling of preindividual tension. Rather, the preindividual – as the dynamic force within life – persists throughout each cycle of individuation and is re-articulated in each emerging relation between individual and milieu. Different stages of life are distinguished by Simondon according to their specific mode of resolving this continuous tension between individual and milieu on the one side and another relation that the whole individual-milieu relation bears toward the preindividual. For human beings, the psyche represents “the continuing effort of individuation in a being that has to resolve its own problematic through its own involvement as an element of the problem by taking action as a subject” (Simondon, 1992, p. 305). Thus, psychic reality is not an end to itself, but a mode of resolution of the preindividual problematic and thus part of the process of ontogenesis. As a consequence, all that we are used to call mental activity has to be conceptualized with reference to the primordial problematic of structurally incorporating the human being's relation to the preindividual as well as to its environment.

Individuation is always at the same time the individuation of the living being and the individuation of an environment relative to the current phase of the living. Thus, an individual always emerges relative to an associated milieu, which in the case of human life is a physical as well as a social world. The whole operation of individuation in Simondon is stretched between two inseparable relations. On the one hand, individuation always unfolds through establishing a relation between the individuating individual and an environment toward which it is orientationally positioned. On the other hand, this relational situation is marked by the persistence of a discrepancy between an excess of potential reality and what is actualized within the momentary self-world relation.

Simondon's meta-psychological contribution is to show that the process of becoming a (human) individual – which is co-extensive with (human) life itself – unfolds relationally. ‘Relationally’ here refers at the same time to the relation of the human being toward its environment and to a relation between the actualized individual and the preindividual. The specific problem in thinking the human condition, according to Simondon, lies in understanding, how individuation is accomplished by human beings. To this end, Simondon introduces the dual concept of psychic and collective individuation. Human beings individuate not by establishing an exterior relation between individual and milieu, but through an internalization of the whole problematic of living. Thus, what psychologists often take for granted – the existence of a psychic apparatus or mental realm which encloses a subject's relation to a world of objects as well as its inter-personal and social relations – is understood by Simondon as a specific resolution to a wider problematic of living organisms. Without being able to unpack all the consequences and complex implications of this processual understanding of psychic reality here, what is important for our aim is that for Simondon the whole purpose of the psychological is to resolve a tension that is prior to the individual as yet individuated. At this point, we can begin to see that, for Simondon,

sense-making (like any other form of psychic activity) is a liminal enterprise not merely by way of happening under uncertain external circumstances (lack of information, changing environments, etc.), but because its very purpose is to come to terms with the fundamentally open make-up of the human condition. It is there, because we bear a preindividual charge that we are constantly trying to incorporate into feasible experiential relations toward ourselves and our social and physical environment. Simondon's meta-psychology offers a process theoretical and relational perspective on liminality as a fundamental aspect of human life. Based on this general outlook and with specific regard to the dual relation of a subject toward an environment and preindividual reality, we now turn to the topic of affective sense-making and the role that moods play in the process of individuation.

### **3.2. Problematizing life – Affectivity and the experiential persistence of the preindividual**

In the last subsection, we have seen that, for Simondon, an individual's relation toward its associated milieu is as much experientially transparent as is its relation toward which, in this relation, persists as preindividual, unresolved potential. There is a certain risk for misconception in speaking of a relation of 'an individual toward the preindividual' here, as the whole point of Simondon's theory is to think individuation from a point of departure prior to a given individual. Consequently, what Simondon expresses by speaking of a persistence of preindividual reality in every stage of individuation is the idea that an individual is "simultaneously more and less than a unity" (Simondon, 1992, p. 306). As such, it "possesses an internal problematic and is capable of being an element in a problematic that has a wider scope than itself" (Simondon, 1992, p. 306). Consequently, Simondon has to explain how the problematic inherent in any phase of an individual's becoming factors into a concept of experience. Simondon's theory of affectivity is thus situated within the wider problematic of explaining, how subjective experience pertains to an aspect of existence which by definition exceeds the individuated relation between a subject and an object world (Simondon, 2007, pp. 97-123). Conceptual knowledge, propositional comprehension and reasoning cannot account for this aspect of reality as they already presuppose categorical distinctions rooted in a structurally determined relation. Rather, Simondon proposes that experience can account for preindividual reality because it is rooted in an affective relation which he calls the affective-emotive subconscious ("subconscience affective-émotive", Simondon, 1992, pp. 98-99). Experience through the affective-emotive has to be situated prior to verbalization, conceptual distinctions, etc., for it is movement from preindividuality and toward individuated being. It is about a pre-reflexive orientation toward the discovery of a potential level of compatibility between individual and milieu. One can see, how Simondon attempts to circumvent a conception of experience which already presupposes the established individual-milieu relation. Experience is fundamentally orientation, yet an orientation which is ontologically prior to the constitution of a subject-object relation. The double term 'affective-emotive' indicates that affective experience encompasses the passage from apprehending preindividual tensions (the affective) to an active-(emotive) orientation toward the potential resolution of these tensions in a (future) movement of individuation. This makes Simondon's theory of affectivity so distinctly different in scope from a psychological theory of emotions: in Simondon's sense affectivity is not about a specific object or state of affairs in the environmental field of an agent, but about a fundamental problematization of an individual's current being in light of a preindividual charge borne by it. This becomes clear in Simondon's interpretation of the psychological categories of pleasure and pain:

