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Affective atmospheres and the enactive-ecological framework

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenology of atmospheres is recently gaining attention in debates on situated affectivity. Atmospheres are defined as holistic affective qualities of situations that integrate disparate affective forces into an identifiable and unitary *gestalt*. They point to a blurred, pathic, relational, and pre-individual form of experience which has been described in terms of ecological affordances. Despite its relevance in diverse areas of research such as architecture, phenomenological psychiatry and aesthetics, a thorough analysis of the phenomena of affective atmospheres from an enactive-ecological perspective is missing in the literature. This article aims at clarifying how and to what extent affective atmospheres can be accommodated into ecological-enactive understandings of the environment in terms of affordances. To do so, I review four perspectives on ecological affordances – the gibsonian account, the relational account, affective affordances, and the Skill Intentionality Framework (SIF) – and contrast them with the ontological and epistemological principles that ground the phenomenology of atmospheres. I argue that only the field perspective developed in SIF is compatible with the phenomenology of atmospheres. From this perspective, affective atmospheres can be understood as phenomenological counterparts of context sensitivity, that is, as the holistic and pathic background feelings that make certain affordances more salient than others. As a conclusion, the analysis in this article shows the potential of the phenomenology of atmospheres to enrich the ecological-enactive cognition framework. It also highlights the opportunity to construct a situated understanding of affectivity that is informed by phenomenological perspectives.

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1. Introduction

Enactive-ecological approaches to cognition (EE) represent a compelling anti-representationalist and anti-cognitivist stance that is gaining interest in cognitive sciences (McGann et al., 2020; Newen et al., 2018). The main

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contribution of the EE perspective is that it considers the embodied interaction of the agent embedded in its lived-environment as the locus of cognition (J. J. Gibson, 1979/2014; Varela et al., 1991/2017). Cognition is not a passive reception of neutral sense-data, or the rule-based processing of abstract symbols, but the embodied and evaluative activity of an autonomous agent situated in a sociomaterial environment. Cognition is thus embodied, embedded, and enacted.

A fundamental aspect of the EE perspective is that the primordial relationship between the individual and his/her environment is not of theoretical, reflective, and detached cognoscitive relationship, but of commitment and care (Colombetti, 2014). Since cognition is grounded on the organization of the living (Thompson, 2010), whatever the mind is, it must be primordially affective (Colombetti, 2014). The primary relation of the organism with its environment is of affective openness and involvement (*Befindlichkeit*, Heidegger, 1927/1962) rather than a theoretic and detached cognoscitive relation. For this reason, the environment is never neutral, but it is affectively valenced as positive or negative according to the self-maintenance and normativity of the organism (Colombetti, 2017; Maiese, 2018). Here, affectivity is not viewed as a mere companion of conscious experience that tinges mental states with certain qualities, but it is rather a constitutive aspect of all experiences.

However, this formulation of the primordial affective character of experience does not in principle capture the phenomenologically distinct ways affects are manifested. This does not refer to different kinds of emotions or affective valences, such as happiness, sadness, anger, or jealousy, but to structurally different modes of affective experiences such as moods, emotions, sensations, atmospheres, or existential feelings (Fuchs, 2013; García, forthcoming; Ratcliffe, 2012). Phenomenologists have long made those distinctions (e.g., Montague, 2009), but the EE field at large has not incorporated these structural differences into their theories of cognition yet. This step is fundamental, I believe, for an elaboration of a phenomenologically-informed fine-grained account of the primordially affective character of cognition in the EE perspective.

In this regard, recurring interests are tackled from various sources on the phenomenology of atmospheres (Anderson, 2009; Böhme, 1993; Griffero, 2014, 2019a, 2019b; Schmitz et al., 2011). Atmospheres are affective qualities of *situations* that are perceived in a blurred and pathic way and modulate individual and collective experiences of situatedness. This new-phenomenological concept has successfully been applied to humanistic studies in aesthetics (Biehl-Missal, 2013; Böhme, 1993); architectural design (Abusaada et al., 2021; Borch, 2014; Seamon, 2017), collective emotions (Griffero, 2021; Slaby, 2014; Trigg, 2020) and in therapeutic processes (Costa et al., 2014; Francesetti, 2019a; Tellenbach, 1968). Atmospheres

also play a crucial role in the description of certain psychopathologies (Francesetti, 2019b; Ratcliffe, 2013; Sass & Ratcliffe, 2017). This evidence indicates that they might play an explanatory role in understanding the affective character of cognition. What the phenomenology of atmospheres reveals is that not only the material and dispositional aspects of the surroundings, but also their aesthetic and affective qualities, make up our first-person experience. Consequently, they have the potential to inform debates on situated affectivity (Crippen, 2022; Frykman & Frykman, 2016; Maiese, 2022; Trigg, 2021).

The connection between phenomenology of atmospheres and EE has been drawn by some authors, referring to atmospheres in terms of *affective affordances* (Griffero, 2022; Slaby, 2019) *affective scaffolds* (Krueger, 2021), or *affective arrangements* (Slaby et al., 2019). Tonino Griffero (2022), one of its main promoters, considers “atmospheric feelings as qualities *supervening* on expressive affordances” (p. 86, italics added). According to him, atmospherology may benefit from the extensive and long debate on the concept of affordance in ecological psychology. Aside from relatively quick considerations of this kind and despite the relevance of affective atmospheres in phenomenological spheres, an exhaustive theoretical analysis of the main concepts is missing in the literature. Indeed, the analogy between atmospheres and ecological affordances might be unwarranted if not qualified by a proper examination of the theories. In what sense can we say, in line with Griffero, that atmospheres are generated by affordances? How can atmospherology and the EE framework inform each other?

