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WELL-BEING AS A COLLECTIVE ATMOSPHERE

1. Between the devil (objectivism) and the deep blue sea (subjectivism)

Let's begin under Adorno's protective wing:

We can tell whether we are happy by the sound of the wind. It warns the unhappy man of the fragility of his house, hounding him from shallow sleep and violent dreams. To the happy man it is the song of his protectedness: its furious howling concedes that it has power over him no longer. (Adorno 2005, 49)

As suggestive as this quotation may be, here Adorno says something inexact (to say the least): he puts wind in the sails of an entirely perceptual subjectivism, thus underestimating the relatively invariant affective-expressive qualities of phenomenal reality – in this case of the wind, as an outstanding example of quasi-thing (Griffero 2017). Without simply being either an accidental property of things or a stable and permanent object, in fact, wind felt-bodily involves our everyday life more and deeper than things in the strict sense.

The issue of happiness raised by Adorno, however, is no more problematic than the seemingly less ambitious one of well-being. Indeed, although it's gaining increasing momentum as a core topic of humanistic research, the least that can be said is that well-being is a multifold and very controversial construct. What does actually constitute well-being? Can the complexity of human behaviour really be captured through simplified paradigms like that? Does the current state of the art in well-being studies allow for a unified perspective?

Instead of fully answering these preliminary questions I'd first like to say that well-being should be of fundamental importance to a philosophy like New Phenomenology, which is focused on emotional life and on how individuals feel in their environment. Nevertheless, this topic is surprisingly not at the heart of this new research paradigm. One might think that this is because New Phenomenology considers individual well-being as something that falls outside the sphere of scientific inquiry, whereby declares the relentless decline of any introspectionist psychology. However, this is certainly not the case. A subjective appraisal of well-being may be considered to be objectively wrong because of its inaccuracy, instability and incomparability as well as because it does not produce the exact data that would be of use to policymakers. However, for New Phenomenology, this is definitely not an argument against the central phenomenological role of subjective-qualitative facts. Indeed, a neo-phenomenological and, as we shall see, the atmospherological approach is mainly based on a first-person perspective and therefore perfectly entitled to consider subjective well-being as the starting point for a (non-quantitative) philosophical reflection.

However, this approach succeeds in doing so without embracing any introjectionist assumption, i.e. without completely reducing the subject to an alleged inner and ineffable psychic world. After all, the boom of the notion of atmosphere in philosophy and in the humanities (Andermann, Eberlein, 2011; Schmitz 2014; Bulka 2015; Böhme 2017a, 2017b; Griffero 2014a, 2017, 2019 among many others) as well as the renewed success of the notion of *Stimmung* (Gisbertz 2011; Gumbrecht 2012; Reents, Meyer-Sickendiek 2013; Pfaller, Wiese 2018) and the propagation, so to speak, of a *Stimmung* for the concept of *Stimmung* itself (Bude 2016, 37), must obviously be framed within an explanation according to which sentiment (in its various nuances) exceeds Wittgenstein's verdict on the linguistic borders of the world – an explanation of the human orientation in the world that is no longer exclusively based on reason or language.

So let's go step by step in approaching well-being. As usual, it's best to start from the dichotomization into objective and subjective, a buzzword that afflicts any theory of well-being (Fletcher 2016). On the one hand there are objective theories of well-being. They are grounded on the assumption that that affective-cognitive condition can be described either through behaviours and activities contributing to shaping the good life in accordance with shared values, moral principles, and universal features of the "human nature", or through economic data that can be collected and accurately measured. Both approaches believe well-being to depend on such objective issues as whether a thing or an activity satisfies human needs and realises human nature, etc., or whether the economic situation of a person or a community has really improved. It is therefore quite normal that objective theories provide a list of things and activities or statistical and economic data they consider to be good for a person. This takes for granted that something could be good for a person even if that person did not regard it favourably, i.e. that well-being (even if only as a capability parameter) has to be regarded as good 1) intersubjectively or (2) in a (stronger) realist-correspondentist sense. Unfortunately, several studies contradict both these assumptions, showing very uncertain relationships, for example, between the position of a country in the Human Development Index ranking and the level of subjective well-being reported by its citizens.

Two special variants of this objective approach are represented by supernaturalists and objectivist naturalists. For the former, an encompassing atmosphere of well-being, one that proves that our lives are not random or accidental, is only possible in a cosmos that is "teleologically structured" by God (or some other entity beyond the natural world). For the latter, instead, our lives are meaningful to the extent that we engage with objective values (the true, the good, or the beautiful, to use traditional terms) and our actions affect the realization of these impersonal values, without any supernatural entities being involved. Both obviously reject the utilitarian approach, according to which an action's meaning is proportional to its contribution to welfare.

Conversely, subjective theories identify well-being with the fulfilment of subjectively perceived desires and aspirations and assess it based on our attitudes of favour and disfavour. Thus, to know if a person is in a state of well-being or not, they must be consulted, asked what their preferences are and what their favour is for. In short, well-being here would entirely depend on the degree to which one subjectively endorses what one does, whatever it is.

Hence the usual paralysis that comes with dualism: on the one side it's difficult to explain how well-being can be given in the absence of subjective satisfaction; on the other it's difficult to accept that any activity whatsoever may enhance well-being, so long as the subject is pleased about it (the fact that, for example, Sisyphus might love pushing a rock up the hill until it rolls down, and want to do nothing else, is an implausible exception, because a subjective endorsement implies taking pride in what one does).

From the point of view of atmospherology, according to which feelings are more outside than inside, it's all about not reducing the whole reasoning exclusively to a first- or third-person perspective. To conceive of well-being as an atmosphere or, better, as a higher-order atmosphere involves exactly the attempt to gain relative objectivity without losing the value of subjective facts for a person. The point is not simply to claim the importance of a mix of first-personal attitudes (pride in what we've done, satisfaction with and even excitement about what we're doing, confident hope for the future) or to repeat something self-evident – well-being arises from “actively engaging in projects of objective worth” (Wolf 2010, 26) or is experienced when “subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness” (Wolf 1997, 221). Rather, it is a matter of stressing that well-being depends above all on how we live in our lived spatial environment. Which is why I believe that a pathic and atmospheric aesthetics may also legitimately include the issue of well-being in its sphere of competence.

