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Mood, *ki*, humors: Elements and atmospheres between Europe and Japan

Abstract

This paper analyzes the theme of “mood” through a double genealogy of its underlying metaphors. Among the European roots employed today to frame this concept (or non-concept, we should say: but the haziness of moods is an important part of their enviroing force) I will focus in particular on the Latin one, humor, still visible today in the Italian and French. On a diachronic axis, I will highlight how the peculiar meaning of humor, with its stress on a strange and non-objective materiality, bodily and cosmic at the same time, allows us to rediscover a surprising phenomenological insight even in the half-forgotten theories of elemental attunement that characterized most European history. On a synchronic axis, I will show how this hyletic approach to mood is also active in East Asia, where the “stuff” of emotions is qi/ki 氣, literally “air”: the word kibun 氣分, used in Japan as equivalent to the English “mood”, is “a partition/understanding of ki”. Underneath the veil of exoticness, the Asian notion too arises out of a qualitative observation of the spatial, hyletic quality of moods: not an internal state of the subject nor a quality of already objectified things, mood/humor/kibun points to the fundamental disclosure of both world and subjectivity in a dynamic atmosphere.

Keywords

Mood, Ki, Humors

1. The forgotten materiality of moods

Let us begin with a philosophical description of moods so influential to have become almost a *cliché*, Heidegger’s reflection on *Stimmung* in the §29 of *Being and time*:

What we indicate *ontologically* with the term *attunement* is *ontically* what is most familiar and an everyday kind of thing: mood, being in a mood. Prior to

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all psychology of moods, a field which, moreover, still lies fallow, we must see this phenomenon as a fundamental existential and outline its structure. Both the undisturbed equanimity and the inhibited discontent of everyday heedfulness, the way we slide over from one to another or slip into bad moods, are by no means nothing ontologically although these phenomena remain unnoticed as what is supposedly the most indifferent and fleeting in Da-sein. The fact that moods can be spoiled and change only means that Da-sein is always already in a mood. [...] Attunement is so far from being reflected upon that it precisely assails Da-sein in the unreflecting falling prey to the “world” of its heedfulness. Mood assails. It comes neither from “without” nor from “within”, but rises from being-in-the-world itself as a mode of that being [...]. *Mood has always already disclosed being-in-the-world as a whole and first makes possible directing oneself toward something.* Being attuned is not initially related to something psychical, it is itself not an inner condition which then in some mysterious way reaches out and leaves its mark on things and persons. This is the *second* essential characteristic of attunement. It is a fundamental existential mode of being in the *equiprimordial disclosedness* of world, being-there-with and existence because this disclosure itself is essentially being-in-the-world. (Heidegger 2010: 130-3)

This new understanding of the *Stimmung*, translated as “attunement” to reconstitute the musical metaphor of the German *Stimme* or as “mood” in a more general context, is one of the deepest (if underdeveloped) insights of *Being and time*. The contradictory status of mood, “neither from without nor from within”, the adventitious quality of something that assails us but also opens up our qualitative experience, directly contradicts common-sense ideas of (somatic) body, (three-dimensional) space and (internalized) emotion. In which sense can we define mood as an original disclosure preceding both the objective world and the rather substantialized bodies and minds on which we tend to base our identity? Also, no less important is the fact, left unsaid by Heidegger, that is only through a long and even painful process of separation between external and internal, of ontologization of the subject and of erasure of this primordial “between”, that such a characterization of “mood” seems counterintuitive.

Such ontological erasure is in fact first of all the history of modernity and of European philosophical-scientific language, the trajectory of their “mobile army of metaphors”. How estranging (and in its way, no less critical of common sense) can a characterization of moods be if we shift away from both Europe and modernity and turn, say, to a non-European (Chinese) and ancient (5th century b.C.) text such as the Daoist classic *Zhuangzi*?

Joy, anger, grief, delight, worry, regret, fickleness, inflexibility, modesty, willfulness, candor, insolence – music from empty holes, mushrooms springing up in dampness (出虛, 蒸成菌), [like] day and night replacing each other before us, and no one knows where they sprout from. Let it be! Let it be! [It is enough that] morning and evening we have them, and they are the means by which we live. Without them, we would not exist; without us, they would have nothing to take hold of. This comes close to the matter. But I do not know what makes them the way they are. (tr. Watson 2013: 8)

Read just after Heidegger, the Chinese text shows some undeniable affinity with his thought (and this closeness between Heidegger and some East Asian sources is neither marginal nor random: see May 2005). Both the mythic Chinese sage and the German professor recognize how the commonsensical priority of the subject on the moods that open it to the world can and should be turned over, recognized as a paradoxical co-origin. What are, however, the differences between them? At least two relevant features of Zhuangzi's description come to my mind.