The aim of this work is to analyze to what extent and in what sense can the phenomenology of atmospheres be accommodated within the EE framework. In particular, I will contrast the EE concept of *affordances* in its broad variants with the phenomenology of atmospheres. I will argue that only a field perspective as postulated by the Skill Intentionality Framework (Rietveld et al., 2018; van Dijk & Rietveld, 2016) is compatible with phenomenology of atmospheres. The article is structured as follows: First, I will introduce the concept of affective atmospheres and its main characteristic as described by (Schmitz et al., 2011), Griffero (2016), Svenaeus (2013), Anderson (2009) and others. Second, I will contrast affective atmospheres with the concept of ecological affordances in its broad variants: Gibsonian affordances (E. J. Gibson, 2000), affordances as relations (Chemero, 2018), and affective affordances (Candiotto & Dreon, 2021; Colombetti & Krueger, 2015; Krueger & Colombetti, 2018). I will show the shortcomings of these formulations to capture atmospheric phenomena. Third, I will accommodate the notion of affective atmospheres within the Skilled Intentionality Framework (Rietveld et al., 2018; van Dijk & Rietveld, 2016). I will claim that the pathic and holistic character of atmospheres should be understood as operating over the soliciting character of the whole field of relevant

affordances, that is, as the phenomenological counterpart of context sensitivity that allows for certain affordances to become more salient than others by affectively framing the situation. I will conclude that the phenomenology of atmospheres allows us to articulate the primordial affective character of experience in EE terms in a way that is mindful of phenomenological distinctions between structurally different forms of affectivity.

2. Affective atmospheres

The phenomenology of atmospheres was first proposed by the German phenomenologist Herman Schmitz,¹ who put forward a non-mentalistic view of emotions as authoritative and spatial atmospheres. Affective atmospheres are room-filling affective qualities or ambiances of situations, which are composed by different affective forces that organize themselves into a unitary *gestalt* (Fuchs, 2013). They irradiate from spaces and situations both in human-built and wild places (Griffero, 2016). They are moods or ambiances of situations that suffuse interpersonal spaces and influence an individual's affective states. The atmosphere created by a sunset falling on the broad horizon of the Atlantic sea on a summer evening, the atmosphere of solemnity of an organ concert in a Catholic cathedral, or the climate of excitement in a stadium before the beginning of the final-match are prototypical examples of atmospheres. Despite their being more identifiable or intense in certain situations, atmospheres should be seen as ubiquitous. They are present in our homes, workspaces, and cities, modulating our affective states in a subtle, inconspicuous and pervasive manner. The fact that this does not happen to be easily perceptible to us does not make it any less true or important.

Atmospheres are not types of emotion, but have their own structural identity. They differ from other affective experiences, such as moods or emotions, in terms of intentionality, embodiment and self-world relationship (Fuchs, 2013; García, [forthcoming](#)). While the intentionality of emotions is object-directed and is described as action-readiness (Frijda, 2004), the intentionality of atmospheres is situational and they are experienced in a holistic, blurred, and pathic manner (Anderson, 2009; Ash, 2013; Griffero, 2020; Michels, 2015). The peculiarity of affective atmospheres comes from their being holistic and situational phenomena rather than object-directed. In Anderson's words, "they express something vague, an ill-defined indefinite something that exceeds rational explanation and clear figuration" (Anderson, 2009, p. 78). This means that their qualitative features are not perceived as discrete, edged, solid, or cohesive things that can combine compositionally to create the desired atmosphere. Rather, atmospheres constitute a non-decomposable whole that coincides with their qualitative phenomenal appearance. What new phenomenologists stress is that in

perceiving concrete identifiable elements, such as the visual perception of the sun rising or the touch of the sand, we also have a holistic affective impression of the whole situation, which cannot be reduced to the sum of those individual impressions, but functions as their cohesive context. In Gestalt psychology terms, the atmospheric affect constitutes the background feeling where individual impressions are situated.

Another core feature of atmospheres is their authoritative and soliciting character. One does not just feel atmospheres, but gets gripped by them. They move us, they affect us, they penetrate us in a way that we can barely deny their effects, even if their effect is pre-reflective and sometimes inconspicuous. Indeed, atmospheres may operate in both reflective and pre-reflective ways. For instance, one can easily be gripped by the atmosphere of excitement of a football final-match, even if one does not like football at all. This is even more evident in collective emotional manifestations such as political demonstrations, mass festivals or public religious scenes (Griffero, 2021; Slaby, 2014; Trigg, 2020) where emotional contagion may play a role in building up their attractive character (Hatfield et al., 1993). But this pulling effect is also present in natural landscapes or in isolation, and it does not need to be phenomenologically intense or foreground phenomenon. For instance, one can be gripped by the sadness of a foggy and misty day or working in a tense environment may elicit feelings of stress and anxiety in individuals in a pre-reflective way. Although atmospheres are experienced as pulling and soliciting, this does not imply that one is inextricably prompted to harmonize with the atmosphere of the situation. There can certainly be a mismatch between the atmosphere perceived in the interpersonal space and the affective state of the individual. For instance, when a person at a party does not coincide with the festive mood of the situation, but feels uneasy and awkward. This is why we can even speak of non-inclusive atmospheres (Krueger, 2021). However, as Ahmed (2007) would describe, this “mismatch” can only be perceived if one is already participating in and being pulled by the atmospheric affect. The fact that we can hold ambiguous and “mismatched” affective experiences at once does not imply that some of them must be considered as being outside and others inside, nor that affective states should be divided into public and private.