Many researchers think they're getting away with the paralyzing dualism by saying that objective and subjective dimensions have to be combined in any evaluation of well-being. This idea

does certainly make sense. However, my suggestion is a bit different, and consists in avoiding both the objectivistic quantitative approach, completely dependent on the idea that the world can be reliably evaluated in the third person, and the subjectivistic one, completely dependent on the introjectionistic-constructionist idea that the world can only be viewed and created subjectively in its meaning and value. To do so, I'm going to fully use the heuristic potential of the aesthetic and neophenomenological notion of atmosphere as a feeling poured out into a certain lived, pre-dimensional space, i.e. as a shared feeling that, while being the same, probably triggers relatively different subjective feelings. I hope that this approach can provide a deeper insight into the multiple phenomenological dimensions of well-being, first of all in order to avoid all the many oversimplified and reductionist perspectives that prove unable to see how eudaimonic and hedonic happiness are two correlated constructs and how well-being also depends on cultural and situational constraints. In short: my approach to well-being as a special, higher-order atmosphere does not necessarily have to choose between the devil and the deep blue sea, being actually able to reject the strictly objective theories, the strictly subjective-introjectionist ones, and the reductionism they both inevitably entail.

2. What if well-being is an atmosphere?

As already mentioned, my working hypothesis is that well-being can be defined as a very special atmospheric feeling, a deep mood that is both personal and collective (with all the problems entailed by the possible interaction or conflict of these two different dimensions). The legitimacy of this aesthetic and phenomenological assumption obviously relies on a definition of the phenomenon that does not focus, as far as possible, on its economic, psychological, medical and legal aspects, but that instead interprets the notion in terms of vital feeling. From this perspective, well-being is a feeling, certainly more stable and enduring than other simple feelings and, a fortiori, than emotions. Precisely because of its low af-

fective intensity, it also can be compared to what the philosophical tradition refers to as *Stimmung*¹ or, more tentatively, as mood.

Let's try to make this a little bit clearer. Speaking of well-being in an atmospheric way does not only mean claiming that a mood may be a general indicator of well-being and thus probably provide a function in terms of self-regulation; rather it means stating that well-being itself can be considered a (more or less positive) *Stimmung* or, if you will, a kind of composite atmosphere. When, for example, one makes the generic sweeping statement that people in our society are inclined to an accelerationist-technological optimism (the Silicon Valley model) or to a fatalistic-mystical egocentricity (the bucolic *buen retiro* and/or yoga model), one is undoubtedly trying to establish, although with difficulty and a high rate of generality, what the prevailing *Stimmung* is and what kind and degree of well-being it implies. If we wanted to accept De Rivera's classification (to which we will return later), well-being should coincide with the intersubjective-social emotional climates that reflect longer-term sociopolitical conditions. In my view, well-being does not coincide with any single atmosphere, being rather the result, the condensation if you prefer, of different more localized and transitory atmospheric feelings. More precisely, taking up here my distinction between prototypical, derived and spurious (or idiosyncratic) atmospheres, I propose to assimilate well-being to the prototypical ones, which are objective, external and whose origin is and remains largely obscure. The greater spatial pervasiveness and temporal extension of well-being make it not just a composite atmosphere but a real higher-order atmosphere.

Conceived in this way, well-being is an evaluation (in a broad sense) devoid of a real focus and yet able to induce a certain perception (also more atmospherically localized) of one's situation; in other terms, your well-being lets you decide what you perceive or experience and how you perceive or experience it (some-

¹ It's important not to overestimate the alleged untranslatability and ineffability of the term *Stimmung* (David 2004), if only because declaring that something is untranslatable means comparing any translation of it with the original.

times even prejudicially or in a conformist way, just think of the spiral of silence), and it's a precondition for you to be able to run risks or to wish to take your time to observe something carefully, instead of seeking distractions, etc. Here one can hardly avoid a certain degree of hermeneutical parts-whole circularity, because on the one hand well-being probably results from the accumulation of momentary atmospheric situations connoted in a certain way and finally condensed into a holistic overall feeling without a real intentional object, while, on the other, those occasional atmospheric situations in turn are already tonalized in a certain way and therefore experienced on the background of some *Stimmung* (i.e. of a certain degree of well-being).

Due to (or thanks to) this affective circularity between single atmospheres and well-being as a higher-order atmosphere or *Stimmung*, it can be said that what we experience on the background of a mostly tacit *Stimmung* – which determines both which worldly entities we encounter and how we do so – in turn contributes, at least imperceptibly, to the modification of the overall *Stimmung* itself. It is not necessary to agree with the primacy that Heidegger assigns to the *Stimmung* of anguish and deep boredom, every objectification-focus of which would be nothing more than a form of removal and therefore an inauthentic affective situation (*Befindlichkeit*), in order to accept the idea that, like every *Stimmung*, well-being also provides pre-theoretical evidence and certainty to our being-in-the-world.

In short, well-being is therefore both an atmospheric premise and an atmospheric result. It acts as a background, from which various figures and even antithetical orientations can emerge, as in the case of both dissidence and fatalism with regards to capitalism, now free from the illusion of perennial growth: those are two affective and well-being-related reactions to the same higher-order atmosphere that we could call 'irritability'. Just as any other *Stimmung*, moreover, well-being can never truly be absent: it is always there, even if unconsciously. Just as silence necessarily implies a certain kind of communication, not feeling any *Stimmung* is in turn a *Stimmung* (Bude 2016, 22), and not feeling well-

being means probably feeling a certain (very low, clearly) degree of situational well-being.