In general, one interprets pleasure and pain as signifying that a favourable or disfavourable event suddenly occurs in life and affects being: in fact, it is not on the level of the perfectly individuated being that such signification exists; maybe there exists a pleasure and a pain purely somatic; but the affectivo-emotive modes also have a significance within the accomplishment of the relation between the preindividual and the individual. The positive affective states indicate the synergy of the constituted individuation and the movement of the actual individuation from the preindividual; the negative affective states are states of conflict between these two domains of the subject.<sup>2</sup> (Simondon, 2007, p. 106)

Here, Simondon does not situate affectivity outside or beyond one's everyday experience of events and the awareness of somatic feeling states; however, in light of such events, the affective experience is about a much wider problematic, one that is preindividual to any event-based evaluation. From a functional standpoint, and referring to Helm's concept of emotions as felt evaluations, then the affective-emotive subconscious is not about evaluating a specific set of relations as yet established, but about apprehending a specific momentum in a subject's process of becoming, relative to its preindividual problematic.

#### **4. Liminal moods and open process of becoming**

In this final section we return to the topic of moods and their relevance for situated sense-making under conditions of uncertainty, ambivalence and risk. To this aim, we now examine how a Simondonian perspective on individuation, the preindividual, and affectivity can be applied to understanding moods. As we have seen, Simondon himself is interested in affectivity primarily in the context of explaining, how a subject can become pre-reflexively aware of a preindividual aspect of its existence, that is, of a dynamic potentiality which by definition exceeds categorization and rational comprehension. Thus, his aim is not to account for specific distinctions and phenomenological variations in our everyday experience of emotions, sentiments, feelings, or moods. From a psychological perspective, one might ask, whether the 'functionality' that Simondon associates with his concept of an affective-emotive subconscious applies to all forms of affective experience. In our reading of Simondon, this is not necessarily the case. We suggest to distinguish between different variations of affective experience which serve distinct 'purposes' based on their relation to individuation and preindividual reality. A psychological taxonomy of affective experiences could take into account the specific relational makeup of a psychosocial individual relative to its environment as well as to preindividual reality. For instance, there are spontaneous affective responses to specific stimuli in the environment, which seem to be sufficiently intelligible within the context of an established subject-environment relation. This would be

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<sup>2</sup> The original quote reads: "On interprète en general le Plaisir et la douleur comme significant qu'un événement favorable ou défavorable pour la vie surgit et affecte l'être: en fait, ce n'est pas au niveau de l'être individué pur que cette signification existe; il existe peut-être un plaisir et une douleur purement somatiques; mais les modes affective-émotifs ont aussi une signification dans l'accomplissement de la relation entre le pré-individuel et l'individuel: les états affectifs positifs indiquent la synergie de l'individuation actuel du pré-individuel; les états affectifs négatifs sont des états de conflit entre ces deux domaines du sujet" (Simondon, 2007, p. 106).

the case for instance in the dog-example we used earlier in this paper. For these, we would reserve the term ‘emotion’ as widely used in the psychological literature. For the purpose of a psychological taxonomy a crucial question would then be, whether we can find affective experiences which specifically pertain to the experience of preindividual tension the way Simondon has in mind with the affective-emotive subconscious.