Indeed, atmospheres dwell on the loose lines between interiority and exteriority, objectivity and subjectivity. Notice that Schmitz’s initial formulations invite an overly externalist reading, as they are depicted as existing “out there,” almost as self-standing substances that fill spaces with a certain “aura.” Formulations like “indeterminate powers of feeling poured out into the expanse” (Schmitz et al., 2011, p. 243), “moods that were in the air” (Böhme, 2021, p. 1), or “centripetal and external vectors” (Griffero, 2019a, p. 30) might convey an overly externalist picture. Nevertheless, atmospheres are not placed in the extrapersonal sphere, but they are relational and

dynamic phenomena. They are phenomenological experiences. Nonetheless, this does not suggest that atmospheres originate solely from within ourselves or that they are limited to intrinsic bodily sensations experienced in our private internal domain. We perceive atmospheres as external phenomena in the space surrounding us, as if they are “in the air,” permeating ourselves and others. Atmospheres are simultaneously subjectively experienced and yet perceived as existing in the external world.

Moreover, in my understanding, their relational nature should be understood in a very particular manner. They are not entities, relations, or properties per se, but a genuine mode of world disclosure (in line with Slaby, 2014; Svenaeus, 2013). In other words, atmospheres do not represent relations between fully constituted entities and subjects, but participate in the process by which those entities emerge as concrete and relational. They are not responding to the *what* in experience, but to *how* those experiences are given. In other words, they are more operational than substantial. A situation does not, strictly speaking, *have* an atmosphere, but is given *atmospherically* when its affective qualities are felt in a holistic and pathic manner, so that the boundaries between inside and outside of the lived body are blurred and indeterminate. To be clear, they should be understood as relational, in the sense of dissolving the mediational ontology – the divide between inside and outside, interior and exterior, of the experiencing subject – rather than just locating affective atmospheres outside of the divide or characterizing them as relations between internal and external elements.² As a result, atmospheres can be considered as proper structures or modes of consciousness and thus not merely particular contents of our mental life. If we assume their pervasiveness, it is plausible to see them as a form of affective involvement (*affektives Betroffensein*, in Schmitz, 1978/2005, p. 260) that pervades every conscious experience and manifests the primordial affectivity that grounds cognition in general (Colombetti, 2014).

In this vein, atmospheres have been described as the holistic impression of the world that precedes the identification of separate and concrete entities (Svenaeus, 2013). Our basic experience of the world is not constituted by individual and atomistic impressions that come together in the mind, but it is the affective pull or gradient which draws our attention to concrete elements. Atmospheres predispose the felt body to perceive and interact with certain entities by pre-configuring the affective background from where certain figures become salient. In Schmitz and colleagues' words,

The world shows up not as a neutral realm of already separate entities but as the atmospheric fields of significant situations, opportunities or quasi-corporeal forces or 'opponents' that in the first instance become manifest to the conscious person in form of the 'internally diffuse meaningfulness' of holistic corporeal impressions. Articulation of significant situations into constellations of separate objects and

structures is a later-coming achievement (although it is usually taken as primary by theoretical thinking). (Schmitz et al., 2011, p. 244)

A similar idea can be found in Merleau Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*: "all things are *concretions* of a milieu, and every explicit perception of a thing is sustained by a previous communication with a certain atmosphere" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 334, italics added). The idea of a pathic and pre-intentional affectivity can be also found in Michel Henry's concept of *radical passivity of life* (Henry & Etzkorn, 1965/1975) where the feeling of being alive is sustained upon a pathic self-revelation that is felt as a latent tension in the body, which is the condition of the possibility of other feelings and affects. As I read it, atmospheres contribute to this basic affective, non-localized tension that is the condition of the possibility of further concrete emotions and objectified perceptions. This is what Massumi (1995) would call, the intensity that precedes extension.

In sum, what phenomenological investigations show is that atmospheres manifest a basic structure of perceptual consciousness as they make certain elements in a situation more salient than others. In line with the primordial affectivity perspective of enactivism, we move from a consideration of atmospheres as mere aesthetic aspects of spaces to a conception of affective atmospheres as core structural/operational features of conscious experiences.

3. Atmospheres vs affordances

Now that the main features of atmospheric affects have been clarified, we can elucidate to what extent the phenomenology of atmospheres can be accommodated with the EE framework, especially in its conceptualization of the environment in terms of affordances (see discussions in McGann et al., 2020). I have defined atmospheres as the background soliciting forces that grip us and make certain behaviors and interactions more likely to emerge than others. In this sense, they could *prima facie* be described in terms of ecological affordances as they are aspects of situations that modulate our disponibility to certain actions and behaviors. Some authors (e.g., Arbib, 2021; Griffero, 2022; Jensen, 2020; Maiese, 2022) have already hinted at this link in a general and nonspecific way. To do justice to the scope of the claim, in this section, I will review different formulations of affordances, assessing their adequacy to characterize atmospheric phenomena. To what extent and in what sense can we say that atmospheres are affordances?

First of all, we should mention that the concept of "affordance" has evolved widely from Gibson's initial formulation and is subject to current debates in ecological psychology (Chong & Proctor, 2020; Heras-Escribano, 2019; Lobo et al., 2018). According to the original formulation (J. J. Gibson,

1979/2014), affordances referred to what the environment offers to the animal, as either favorable or unfavorable. Affordances were seen as physical properties of the environment relative to the biomechanical properties of the animal species. For instance, while a tree affords being climbed by a squirrel, it is not climbable by an elephant. Being quantifiable species-relative properties of the environment, affordances link biomechanical properties of the body with certain physical properties of the environment (e.g., the property of the tree “being climbable by a squirrel,” Turvey, 1992). Affordances, thus, would be dispositions to act in a particular way.

This realist, third-person, and quantifiable character of Gibsonian affordances has made them explanatorily and methodologically useful in a wide variety of experimental settings (e.g., Borghi et al., 2012; de Wit et al., 2017; Gianelli et al., 2013; Kalénine et al., 2016; Travieso et al., 2015) and in evolutionary theories (e.g., Reed, 1993; Withagen & van Wermeskerken, 2010). Gibson’s original definition, however, has been revised and reformulated in order to explain not only behavior at the species level, but also individual perceptual and affective experience. Inspired by the direct perception thesis (Michaels & Carello, 1981), some proponents of ecological psychology consider affordances to be central to a general theory of (perceptual) experience and find in them a path toward naturalizing value and meaning from an embodied, nonrepresentational, and situated perspective (Baggs & Chemero, 2018; Djebbara, 2022; Heras-Escribano, 2019).