In this context, well-being might also be considered as an existential feeling, that is, as Matthew Ratcliffe (2008) reminded us, as a feeling of bodily state and at the same time as a way of experiencing things outside the body. By the way, whether it is an existential feeling or a higher-order atmosphere, well-being is still a (relatively conscious) 'affective' state that prefigures all ways of finding oneself in the world and thus provides an orientation through which experience as a whole is structured. What is decisive for an atmospherological approach, however, is that even those who, when asked about their well-being, answer, for example, "I feel strange or confused", are not just saying something about themselves but something pre-propositional about the world as such.² In other terms, for them "everything feels strange or confused".

Nevertheless, more than detailing this pre-articulate atmospheric sphere that I have dealt with on many other occasions, it is now worthwhile to further problematize my suggestion (i.e. the atmospheric nature of well-being), by bringing to light many of the doubts that weigh both on the notion of well-being as such and on its explanation in atmospheric terms.

3. A quicksand of doubts

a) *In praise of 'indirectness'*. The first unavoidable question is whether and how well-being, also as an atmosphere, can be investigated and verified. Provided that each object requires its own specific method of investigation, what might be the most suitable in this case? Being an integral part of our daily lives, can well-being as an atmosphere, be really empirically objectified and studied? My suggestion is to re-evaluate the scientific value of 'impressions', even, if not above all, of the first ones, since they are caused by involuntary and certainly unintentional vital experiences. Be-

² "Belonging to the world is a pre-articulate, practical orientation and any attempt to reconstruct it in propositional terms is an over-intellectualisation of something that is presupposed by propositional thought" (Ratcliffe 2008, 178).

ing soft facts (tranquillity, trust, community, natural beauty, etc.) (Grossheim, Kluck, Nörenberg 2014), impressions are in this context more revealing than alleged hard facts such as economic situation, demographic problems, unemployment, physical fitness, etc., and this is so not despite but precisely by virtue of their axiological impenetrability (if one can say so).

But here we immediately stumble upon the source of all doubts. It is the same paradox as that resulting from the conceptualization of happiness and the question of the producibility of atmospheres, resulting in a performative fallacy. It can be summarised in the following formula: “to achieve well-being, forget about it”. Only in this way, with any luck, will well-being come: that is, as a by-product of pursuing meaningful activities and relationships. If one is reasonably successful in those activities, well-being may follow. This very widespread paradox brings to light the fact that pursuing well-being directly and deliberately is self-defeating or otherwise very problematic. Focusing our attention on our well-being through excessive critical scrutiny of our feelings actually erodes our well-being, as we feel that it is always insufficient or does not live up to our expectations or our imagination.³ Kant, for example, reminds us that “the more a cultivated reason purposely occupies itself with well-being, so much the further does one get away from true well-being” (Kant 1996, 51). Making it a little easier: well-being needs indirectness rather than excessive self-seeking and self-preoccupation, because it cannot be pursued directly but only through other things that in turn must be sought not as means but for their own sake.

This paradox also challenges the widely held belief that obtaining certain things and specific results will automatically increase our well-being, and valorises, on the contrary, the idea that well-being has less to do with acquiring what we seek than with the journey we embark on by seeking it. It’s well known that sometimes “anticipation is better than realization”, or, put in my terms, that protention is sometimes more atmospheric than reali-

³ Mill, Sidgwick and Kant agree on this point, though of course with partly different arguments.

zation. This suggests that well-being comes from positive attitudes concerning the future, such as hope, faith, and optimism: that is, not from getting what we hope for, but rather from the impact of these future-oriented attitudes and their positive thoughts on the present.

Moreover, this paradox also problematizes any question explicitly aimed at verifying the well-being of an individual and/or a community. This casts an equivocal light on the statistical tools normally used in sociological surveys (questionnaires and interviews). It actually seems that sincere answers about one's well-being only emerge when one is not expressly asked about it. As I've already mentioned, thetical questioning of well-being immediately evokes relatively misleading theoretical constructs in both the questioner and the respondent. It is therefore preferable to resort to indirect questions, from the answers to which one can then infer something about the central question. It is an oblique method, if you will, which does not start from definitions but from how one feels here and now, and consists above all in avoiding strictly quantitative methodologies obsessed by omnipresent diagrams and tables. In conclusion, it goes beyond the examination carried out by strictly statistical questionnaires and does not ask direct questions about one's level of well-being.

From my point of view, a neo-phenomenological and atmospherological approach to well-being avoids all the strictly socio-economic indicators that best represent development, preferring to focus (albeit indirectly) on the identification of subjective feelings, in a sense on what it is like to be me or you. To those who believe, for example, that the quality of political life might be measured by simply asking people how much they trust each other and their government, it can be argued that there is no clear empirical evidence of a positive relationship between governmental policy performance and citizens' political trust and participation – let alone their felt-bodily (individual and collective) resonance, which, after all, is what matters most in an atmospherological conception of well-being.

In summary: it does not seem possible to pursue well-being directly, nor does it seem possible to investigate its degree directly. And there's more: many other problems come up immediately.

b) *How widespread is it?* Let's assume that well-being is a higher-order atmosphere. Hence other problems, the first of which is to establish how widespread it is, i.e. what its spatial and temporal boundaries are. Despite the constitutive vagueness of the theme under investigation, a phenomenological orientation cannot fail to ask such a question if it aims at achieving *some* precision, for example if it wishes to go beyond the (albeit correct) assertion of the holistic and, so to speak, Gestaltic character of well-being, thus understood as a whole irreducible to its individual components. And this question needs an ontological-methodological reflection to be answered. I will come back to this point.

For now it is enough to ask if, for example, it is legitimate to talk about different affective zones and climates even if they are simultaneous and neighbouring. The problem becomes more complicated when the question concerns the atmospheric well-being of a historical period and/or a community, because one runs the risk of levelling out disparate emotional tones: think of the very different *Stimmungen* affecting an immigrant or a resident, a man or a woman, an "apocalyptic" or an "integrated" intellectual (Eco 2000, 17-35), a permanent or a precarious worker, etc.

c) *What about its intensity?* Does well-being necessarily certify an increase in the intensity with which one experiences what happens? The question makes sense, because it does not seem at all irrational to prefer a life that steadily delivers medium pleasures over a life of wild oscillations (i.e., a series of intense pleasures and intense pains), even if this second life features a greater amount of pleasure overall. Yet some prefer the so-called "James Dean effect" (Diener, Derrick, Shigehiro 2001, 157) and think that a triumphal life is better than years of positive but mediocre value.