As we have argued in section 2, we hold that moods are the most likely candidates for this role. Within a Simondonian framework, there are several reasons for this: (1) our discussion of mood’s intentional structure has shown that moods are best characterized by a global intentional orientation toward the “total environment” (Mitchell 2019, p. 123), as a broad horizon for all of one’s current (and potential future) projects. In Simondon, this is precisely what is the case for the affective-emotive in its relation to the subject-environment relation. As we have seen in Simondon’s discussion of pleasure and pain, even in cases where specific sensations or feeling states are involved, the fundamental affective relation is not toward specific events or objects but about a most general relatedness. (2) The globality of mood experiences, as we have seen in Mitchell and more so in Kenaan, extends not only to the current state of one’s relation toward the world, but involves also the anticipation of future events and developments. This is particularly evident in Kenaan’s characterization of moods as inherently oriented toward change (Kenaan 2017, p. 1474-1475). In Simondon, this is expressed by Simondon in his hyphenated juxtaposition of affective and emotive, where the first term refers to an appresentation of the preindividual set of potential trajectories of becoming, while the second term refers to a more active, motivational orientation toward realizing said potentials. Thus, just as we have discussed for moods, the affective-emotive already involves a tendency to transition and change while at the same time remaining perceptive of the potentials not yet resolved. In light of this dual structure of the experience, we point (3) to our discussion of recent research which shows that moods are specifically involved, when discrepancies between potential outcomes and actualized outcomes are perceived. We think that the idea that moods are intentionally directed at the processual apprehension and resolution of discrepancies between potential (preindividual) individuations and actualized self-environment relations is worth exploring further. (4) Last but not least, we return to our initial observation that moods are inherently oscillating, prone to sudden changes and swings. In light of Simondon’s characterization of preindividual reality as a situation of simultaneously active potential becomings, this feature of moods can be seen as a direct response to the intentional content of the experience. Thus, the ephemeral and often meandering character of moods would be due to the inherent nature of the preindividual to which the experience pertains.

## **Outlook: Beyond individual moods – collective sense-making and liminality**

We started our discussion by referring to Horlick-Jones and colleagues’ emphasizing the importance of in-between strategies of sense-making especially in a socio-historical situation which is characterized by insecurity, risk and indeterminacy. With Thomassen (2014) and Stenner (2017), we have shown that such a situation is characterized by the experience of permanent liminality, that is, a fundamental shift in the relation between phases of relative status stability and phases of transition, re-orientation and change. From our reading of Simondon, we conclude that what these authors discuss as a late modern (or even past modern, if one follows Virno, 2004) development is an ontological dimension of

human life. In bearing an inexhaustible relation toward the preindividual, living beings are ontologically liminal in so far as they constantly carry a certain potential for destabilization, transition and alterity within their relational orientation toward the environment. However, Simondon's discussion of individuation is not exhausted in this general conclusion. His analysis of psychic individuation as a specifically human mode of individuation (which moves from perception and the affectivo-emotive to mentalization and the internalization of an experiential relation toward a world of objects) is further extended by a mode of collective individuation which involves the transition from individual toward collective structures. Thus, the preindividual is not just a problem of a solipsistic agent, struggling with containing an excess of potentiality in a vast and empty environment, but it is, and this so right from the start, a collective problematic. This aspect has been taken up by Virno in his analysis of collective structures of experience in societies after the end of modernization (2004). There, he develops a theory of basic collective tonalities of collective agents in societies which are no longer founded on intelligible structures and stable normative foundations. For such a situation, Virno poses the question, what resources agents might collectively turn to in their need to resolve their preindividual problematic. To deal with Virno's answer to this question would be beyond the scope of this paper. We just want to stress, though, that for Virno, the problematic has to be discussed in affective terms, that is, via examining a basic tonality or collective attunement of the multitude toward the contingent conditions of contemporary life. Just like Stenner and Thomassen, Virno discovers a fundamental zone of overlap between affective experiences on an individual level and collective affective structures. We argue that these perspectives might profit from further examining, how affectivity relates to specific phases of change, and transition. A Simondonian perspective on moods as transitional affective experiences which reflect an agent's relation toward preindividual tensions within her relations to self and world can contribute to this end. This will presuppose considering in detail, how shifting moods relate to practices of affective modulation which operate on a transindividual, and collective level. Efforts in this direction have already been made by Hui (2015), and Bösel (2018). Bridging the gap between our conceptual approach (as advocated in this paper) and these authors (who focus on the forces attempting to modulate and shape the affective relations between the subject and its environment) will, however, require to go beyond the realm of the psychological and take into account the transindividual dimension of individuation. Thus, just as Simondon holds that each phase in an individual's being contains the potential for further individuation, we conclude this paper by pointing toward potential ways of going beyond the scope of the ideas presented here.

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