In this regard, one of the most influential proposals is the relational account of affordances (Baggs & Chemero, 2018; Chemero, 2018). According to this view, affordances are not mere properties of the environment, but relations between the abilities and skills of a particular organism and features of the environment (Baggs & Chemero, 2018). This perspective stresses the reciprocal dependence of an animal on its environment (Kiverstein, 2020). Proponents of the relational account want to distance themselves from the substance ontology that underlies Turvey’s and Gibson’s dispositional accounts. From a Gibsonian perspective, affordances are taken to be properties of substances that must somehow be perceived by animals that exist independently of and separately from those affordances. Baggs and Chemero, instead, suggest that affordances are relations between abilities of the agent and aspects of the environment and thus do not presuppose a substantial reality.

Both the Gibsonian and the relational formulation of affordances as general theories of experience, however, raise certain questions concerning their phenomenological character. As Dings points out (Dings, 2018, 2020), the soliciting character of an affordance depends on the individual’s concerns and autobiographical history, so their phenomenological character differs from individual to individual in terms of valence, force and their degree of self-reference. But beyond individual differences in

how affordances are perceived, skeptical questions have arisen about the validity of affordance-speech to capture the richness of our experiential life. As Ratcliffe and Broome pointed out (Ratcliffe & Broome, 2012), the theory of affordances does not capture the manifold ways the environment appears as meaningful to us and it might reduce the complexity of first-person experience to *action*-relative aspects of perception. “Things do not simply ‘afford’ activities; they appear significant to us in all sorts of different ways” (Ratcliffe & Broome, 2012, p. 61, note 24). More recently, the authors question whether the relation between meaningfulness of experience and possibilities for action is not a one-to-one mapping, but rather an overly variable relation that may encompass multiple chains of causation or *affordabilities* (Ratcliffe & Broome, 2022). This variability is particularly salient when taking a diachronic perspective on experience, where the landscape of future possibilities that a given object affords opens up exponentially. For instance, the authors use the example of a gate of the airport to allow one to fly to New York. Beyond its direct physiognomic characteristics, the gate is meaningful and relevant to the individual in virtue of future possibilities, which encompass multiscale *meanings*, so to speak (e.g., the possibility of flying to New York to attend the job interview that one has been expecting for so long). This example shows that meanings go beyond the immediate solicitations to act but also relate to long-term autobiographical, ethical, or affective potentialities (Dings, 2018), which may only indirectly lead to concrete actions. Indeed, not all the ways the environment appears as significant to us can be reduced to solicitations to act, which indicates that affordances may not explain and distinguish the many different and complex forms of potentialities that constitute our subjective and intersubjective experience.

A general concern is that a definition of affordances in terms of action possibilities does not by itself explain why some affordances are more salient than others in a given situation, nor why some action possibilities are actualized by the agent while others are not (Dings, 2018). This problem derives from the indeterminacy regarding the scope of possibilities of affordances, that is, whether they refer to (species-level) physical possibilities, (individual) purposeful possibilities, potentially perceptible action possibilities, actually perceived action possibilities, or actualized actions (Nye & Silverman, 2012). This point is relevant because the soliciting character of affordances, which can be felt experientially, is not captured by a definition of affordances in terms of action possibilities, which can be described from a third-person and mechanistic perspective (de Haan et al., 2013; Dreyfus & Kelly, 2007). Indeed, while affordances are relatively stable, the solicitations associated with them are highly variable and dynamic and depend on their relevance to the individual agent’s concerns (Dings, 2018; Withagen et al.,

2017). Both the dispositional account and the relational account of affordances are described from a third-person perspective and require shifting to actual solicitation-based discourse to account for the first-person perspective (Dreyfus & Kelly, 2007; Kiverstein, 2020).

Atmospheres are an example of meaningful experiences that are not fully captured by traditional approaches to affordances. Affective atmospheres refer to actual experiences, which are either conspicuous or inconspicuous, and structure the actual perception of the individual agent. Affects, understood in an atmospheric way, modulate the felt body in a general way, pre-figuring subjective and intersubjective experiences and modifying the pathic dimension of embodiment rather than soliciting a concrete, delimited, and quantifiable action. While the environment can invite a certain action or even urge a person to do something, to an atmosphere one reacts not necessarily with a behavior, but they are often felt pathically through bodily resonance (Griffero, 2019a). Even if they may ultimately derive into concrete actions, they are not meaningful in virtue of it, but in virtue of modulating the affective state of the individual in a pathic, aesthetic, and holistic manner. In other words, affective atmospheres are generated by expressive rather than pragmatic aspects of affordances, opening up a space for potential feelings.

In response, a closer concept might be that of *affective affordances*. Affective affordances describe aspects of the environment that we perceive as “affording regulative opportunities to amplify, suppress, extend, enrich, and explore [...] our affective experiences” (Krueger & Colombetti, 2018, p. 214). The idea behind it is that things do not only afford actions, but also bootstrap or scaffold emotion regulation (Colombetti & Krueger, 2015). For example, colored clothes or a rosary may trigger affective predispositions in certain people, making them feel more confident or connected, influencing the complex networks of emotional regulation (Colombetti & Roberts, 2015). In this way, the niche construction activity of the organism would also involve creating arrangements of things so that they intervene as extended affective regulators (Krueger & Szanto, 2016; Slaby et al., 2019). These situated perspectives on affects promote a view where affects are no longer the individual’s inner states, but emerge from the interaction of the agent with their sociomaterial surroundings (Colombetti et al., 2018; Slaby, 2016; Stephan & Walter, 2020).