One could rightly suggest that those who believe in the James Dean effect are misled by their aesthetic intuitions from the outside, because “Dean’s actual life makes for a better story than the imagined longer life, but this clearly has nothing to do with whether it is a better life *for him*” (Bradley 2009, 160). Another objection is that prejudice in favour of the James Dean effect gives too much importance to the last phase of one’s experience (end) or to the emotionally stronger moment (peak) of it, rather than to the whole of one’s experiences, thereby uncritically repeating the well-known but misleading feeling that the value of later-occurring goods is greater than that of previous ones. Here’s an example that seems very telling to me: common sense tells us that our well-being would soar permanently if we won a multimillion-dollar lottery, and it would sink irreversibly if we lost our sight. Nevertheless, it seems proven that these emotional highs and lows do occur, but only for a short time and that, in tune with our range of happiness, within a year from these events, levels of happiness and therefore of well-being usually return to about where they were before (Brickman, Coates, Janoff-Bulman 1978).

d) *Doubts about the comparison and development of well-being over time.* One may also wonder whether well-being is immediately felt, through a sort of special self-reflection evidently endowed with transparency, or whether it becomes perceptible only *ex post*, that is, if examined at a certain distance and only by comparing one’s current situation with the previous one (be it one’s own or the general one). The comparison cannot actually be escaped, because when we experience something we also always seek justification in the eyes of others, also compared with their experiences our other ones. This powerful conditioning is inherent in human nature, but it has intensified in the postmodern world, where belief in objectively defensible values is at risk or has evaporated altogether. This is consistent with the widespread psychological finding that our well-being (or our unhappiness), for example that which we draw from consumption of goods, depends primarily on the comparison with others’ consumption

standards. In other words, well-being as a composite atmosphere depends on, both in the experience we have of it and in expressing it in a propositional form if asked about it, and is highly conditioned by this sort of “negative externality”– which in turn, of course, is atmospherically perceived.

However, the relationship between well-being and temporality is more complex than that. In fact, it is reasonable to think that an atmosphere of well-being is perceived only in the presence of a historical course perceived as an improvement with respect to the past or to other people.⁴ The problem actually affects every atmospheric perception. Although the perception of well-being as an atmosphere is linked to the immediacy of the here and now, of a certain lived space and a certain presentness, one cannot ignore that it also has its own temporal dynamics, so much so that shifts in our attitudes and experiences can alter our assessments of when and to what extent we were well during other periods of our lives. By living longer and more deeply, we could indeed acquire a wider range of comparisons to use in assessing our lives. This means that our attitudes can shift, so that it makes sense to say, for example, “I thought I could never be happier than I was in my youth, but now I know that was an illusion”. It should not be underestimated, as evidence of the key role of our first atmospheric impressions, that even in this case the alleged happy atmosphere lived in youth does not cease to be happy, at least insofar as it acts as a paradigm of the following affective experiences. Therefore, our conception of atmospheric well-being has to be dynamic rather than static.

Another well-known mental ‘cramp’ related to temporality is that processes that go from bad to good are considered to be better and preferable than processes that go from good to good, and obviously than those going from good to bad. This is what research has called “treadmills”. A lot of money simply feeds a “he-

⁴ People with chronic diseases or disabilities often perceive themselves as ordinary men and women coping with extraordinary circumstances and, as a consequence, report good levels of well-being (Delle Fave 2013, 9-10).

donic treadmill”: the more we buy and have, the more we want. Testifying to our continuous adaptation to circumstances, this means that economic growth only satisfies us for some time, because with a growing availability come greater desires, so that we return to our previous state of dissatisfaction (think of the distinction between needs and desires, Böhme 2017c). So, when somebody says that governments should aim at maximizing their citizens’ consumerist happiness and well-being, they are forgetting the risks of reducing policies to products, which would end up generating in citizens a spiral of progressively rising expectations that in principle would be impossible to fulfil.

Finally, one can’t forget the fundamental gap concerning the relationship between momentary experiences of well-being and long-lasting well-being. Hence the need to a) not mistake potential well-being with the actual state of well-being; to b) pay attention to the fact that small doses of well-being do not necessarily add up to greater well-being; finally c) to acknowledge that the well-being based on momentary pleasurable experiences, which come from satisfying homeostatic needs such as hunger, sex, and bodily comfort, is quite different from a well-being based on longer-term enjoyable experiences, that is, on good feelings that people experience when, with time and effort, they do or become something that goes beyond what they were.

These are just some examples of the difficulties faced by an analysis of well-being based on a time paradigm. Indeed, even the most quantitative theories add further difficulties. In macroeconomic terms, the paradox of economic growth, for example, is well known: average incomes in Western democracies have doubled over the last fifty years, but levels of happiness seem to have remained virtually unchanged. I am a long way from the Miserism International to which many philosophers have affiliated and which is well mocked by Sloterdijk (2016), but I don’t think it’s wrong to assume that excessive concern for safety, comfort, and material well-being ends up being detrimental to optimal development. In other terms: money contributes to well-being less than we usually believe. It immediately and powerfully increases peo-

ple's well-being by rescuing them from poverty, but thereafter it contributes little to it. What partly explains "this surprising result is that we tend to misuse money once we have it, thus becoming caught up in endless routines of getting and spending, rather than building wealth to increase freedom and peace of mind" (Martin 2013, 38).

e) *Consistency and continuity of well-being*. The concept of well-being as a higher-order atmosphere may assume peculiar relevance if understood as a balance rather than as the maximization of positive affect. The problem arises especially when well-being is identified with meaningfulness, that is, with what one could define as a life rich in purpose and direction, pride and self-esteem, fulfilment and depth, autonomy and maybe joy on the part of the agent, and admiration and inspiration on the part of others. Nevertheless, the degree of meaningfulness of one's life is always determined not only by the objective value of the projects and the degree to which the agent is suited to and engaged by them, but also by the degree to which these projects add up to a balanced and coherent whole. As Kauppinen (2012, 368) reminds us, the value of a series of achievements is enhanced when these achievements complement and build on one another and thus give well-being a "progressive" shape by which earlier activities positively inform the later ones.