In this way, we can even talk of an affectively extended self where crucial aspects of emotional regulation are distributed over diverse elements in the habitat of the organism (Heersmink, 2020; Piredda & Candiotti, 2019). Noticeably, the potentiality of certain affective affordances to regulate our affective states does not rely neither on intrinsic static properties of the object or the agent, nor on biomechanical relations between them, but rather it depends on the affective practices and *affective habits* of the agent

in a given social community (Candiotta & Dreon, 2021; Piredda & Candiotta, 2019). This implies that affective affordances result both from the history of couplings between different elements of the situation and the agent (DiPaolo et al., 2017). A black power suit may give you the security needed for a job interview, but not always and not to the desired extent. Moreover, certain affective experiences do not only reinforce a predetermined regulatory mechanism, but affects may also trigger changes in habitual patterns of interacting with the environment. Accordingly, affects may accomplish a regulatory function in equilibrating the self-sustained networks of habits as well as triggering significant self-transformations (Candiotta & Dreon, 2021; Maiese, 2022).

The construct of affective affordance is certainly closer to the atmospheric phenomena I am interested in, but it does not capture it entirely. In a general sense, the soliciting character of atmospheres can be considered an affective affordance or an “affective arrangement” (Slaby et al., 2019) in so far as they appeal to an individual’s bodily resonance and make the affective aspects of experience salient. Indeed, we actively manipulate the ambience of our homes, our workplaces, subtly changing the enlightenment, the perfume, and so on in order to regulate our affective states. We may go to natural places to release stress or to a jazz modernist cafe in search of inspiration for writing. Certain spaces such as churches, natural landscapes, or museums can effectively be used to regulate the affective state of the individual and can be considered part of his or her affective niche. Nonetheless, there are some relevant distinctions to make between atmospheres and affective affordances.

To begin with, a clear contrast is their potential and actual character, which derives from the indeterminacy in the scope of possibilities introduced earlier. Affective affordances are defined as those elements in the environment that have *the potential* to be used as affective regulators. The music I save on my playlists can be considered part of my affective niche even if I am not listening to it at that precise moment. Affective affordances are defined as *affective regulability* rather than actual affective experiences. Atmospheres, however, exist only in their actuality. It would sound absurd to talk about the atmosphere of the workplace when there is no one in it. It would be meaningless to speak of an atmosphere potentially eliciting a certain emotional response, because the atmosphere *is* the actual affective resonance with the situation. Atmospheres exist in actuality of their being felt, as affective qualities of situations we are immersed in, not in their virtuality as opportunities for affective regulation. They are phenomenological categories, that is, forms of affective experiences and, as such, they have a similar status of – but different structures than – other modes of affects such as emotions, moods or existential feelings (Fuchs, 2013; García, *forthcoming*). This phenomenological distinction between modes of affectivity

may indicate different mechanisms of affective regulation that are not captured (at least in current formulations) by the concept of affective affordances. One of the reasons is that it conflates all affective phenomena into a dispositional definition, that is, the view of affectivity in terms of action-readiness or motivation to act (Frijda, 1986). As a consequence, the concept of affective affordance by itself may lack the phenomenological depth required to characterize atmospheres and to distinguish them from other forms of affective experiences.³

Moreover, the atmospheres we experience in our everyday life are not limited to those intentionally created or manipulated as the concepts of affective affordances and affective arrangements suggest, but we find ourselves immersed in them unintendedly. The atmosphere of a high-standing restaurant may not always be as calm and intimate as intended in the first place. The reason is that, beyond the careful arrangement of things (e.g., odors, the food, the musical ambience, etc.), interactions between people participating in them modulate the moment to moment ambience of the situation (e.g., a couple arguing at the next table). The interactions between the elements of the situation give rise to an identifiable configuration or *gestalt pattern*. If one element of the situation changes, the whole situation also changes. As a result, although specific generators of type-atmospheres can be identified and studied (Böhme, 2021), due to their constitutive openness, operational nature, and unfinished character, the resulting token-atmosphere will be beyond the designed arrangement of things.

Another contrasting point concerns their ontological status. In certain situations, the absence of certain elements can condition the resulting atmosphere. For instance, the absence of a member of the family who has passed away recently may generate an atmosphere of nostalgia and sadness at a Christmas family dinner, the absence of personal belongings in a new apartment may generate a cold atmosphere of strangeness, or the absence of ambient noise may generate an atmosphere that facilitates concentration. To give another example, the absence of effective leadership may cause an atmosphere of uncertainty and chaos in an organization. Not only does the presence of certain elements of the environment influence our affective experience, but sometimes the *presence of an absence* is what elicits certain emotional and systemic responses. If we assume this possibility, then it is not easy to imagine how certain atmospheres could be described in terms of affective affordances. The reason is that ecological psychology departs from the ontological claim of an existing physical environment – the habitat of the animal species – a part of which is the world as perceived by the individual (Umwelt) (e.g., Baggs & Chemero, 2021). Since the perceived world is a subset of the physical world, therefore, it must be described in positive terms. Atmospheres, instead, as phenomenological categories, although relationally defined, do not presuppose the positive existence of

the relata. Indeed, they are considered epistemologically prior to objectifiable reality by some authors (Anderson, 2009; Griffero, 2017).

Moreover, affordances are described as relations with concrete things and objects (primarily artifacts). The main issue here is that the discourse of affordances (including the concept of affective affordances) has been constructed on the paradigmatic example of canonical affordances (Costall, 2012; Viola, 2021), which refer to relationships with object-like artifacts. Even if affordances are considered as emergent properties of the interaction between the animal and its environment and thus not reducible to their physical properties (Stoffregen, 2003), prototypical affordances refer to agent-object dyadic relationships. Indeed, affective affordances are typically described in terms of relations with artifacts (e.g., a rosary, the picture of the family, the color of the cloth, to use some examples from Krueger & Colombetti, 2018). However, the meaning of an affordance, even in its canonical form, does not depend only on the features of the object and the agent (and their history of couplings), but on the constellation of affordances this particular affordance is embedded in, that is, it depends on the wider contextual framework or to the situation to be meaningful (Costall, 2012). In other words, the meaning of an affordance is instantiated within a wider context of the *situation*.