4. The pathic way to well-being

As already mentioned, one of the main questions is whether well-being can only be pursued indirectly as the by-product of meaningful activities and relationships, and can only be recognised indirectly as the by-product of reflections (and questions) about something else. The pathic solution I'm suggesting involves two options. The first one goes by the name of "flow".

1) Referring to the metaphor of a current that carries one along effortlessly, adopting the flow means (Csikszentmihalyi 2014) focusing on the process of living well (eudaimonic approach) rather than on the outcomes of this process (hedonic ap-

proach). It implies engaging in valued activities and experiences that challenge us, while providing immediate and positive feedback, regardless of whether episodic pleasures are involved. This intense experiential involvement in moment-to-moment activity shows three additional subjective characteristics: a) a loss of self-consciousness, since attentional resources are fully invested in the task at hand; b) a lack of anxiety about losing control, which makes people's daily lives tiring; lastly c) an altered sense of time, since, in the flow, the moment-to-moment activity does not allow one to focus on the experience of duration (Friedman 1990), so that people report time passing quickly or faster than normal. According to these features, well-being could consist in the atmosphere which these flow-experiences, relatively rare in everyday life, are immersed in. Everything seems to be able to produce a flow, as soon as clear proximal goals structure experience effectively, providing both a balance between perceived (not necessarily present) challenges and perceived (not necessarily present) skills, neither overmatching nor underutilizing them, and immediate feedback about the progress that is being made. Relative unawareness and full dedication to what is being pursued leave the individual with little doubt about what to do next.

Well-being as a higher-order atmosphere might be a condition that allows us to live as many flow-experiences as possible, that is, activities that promote an intrinsically rewarding experiential involvement and, for this very reason, depend more on motivations and processes than on functional terms and outcomes. An atmospheric crisis could occur in a person or in a society, in fact, when they or it fail to find enjoyment in a productive life and need both increasingly elaborate means of control and repression, and artificial stimulations to be productive. In my view, activities that are so wasteful and disruptive as to interrupt the flow or make it impossible both contribute to, and follow from, the generation of wider toxic atmospheres.

Consequently, the higher-order atmosphere of well-being should consist in complete absorption in what one is doing, being and allowing for an autotelic activity that is never dictated by a

pre-existing intentional structure located within the person (a drive) or in the environment (a tradition or script), i.e. rewarding in and of itself to such an extent that the end goal is just an excuse for the process itself. Atmospheric well-being would therefore be recognizable by its acting as a facilitating framework that pushes one to do things for their own sake. Nevertheless, to avoid any temptation to fall into a melioristic pragmatism, it must be stressed that attention and deliberate planning don't play a key role in the flow and that this kind of experience should be understood in a more pathic and (in a broad sense) passive key. The widespread trend towards constructionism of many flow theorists must also be avoided. Indeed, it's not true that one can find a flow in almost any activity (working at a cash register or washing clothes) and find instead pleasant activities (going to the cinema or playing football) boring and anxiogenic, as if only subjective challenges and skills, and not objective ones, could really influence the quality of one's experience. Atmospheres (including that of well-being) are quasi-objective, they are pervasively present in the lived space outside individuals, and act as quasi-things, felt-bodily involving individuals and groups and sometimes even resisting their effort to change or neutralise them⁵: all this helps defeat any radical constructivism, according to which all feelings only exist within individuals and are therefore at their disposal, so much so that when people perceive them in their environment it is only because they have first unconsciously projected them outside. All this also helps show that self-consciousness does not at all coincide with felt-bodily non-affectivity. Being now conservative and now expansive, well-being, atmospherically understood, is actually a comprehensive affective situation making life better and more fluid even from a felt-bodily point of view, thus avoiding, for example, the wish to be elsewhere and to do something else.

2) On the basis of this felt-bodily approach to the philosophy of atmospheres I can say that an individual's flow is the reso-

⁵ For atmospheric authority cf. Griffero (2014b).

nance of a more general atmosphere of well-being that still needs to be investigated. However, in order to better understand this pathic approach to well-being it is necessary to keep in mind that this resonance sometimes consists in accepting, rather than in fully resolving, conflicts. In smell-the-roses moments, for example, affirmation and keeping things the way they are seem to be the simplest of things, for in these cases goodness and beauty seem to be everywhere if only we are attuned to them. As Epictetus teaches: “Do not seek to have events happen as you want them to, but instead want them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go well” (*Epictetus* 1983, 13). The paradox of a felt-bodily submission is that, as is well known, surrendering to what happens and losing control can liberate us in ways that contribute to well-being. As Frankfurt (1989, 89) put it, “a person may be enhanced and liberated through being seized, made captive, and overcome” by an object, because they are “guided by its characteristics rather than primarily by [their] own”.

This pathic concept of well-being, according to which persons are at their best when they “have lost or escaped from [themselves]” (Frankfurt 1989, 89), obviously sharply conflicts with the post-Enlightenment belief that the autonomy and arbitrariness of the individual, considered as such to be positive qualities, are increased by multiplying the number of options. We know from experience that multiplying options sometimes lessens our happiness by ruining the atmosphere of well-being: too many choices can be burdensome, because they place responsibility (and potentially blame) on us, but also because evaluating options takes time and adds complexity and confusion. We are sometimes actually more satisfied when our decisions are not so easily reversible and, committing in a spirit of permanence, we do not feel free to walk away at any time. I know this may sound like an old wife’s tale, regressive if not masochistic, but I think it’s worth repeating that, except in extreme cases, we really feel atmospheric well-being only when we grapple with sufficient options to avoid boredom, but also let ourselves go to what happens and (in a sense) decides for us. Is it really so irrational and regressive to

think that we probably already have everything we need to experience well-being, and we must only change our attitudes? To focus on what we already have and on our present instead of pursuing happiness outside ourselves and in the future: this is the first aspect, controversial but stimulating after centuries of hyper-rationalism, of a pathic way to well-being.