A way of overcoming this issue would be to define affordances as relations between specific aspects of the agent and whole situations. Indeed, this is the strategy adopted by Chemero (2003), who argues that affordances should be understood as relations between abilities of the agent with features (not properties) of whole situations (like raininess being a feature of a situation). While properties are defined in relation to objects, features do not postulate particular and concrete objects as the substracts of qualities. This formulation would explain the fact that the situation as a whole may offer certain possibilities for action or affective regulation. The problem is that this situational account by itself does not distinguish the contribution of different affordances to the experience in a given situation, nor how we distinguish between meaningful objects. If affordances are relations with aspects of whole situations, how can it be that I ascribe the ability of regulating my affective states to certain things, places or people in any consistent or meaningful way? It seems that while the bare concept of affective affordances overly relies on concrete elements and misses the whole situation, the situational account relies on whole situations missing the concrete elements. The phenomenology of atmospheres, instead, wants to describe how the situational affective qualities make certain concrete affordances more salient than others. It aims to provide a conceptual apparatus to talk about the actual affective engagement with whole situations as experienced by the agent that serves as a context from where concrete elements and relations emerge.

What these considerations point to is the multiscale character of atmospheres, which encompass not only elementary object-like solicitations of atomistic behavioral units, but also their integration in wider contexts or situations. A general mistake would be to understand affordances as “what” is perceived, rather than “how” situations are perceived (Heft, 2018). Indeed, we should understand the conceptual framework of affordances as a theory of how experience is built, rather than the reifying attitude toward affordances as the content of perceptual experience. Atmospheres aim to do precisely that: to settle the operational affective grounds of all perceptual experience. An overly ontological rather than epistemic perspective on affordances make that both the Gibsonian dispositional account, Chemero’s relational account and Krueger and Colombetti’s proposal of affective affordances fall short in accommodating atmospheric phenomena.

4. Atmospheres of the field

From previous considerations we can identify three tensions that traverse the debate about affordances that the phenomenology of atmospheres tries to overcome: First, the width of the meaning of “action” possibilities in affordance theory. Second, the tension between the positive and the phenomenological environment. Third, the part-whole mereological relationship of situations and affordances. In this section, I will argue that a field theory as put forward by Rietveld, Kirverstein and others (Rietveld et al., 2018; van Dijk & Rietveld, 2016) as part of the Skill Intentionality Framework (SIF) allows us to articulate these tensions in a way that is compatible with atmospherology.

Concerning the first tension, notice that cognition from an enactive-ecological perspective is always conceived as a form of activity. In this regard, actions might be understood in a narrow or in a broad sense: The former refers to motor activity or sensorimotor behavior. The latter, instead, encompasses every modality of cognition such as linguistic performance, affective regulation, planning, social interaction, and so on. Since affordances depend on the ability of the individual, and humans have a wide variety of skills (e.g., motor skills, but also linguistic, affective, cognitive and social skills), therefore, the environment must offer multimodal affordances of different nature and orders – encompassing higher order cognitive abilities, the so called “mental affordances” (McClelland, 2020) and affective affordances too. In an attempt to provide a more encompassing and enriched perspective, (Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014; Rietveld et al., 2018; van Dijk & Rietveld, 2016) proposed that a rich variety of different affordances must be organized forming multimodal landscapes. They use the example of a towel in a public restroom which affords, not only drying hands, but also to be represented as a towel, to be correctly judged as a towel,

to be linguistically referred to as “towel”, and so on. The perception of a towel, then, would involve a *rich landscape of affordances* that the towel presents. By widening the scope of what counts as *action* solicitation, the authors can encompass a variety of ways in which the environment can appear as meaningful to us. This liberal account of action possibilities goes along with the dynamic and heterogeneous character of atmospheres, which ongoingly emerge from the interaction of heterogeneous elements of different kinds. An utterance, aesthetic elements, certain behaviors or intersubjective interactions may contribute to building the atmosphere of a situation. Thus, this landscape perspective allows us to specify qualitatively different action possibilities, understood in a broad sense, that might be present in certain situations.

A second tension concerns how to articulate the positive (species-relative) and the phenomenological environment (for an extension of the debate see McGann et al., 2020). In this regard, the authors distinguish between the *rich landscape of affordances* —which is relative to a particular population – and the *field of relevant affordances* —as actual solicitations experienced by an individual. An affordance is relevant when it is perceived by an individual as soliciting certain action, which is manifested as a bodily state of action readiness (Frijda, 1986). The field of relevant affordances is thus the dynamic and wide field of solicitations that the individual experiences in interaction with the environment. The field is a phenomenological field and refers to a dynamic totality that emerges from the interactions between the agent and its particular landscape. In other words, the field is a field of saliences, or the “field of forces” in Lewin’s terms (Lewin, 1951).

The move from the landscape of affordances to the field of solicitations is done by what Maiese (2022) calls *affective framing*. Affective framing is the operation by which we bodily gauge, select and filter the information of the environment, by narrowing down the field of potential significations into actual and concrete meanings that are relevant for the individual. This form of filtering, I shall argue, is not a mere selection of a subset of affordances of the landscape, but a form of active enactment. We do not just inhabit our environments and select from them what is relevant for our purposes, but we *enhabit* them (James, 2020). The landscape of affordances, thus, becomes transformed as the field of relevant affordances of a particular individual by ongoing enactments of our habitual forms of interacting. This form of affective framing, as I will explain later, has to do more with a form of *concretization* than with mere filtering.

A third concern refers to the mereological problem of how to properly understand situations without falling neither into a fused whole that banishes the contribution of individual affordances, nor to a mere composition of atomic affordances. Drawing on Lewin’s (1951) field theory, the field of relevant affordances explains the mutual

constitutive influence between the particular affordances that compose the field and the situation-level downward constraint that the field exerts over particular affordances. In other words, the field is not only composed of particular affordances, but individual affordances can be seen as functions of the whole field. However, the field should be understood not merely in holistic terms, but beyond the traditional slogan that “the whole is more than the sum of its constituents,” it must have a certain dynamic *structure*. Drawing on Gallagher (2022), I suggest that this part-whole mutual constitution shall be construed in terms of dynamic Gestalt configuration, that is, as horizontal, nonhierarchical and dynamic patterns that integrate multiscale and multimodal affordances.⁴ Dynamic Gestalts are processes of figure-ground conformation in experience, where multimodal and multiscale affordances conform a certain pattern according to situational requirements. Accordingly, affective atmospheres should be interpreted in the context of the emergence of a Gestalt configuration of affordances. Atmospheres are, thus, operations at the field level.⁵

Recalling the relational and holistic ontology that underlies the enactive perspective (Thompson & Varela, 2001), in order to understand a system, we should not only look at the elements composing it, but also to the interactions among them and the concrete wholes they generate. The idea is that the dynamic interplay between elements of a system gives rise to emergent processes, which in turn exert a downward or global-to-local influence on those elements. This downward causation goes beyond mereological supervenience (Kim, 1984); that is, the idea that wholes supervene on the properties of their parts. From the relational holism perspective, instead, wholes and parts are defined by their bidirectional relationship, where local-to-global and global-to-local influences apply. However, in order not to fuse the contribution of each element and to maintain the structures of situations, those wholes should be understood as dynamic Gestalt patterns (Gallagher, 2022).

This perspective thus contrasts with Griffero’s (2022) formulation of atmospheres as *superveniences* of affordances that compose them. As I see them, affordances are not mere generators, but are partly constituted by the situational atmosphere they are embedded in. To make it clear, although both material and non-material elements such as spatial configurations, arrangements of things, and more relevantly, people interacting in them, contribute to the creation of a certain atmosphere, this contribution is not of mereological supervenience, that is, the relation of what wholes and parts are is not only determined by bottom-up constitution, but top-down constitutive relations matter. Becoming gripped by an atmosphere is not merely a sign of being solicited by the affordances that constitute it (as claimed for instance in Brown et al., 2019). Instead, elements of the field of affordances

can generate macro-level patterns, which are atmospherically felt and can, in turn, constrain the perception of particular elements. Atmospheres generate affective states that contextualize the salience of concrete affordances, entraining the perception of concrete and objectifiable reality. Phenomenally, atmospheres modulate the whole landscape of affordances and the felt body that resonates with it, settling the background from where concrete and relevant affordances may emerge.

This being stated, what might be the precise specific operative role of affective atmospheres in the Skilled Intentionality Framework (SIF)? A closer look at SIF reveals that there are three senses in which affectivity is involved in the field of relevant affordances: First, we may consider affective affordances as one type of those elements that compose the landscape, but I have already indicated the problems with the concept of affective affordances in characterizing atmospheres, namely their potentiality/actuality, their ontological status, and their deliberate use. Second, affectivity may be involved in the soliciting character of individual affordances – rather than one type of activity that a thing affords. In this sense, all affordances would be affective since they all would have the potential to become solicitation (Caravà & Scorolli, 2020).

However, this is not the kind of affective experience atmospheres refer to. Rietveld and Kiverstein (2014) define this soliciting character of affordances in terms of bodily *action readiness*. According to the authors, “states of action readiness characterize affective states in ways that reflect the strivings of organisms to modify their relation to the environment” (Rietveld et al., 2018, p. 55). The relevance of the field is thus felt as an affective allure and bodily responsiveness to the summons of affordances (even to the ones in the background of perceptual experiences). Arguably, however, this form of affective allure is not of the atmospheric kind, but of an emotional kind. Indeed, following phenomenological distinctions, while emotions can be described as showing action tendencies (Müller, 2021), moods and atmospheres are not defined by their intrinsic active aspect (Fuchs, 2013; García, forthcoming). The inherent action-oriented character of emotions, which is already manifested in its Latin root *e-movere*, which means “to move”, is not necessarily present in other forms of affective experiences. Moreover, affective allure or action readiness are bound to a concrete and delimited action possibility, that is, to the inviting character of a particular affordance. Atmospheres, instead, are better described as the pathic tone of the whole bodily affective resonance.

Lastly, I claim that affective atmospheres can be accommodated in SIF in a third sense, that is, as the soliciting character of the gestalt configuration of the whole field. Atmospheres shape the *potentiality* of what is to be felt, perceived or acted on, by modifying the moment by moment salience of concrete elements in a situation. Atmospheres are thus intrinsically related

to the temporal dimension of conscious experience. They open up or constrain future *possibilities* and they predispose the individual to novelty and change. Atmospheres, in positing a semi-stable affective background where the individual finds itself situated, contribute to the process of becoming, that is, to the operation of actualizing the potentialities of being in a coherent actual experience (García, [forthcoming](#); Wrbuschek & Sluneko, 2021).

In this regard, they can be understood as the experiential counterpart of context sensitivity, that is, the “selective openness to a multiplicity of relevant affordances simultaneously” (Rietveld et al., 2018, p. 57). Context sensitivity is not mainly a matter of reflectively evaluating the situation, but rather an embodied affective resonance that modulates the situational field in a general way, which is realized in atmospheric affects. This form of affective framing modulates the moment by moment selective attention and patterns of affective engagement, by setting new spaces of motivations in response to situational demands (O’Conaill, 2014).