Nevertheless, what better qualifies this approach and takes it beyond a stoic mood, as already mentioned, is the effort to root well-being as atmosphere or historical climate (in a non-metaphorical sense) in some felt-bodily disposition. This is the witness and the filter, subjective but also collective when it takes the form of a felt-bodily “style”, of that atmosphere. Therefore, well-being presents itself as an atmosphere experienced by the felt body, without coming exclusively from it (being at most favoured by it). It only ceases to be latent in particular cases, expressing itself externally in a specific way: consider the emblematic case of art. Just as the sound of a trumpet in baroque music seems to felt-bodily correspond to a certain corporeal tonality of that historical period (brilliance and agility), so the degree of well-being of a historical period could be seen in the kind of felt-bodily communication (Griffero 2016, 2017b, 2017c) that individuals of that period establish with others and with things. Members of a certain community might not feel exactly the same thing, but at least share a certain “style” of feeling, an affective and cognitive aftertaste that does not necessarily coincide with their entire individual biography. Since there is no collective organ of common feeling, they are perhaps only made aware of this style by the feedback of the cultural products of that time. In other terms, they only realize how they are feeling as a community through the style of their lives and works and/or when differences and conflicts emerge.

Leaving aside the controversial question of whether such felt-bodily affectivity is experienced in an individual way and later extended to others or is experienced as something collective and shared from the beginning, my thesis is that collective well-being is an atmospheric feeling or a higher-order atmosphere that syn-

thesizes a historical climate. It provides individuals with an overall existential style that is expressed in their overall felt-bodily state and attitude. One obviously has to go beyond Bourdieu's sociological "habitus" as the mere reflection of a certain social position, as well as beyond Searle's analytical idea of an implicit background to linguistic-social action as a merely conventional and mental-individualistic state. The concept of atmosphere or emotional climate, I think, is able both to recognize and enhance the right autonomy of the affective sphere and to focus on the atmosphere of well-being understood as a collective phenomenon.

For this very reason, the concept of atmosphere, especially if applied to a repeated and longer-term non-temporary state, acting therefore as a higher-order atmosphere, borders with that of situation. In fact, a collective atmosphere is shared because its widespread affective quality identifies and distinguishes one situation from the other, leading those who are inside it to what is salient or not, possible or not, etc. That is why every discussion on the collective atmosphere of well-being also requires an in-depth examination of the possible types of situation. Using Hermann Schmitz's broad classification, it could be said that a situation is present or long-standing, impressive or segmented, deeply rooted or only inclusive, and that there are, as a consequence, different forms of atmosphere sharing, whose binding power depends both on the felt-bodily disposition of the people involved and on the degree of the atmosphere's situational rootedness. To give just one example, some atmospheric feelings remain the same even when they are rejected and not shared (a landscape, for example, may be melancholic as such even if the spectator is happy), while others, more resonance-conditioned, exist only when they are embodied and shared: without people who are feeling well, for example, there can be no atmosphere of well-being, exactly as without brave people there can be no atmosphere of courage.

Nevertheless, it's clear that there is a big difference between the atmosphere that, for example, I am experiencing this morning on the streets near my house and the atmosphere of well-being that surrounds me in the long run and that, encouraging or de-

pressing me, distinguishes a neighbourhood, a city, a country and even a historical era. In order to better understand well-being as a pervasive and durable emotional phenomenon, Joseph De Rivera's distinction among three types of collective affective states may also be useful. He distinguishes between a) transitory emotional atmospheres as short-term, situation-related affective group experiences focused on a particular common event (a funeral, a collective situation, a party, etc.), b) intersubjective-social emotional climates reflecting longer-term socio-political conditions and also referring to how the people of a given society emotionally relate to one another (for example taking care of one another etc.), lastly c) broad affective cultures, that is, long-lasting situations. These collective states, considered objective by De Rivera (1992) because they are perceived as existing apart from individual feelings, also interact and influence each other, meaning, for example, that emotional climates depend on the underlying affective culture, and both influence, and in turn are affected by, emotional atmospheres. Similarly, one could say that a certain individual and momentary atmospheric well-being (even as a spurious atmosphere) interacts, in ways to be investigated, with a certain atmospheric well-being understood as a more extended climate in time and space (derivative atmosphere), as well as with a certain affective culture characterized by its own level of well-being (prototypical atmosphere). In short: a certain degree and quality of collective and long-term well-being summarizes and condensates in an overall state the well-being quality of localized emotional climates and even idiosyncratic-temporary atmospheres. Thus differentiated, well-being as an atmosphere proves to be, in a sense, both an outcome (as a higher-order atmosphere) and a premise (as a single atmosphere) of our everyday affective life.

Let me offer an example that brings to light all the difficulties entailed by applying this theoretical construct. At first glance, it is very easy to say that, for example, a community dominated by fear of the future, whose perceived well-being is consequently rather low, certainly "breathes" a negative atmosphere (as an emotional climate and even as a broad affective culture), which in

turn crystallizes in multiple points of condensation, more or less justified and predictable, of temporary or longer duration. But what is *really* responsible for the atmospheric well-being of this community? This question is hard to answer, but what's certain is that if well-being comes from some basic human emotions, it makes little sense to look for its cause in specific political, economic, cultural, etc. situations. In fact, nobody can confidently claim either that politics generates a collective mood and is therefore responsible of it, or that politics is just a reflection of a previous affective culture and simply uses it for its own purposes, for example by enhancing atmospheres within which the leadership's initiative is readily accepted, etc.