Now, if affective atmospheres are the phenomenological counterpart of context sensitivity and they can be viewed as the top down constitution that makes certain elements salient from a given context (understood as a gestalt pattern), how do they operate? I believe that this movement from the whole to the particular can be construed in terms of *concretization* (Feenberg, 2017). In the dialectical and simondonian tradition, as recently adopted by some enactive authors (DiPaolo, 2021; DiPaolo et al., 2018), concretization refers to the epistemic operation of considering an element as embedded within a network of relations, that is, its constitution as a relational system. It opposes abstraction (ab+trahere), which refers to the process of decontextualization or isolation of the element from its relation with other elements (see DiPaolo et al., 2018, p. 92). Concretization, in this context, can be viewed as the operation of going from holistic abstract and blurred affective atmospheres to identifiable constellations of concrete affordances and relations between them. Indeed, the atmospheric way of disclosing the world is characterized by being fundamentally ambiguous as it holds opposite tensions that are dialectically related – “presence and absence, materiality and ideality, definite and indefinite, singularity and generality” (Anderson, 2009, p. 77). Noticeably, the very etymological term *atmosphere* refers to two opposed forms of spatiality – the tendency of aerial substances to fill in spaces (*atmos*) and a particular form of spherical organization of space (*sphere*). Consequently, atmospheres can be seen as ambiguous and blurred totalities that sometimes call for concretization and disambiguation. This call for disambiguation lies on the ground of the gripping force of atmospheres. In other worlds, atmospheres are ambiguous and blurred totalities that call for concretization and disambiguation into identifiable Gestalt patterns of affordances. In this particular sense, the EE theory can

accommodate the phenomenology of affective atmospheres not only as a particular form of affective experience but as the structurally affective character of experience.

5. Conclusion

This article has explored the possibilities of accommodating the phenomenology of atmospheres into a phenomenologically-informed account of the environment in terms of affordances. I have argued that the Gibsonian affordances, the relational account and the concept of affective affordances lack the phenomenological depth to do justice to the structurally different forms of affective experiences, and particularly to the holistic, blurred, and pathic character of affective atmospheres. A field perspective, as developed by SIF, however, sets the theoretical grounds for these considerations. As a conclusion, we can say that the two approaches, the enactive-ecological proposal of the SIF and phenomenology of atmospheres, pursue different but complementary explanations. While the explanatory strategy of ecological psychology goes from concrete and individual affordances to their combinatorial landscape, atmospheres aim to capture the effects of holistic situations on the emergence of constellations of elements and relations. In this sense, atmospheres and affordances point to two complementary ways of explaining the primordially affective character of experience.

Notes

1. New phenomenology – not to be confused with French new phenomenology (Simmons & Benson, 2013) – was developed by the German philosopher Hermann Schmitz in the 1980s (Schmitz, 2019; Schmitz, 1964–1980/2005), but it is only recently achieving recognition within academic philosophy. The main endeavor of Schmitz’s philosophical system is to overcome the psychologistic-reductionist-introjectionist ontology that has dominated western philosophy. Accordingly, the somehow grandiose label of “new” phenomenology points to his distance with two tendencies of German phenomenological tradition: its alleged internalist orientation and the tendency to turn back to Husserl’s phenomenological framework as the standard phenomenological method. The aim is to move away from apodictical justifications or transcendental speculation of contemplating essences. Although Schmitz is inspired by Husserl’s method, his phenomenology is no longer transcendental or ego-centered and aims to free itself from classical commitments to truth, essence, and the “dogma” of intentionality (Blume, 2010).
2. We can distinguish between the ontological claim and the epistemological claim on atmospheres. The first is held by Griffero (2017), who describes atmospheres as substance-like entities or quasi-thing. In his words, “quasi-objective atmospheres are certainly entities and not only interactions, properties (let alone merely physical ones), or necessarily agent-related aspects” (Griffero, 2022, p. 93). The epistemological claim, instead, understands atmospheres as specific features of experience, that is, as specific structures of our access to the world. This perspective is held by Svenaeus

- (2013), Anderson (2009) and others. In this work, I maintain a skeptical position about the ontological claim (whether they are entities, relations, or properties) and adopt an epistemological perspective.
3. I raise these points not to diminish the relevance of this valuable research and its impressive conceptual development. Although these phenomenological considerations have not been taken into account in current formulations of affective affordances, I do not think that this theoretical gap could not be redressed by their proponents. What I claim here is that any phenomenological theory of affective affordances will need to distinguish between structurally different forms of affects.
 4. This concept has been derived from gestalt psychologists (e.g., Goldstein, 1934/1995) and has recently been coined by Shaun Gallagher to describe the enactive conception of the self as dynamic patterns (Gallagher, 2013) and also to describe the multiscale and multifactorial character of the self and mental disorders (Gallagher, 2022). However, here I refer to the configuration of the dynamic structure of the field of relevant affordances. While Gallagher grounds his conception on a form of interventionist causality between multiscale factors, I shall not endorse his conception of causality here.
 5. Slaby's concept of "affective arrangements," which refer to heterogeneous ensembles that organize in layouts of affective intensities (Slaby, 2018; Slaby et al., 2019), is built to account for the differential contribution of heterogeneous elements to the overall affective atmosphere. Affective arrangements are seen as distributed pre-individual affective intensities that contribute to the formation of concrete entities and subjectivities. Although both atmospherology and Slaby might have similar explanatory aims, they arise from different thought traditions. While the concept of affective arrangements is built from the Spinoza-Deleuzian tradition and cultural affect studies, atmospherology builds on the phenomenological tradition. This paper restricts to the phenomenological aspect of atmospheres and their contribution to EE theories. Although exploring the connection between cultural affect studies and EE theories would be a valuable study in the area, that falls beyond the scope of the present paper.

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