More concretely, suppose we want to investigate the atmospheric well-being of Italians today. We'd probably say that they live in an atmosphere of instability, meaning that people cannot predict what will happen either politically or economically in the near future, and even single persons can't know what to expect or what to do. This very question – what is the Italian well-being like as a higher-order atmosphere or historical climate? – shows all its ambiguity and complexity. Talking about instability, distrust of institutions, populism, mistrust of the future, paranoid need of identity, etc. is not so specific as not to apply to other countries. Moreover, it's very difficult to conclusively establish how many individuals (including maybe imaginary ones) and what time-frame a collective atmosphere of well-being involves, as it is not clear how temporally and geographically extended a collective atmosphere (including that of well-being) is. Indeed, one always runs the risk of adopting different standards of comparison, confusing for instance aspirations (what people would like to happen), entitlements (what has to happen) and observations (what happens), temporary and more lasting moods, strictly personal-characterial feelings and collective moods. Needless to say, that quantitative studies, which often simply reflect the public's perception even when they try to predict how the public will behave, seriously underestimate that people of different neighbourhoods, regions, so-

cial classes, families, ages, etc., may perceive their time quite differently.

Most people, for example, seem to find relatively few connections between their personal and the national situation, being rather influenced by the atmosphere of their home or of the media. Similarly, optimists and pessimists, the elite and members of a minority group, people of different professional or health satisfaction, etc, may well perceive their atmospheric well-being differently. Aggregate macro-studies are not of much help, since people responding to questionnaires on well-being might be afraid or ashamed of saying what they really feel, or simply say what they believe the others want to hear. Do replies to a questionnaire reflect the way individuals feel their environment or simply how they think the majority is feeling? Is the shared atmosphere of a community the feeling it really prefers (a quiet never-changing life, for example), or is it rather that which it dreams of (a more adventurous life)? Is well-being what people feel at home or what they feel, by contrast, when they are talking to strangers or temporarily live abroad, and unexpectedly realize (and appreciate) the state of well-being they unwittingly enjoyed at home? Does it make sense to rely on the usual method that tries to measure the tension between ideal and real, provided that a utopian, for instance, tries to bring these two dimensions closer together? Or else, is the atmospheric well-being a feeling in act now (the distrust of a current authoritarian policy, for example) or a long-standing one (the confidence in the long-term democratic reliability of the country)? Even the feeling of being lonely and distrustful of any collective dimension, which is an obvious condition contrary to well-being, can be shared and sometimes unexpectedly engender a certain level of well-being, for example by reinforcing the social cohesion and positive affect within a smaller social group that feels different from, and better than, the rest of the population.

As you can easily see, looking into well-being as a higher-order atmosphere is like walking on quicksand. Nevertheless, this doesn't mean that it is superfluous to keep asking what well-being

is and how to feel it, or that one must entirely rely on seemingly resolute quantitative tools. The situation is therefore difficult but not desperate, because in our everyday perceptual and affective life we surely and continuously experience affective fields, which are almost never totally subjective and are often reinforced by a common narrative and physical setting. To a shared atmospheric well-being different individuals can obviously react with more or less different – sometimes even antithetic – individual emotions, yet they are still reacting, more than it may seem, to a common affective field that is poured out in their lived space and time. As already said, well-being as a higher-order atmosphere is the relatively enduring affective quality of the overall environment but also the temporary affective quality of an individual.

As regards the objection about the vagueness that allegedly invalidates any atmospheric consideration, one can answer that vagueness is consubstantial to any atmospheric perception and it would therefore be grotesque to delude oneself into eliminating it by means of a rigorous quantitative method. The atmospherological approach can only be as scientific as its object of investigation, and must not at all ape the naturalistic-scientific method. After all, as Massumi reminds us with the necessary cynicism, the latter “is the institutionalized maintenance of sangfroid in the face of surprise” and “properly [...] starts from a pre-conversion of surprise into cognitive constancy” (Massumi 2002, 233). But an experience based on sangfroid and on the elimination of surprise is something totally unrelated to a pathetic aesthetics, which instead revolves around the involuntary and first-personal life experience. A completely unsurprising experience perhaps is not even a real experience.

5. Meaningless affect: political doubts

Finally, a few words must be spent on the foreseeable objection raised by the so-called affect theorists. They would probably claim that a shared atmospheric feeling, and therefore also well-being as I understand it, is neither a feeling nor an emotion but rather an affect, meaning by this a pre-personal and unconscious, formless

and pre-linguistic, meaningless and corporeal potential of intensity. In truth, my neo-phenomenological atmospherology has no problem defining the felt-bodily resonance to an atmosphere as a form of sub-personal bodily thinking, explaining it, according to Schmitz's felt-bodily "economy" and "alphabet", as an endless modification of the contraction-expansion relationship between two poles like tightness and wideness. Nor it would have any problem considering atmospheres irreducible to the physical-bodily conscience and to the post-hoc rumination (maybe also conventional and ideological) of mind and language. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that an atmosphere or well-being is an unpredictable and indeterminate cosmic entity that is hardly distinguishable from matter movements and involves individuals without any regard to its content.⁶

In political terms, which are notoriously the most burning consequences of the new affect theories, an atmosphere entails its own meanings and expresses them through its immanent affordances. A good political or well-being atmosphere, therefore, depends not only on personal taste and/or a certain degree of intensity, but rather appeals to quasi-normative criteria that should be able to limit, as far as possible, both toxic and manipulative atmospheres and the emotional climates whose undeniable intensity does not necessarily imply a high level of well-being. In short: when trying to establish what an atmosphere of well-being is, one cannot be content with simply opposing to some manipulated atmospheres other more intense but equally manipulated ones.

Paradoxically, today even neurosciences underline that affect is independent of signification and meaning. They have long accepted that there is a gap between the subject's affect and their cognition or appraisal, which comes "too late" for reasons, beliefs, intentions, and meanings to play the role usually accorded to them in action and behaviour. The consciousness-independence of action and behaviour, however, does not mean that the brain must be considered the privileged site of affective phenomena and that

⁶ So that when people have different affective responses, they don't really disagree, but are simply different (Leys, 2011, 452).

felt-bodily and even physical processes taking place outside the brain should be reduced to mere background conditions. Furthermore, it's by no means necessary to fully accept Libet's influential but very controversial⁷ thesis - according to which the conscious mind intervenes half a second too late to play the role usually attributed to it in human behaviour - in order to admit, quite rightly, that free will consists not so much in initiating intentions as in responding to them after they arise.

Also a neo-phenomenological philosophy of atmospheres certainly shares the goal of shifting the attention away from meaning or "ideology" and onto the subject's sub-personal material-affective responses. It knows only too well (like rhetoric and pragmatist linguistics) that philosophy, science and even common sense have overvalued the role of reason and rationality in (at least) politics, ethics, and aesthetics, thus disembodimenting the ways in which people think and act and underestimating the fact that the conscious meaning of a message is often of less importance than its non-conscious affective resonances. But to say, on the basis of a misunderstood pluralism, that different intensities of affect can influence and transform individuals for better or worse without regard to the content of said affect, and that democracy is consequently not a normative value but just a personal taste, it's really unacceptable. Not all subliminal inclinations are the fruit of fraudulent manipulations, just as not all affective intensities are equal and equally desirable, otherwise it would be unimaginable how a political activist might strategically intervene in a particular situation and, what's worse, democracy would be a political system that somehow draws on the same media resources as those used by totalitarian regimes.

What atmospherology is interested in, therefore, is not venturing into this Heraclitean metaphysics of affect, but rather phe-

⁷ Libet imposes an artificial requirement when he asks his subjects to pay conscious attention to their movements. These experimental movements are part of an overall intentional situation that includes the subjects' willingness to participate in the experiment (exactly like skilled pianists intend to play the music even if they may be unaware of all the single movements their fingers must make during a performance) and their knowing what actions they were expected to perform.

nomenologically delving into different ways of generating atmospheres and different people's felt-bodily affective reactions to them. Sure, today's renewed debate on *Stimmungen* and the very fact that so many scholars in the humanities and social sciences are increasingly fascinated by the idea that political decision is itself produced by a series of non-human or pre-subjective forces and intensities could also be considered a mere compensatory-conciliatory expedient, that is, an exquisitely kitsch alibi (Bude 2016, 32) to underestimate our split and conflictual society. Just to dispel that suspicion, today's affective turn and atmospherology ought to include a higher rate of criticism and not simply repeat that human beings are bodily creatures imbued with subliminal-inhuman affective intensities that unconsciously condition their beliefs. Even the affect theorists' recent efforts to avoid a crude reductionism by distancing themselves from genetics and determinism is doomed to failure, both because they end up in naturalism anyway, even if especially based on a dynamic and non-deterministic biology, and because they throw the baby out with the bathwater by resorting to an all-embracing impersonal affect as a *deus ex machina* that solves every open question.

The fact that emotion or feeling (in the strict sense) is a subjective-personal but felt-bodily (and not socio-linguistic) subliminal filtering of an impersonal affect does not imply that one should neither consider the mind, as affect theorists do, as a purely disembodied consciousness (hence a new dualism), nor simply take impersonal intensities as a new (Kantian) transcendental apparatus. Nigel Thrift (2004, 64) is then certainly right in reminding us that "political attitudes and statements are partly conditioned by intense autonomic bodily reactions that do not simply reproduce the trace of a political intention and cannot be wholly recuperated within an ideological regime of truth". Nevertheless, in order to avoid any excessive irresponsible non-normative drift, I'd like to make a few critical remarks about what I mean by "atmospheric competence".

In my view, a "good" atmospheric competence should be able, first of all, 1) to distinguish between "toxic" and "benign" at-

mospheres. It must be pointed out that toxic atmospheres, which cannot however be reduced to non-atmospheres, are not only those arousing stress and distress but also dissuasive-sedative ones. Through them, apparatuses aim at defusing any social contradiction with the help both of artificial and conformist attunements and of the inhibiting effects resulting from the alarmist demand, today become obsessive, to regulate every fragment of everyday experience, possibly through the alibi of privacy and political correctness. A good atmospheric competence should then 2) accept the fact that, given that there is no undisputed privileged place for awareness (especially in our post-traditional societies), the best option is to learn to experience very different atmospheric experiences interacting with each other. This could give rise to a well-being that, as happens in democracy, fully depends on a division of powers (affective in this case) that relativizes their impact. Lastly, it should 3) favour and foster the atmospheres in which, as happens with *trompe l'oeil*, an early pathic-immersive stage may and should be followed up by a stage which will be necessarily emergent. In this respect, an example of atmospheres that are powerful and influential without being oppressive and coercive could precisely be obtained from aesthetic experience: through its provocative and irritating impact, in fact, contemporary art generates cognitive and affective discontinuities that make a healthy critical distance possible.

I have looked around very carefully but I don't see other ways to at least partly immunize oneself against today's widespread atmospherization. The ways that are usually outlined, be they romantic-moralistic or cognitive-naturalistic, are too naive because they trust respectively in personal freedom and in the critical force of scepticism. Sometimes they are so unrealistically ascetic as to require a strong and inhuman distance from the affective world, not realising that this lack of a felt-bodily resonance is rather the symptom of a psychopathological crisis. My pathic aesthetics cannot do more than suggesting the "provisional atmospheric morality" summarized a few lines earlier, thus promoting a more in-depth reflection on the complicated relationship be-

tween the affective and the cognitive realm. Of course, it would be very easy and liberating to resolve the issue of well-being once and for all by emphatically saying “I don’t care about truth. I want happiness”, or, following Bachelard’s rejection of existentialist gnosticism, by simply taking comfort in the fact that “Being starts with well-being” (Bachelard, 1994, 104). Indeed, even if this were true and convincing (which it isn’t), it would still be necessary to explain what “happiness” means: a “vast program” that, after all, is no easier to solve than well-being.

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