First, in *Zhuangzi*, as in many other East Asian sources, the reflection on mood and attunement develops through an overflow of *images* and *material metaphors*: it embraces in an eager and yet precise manner a long list of Schmitzean *Halbdinge* that is completely absent in *Being and time*. “Mushrooms springing up from the dampness of the night”: is there a more appropriate image for the inexplicable, uncaused, diffuse sadness that we find in the air as we wake up in an autumn morning? In the same chapter, Zhuangzi recognizes this reciprocal primal disclosure of world and emotionally attuned subject in the song of wind blowing through trees, through cave opening, through mountains. Voiceless and insubstantial, wind borrows its voice from the myriad of vacuous realities composing our world, ourselves included. I want to stress the coherent invariance in these metaphors: dampness, vapors and wind all are *aerial matter*. There is in other terms an effort, *completely absent* in Heidegger (who is not even seriously inquiring into the musical metaphor of the *Stimme*), to recognize mood not simply as something indistinct assailing us from the outside, but through concrete material correspondences between interior and exterior, micro- and macrocosm.

The second central insight acutely conveyed by the imaginary of *Zhuangzi* and left unsaid by Heidegger (despite his talking of *Stimmungen* as “fleeting”, “sliding into one other”) is a description of the

movement, of the constant *flux* that characterizes emotive attunement. Moreover, this flux does not unfold in a merely temporal *ekstasis*, but let us discover ourselves within a multitude of spatial suggestions: we could say with Schmitz *leibliche Regungen*, with the multiple sense of the word *Regung* covering “emotion”, “movement”, “stirring”. The *Regung* of moods makes us for instance feel “up” or “down” in the protopathic-predimensional space of embodiment, or can even push us toward a chromatic quality, that the English-speaking world identified as “blue”. As we “feel blue” or “have the blues” we obviously do not simply perceive ourselves or some external blue object as blue: we rather assist to a shift of our whole world towards a colder tonality, a desaturation or a darkening, without any positive obstruction of our chromatic attention of a real “red” or “pink” hue.

2. “The color of things”: mood and color as hyle

The example of this idiom, while culturally contingent and of unclear origin², opens a very promising path to develop on the first two elements of a) imaginative materiality and b) flow gathered from *Zhuangzi*. What do chromatic phenomena have to say about attunement?

What is color at all? Neither an objective quality of the world, as is constantly shifting according to light, distance, in a certain sense even emotive states, nor subjective in the sense of an internal, private state of consciousness. Color would seem to at least share something of the topology of moods, “neither without nor within”, also “assailing” us as the irreducibly qualitative element of experience.

It is interesting to notice how Heidegger is “silent about the topic” of color perception too (Ainbinder 2017). Husserl, on the contrary, consistently used color as the most pithy example of *hyle*, “matter” in the phenomenological sense: a “core of experience” (Husserl 1962: 167) that precedes intentional acts and meaning-positing, affecting us not as a stable thing or identity, never given by itself but only and always through an endless array of shifting “adumbrations” (*Ab-schattungen*). We can therefore say that “moods” structurally share

² Attested around the 18th century, it could refer to a sort of baleful spirit afflicting someone, be a reference to livid blue veins appearing on the skin in case of distress, or having originated by an alleged naval habit of waving blue flags in the case of an officer’s death.

with color a) its flowing quality and b) being a “hyletic” element of experience, neither objective form nor meaning. Let us think for example of a canvas from Picasso’s blue period: the turquoise used for the skin of a woman in *Femme aux Bras Croisés* (1901-2) does not make us think at any point of a blue-skinned alien or even of a night scene. She is rather engulfed from or manifesting within a melancholic atmosphere, an *aura* in the double sense of “air” and “light”. Husserl admitted that it is in the matter-color-aura of such “hyletic objects” that we are confronted by the affective force of an “original impression” (*Urimpression*) of the world. Goethe’s analysis of the emotive *Regungen* of colors in his *Zur Farbenlehre*, once seen in this perspective, is far from idiosyncratic: it rather represents an essential element of a phenomenological study of color as *hyle*, unwilling to reduce it to a simple object. His “phenomenological” description of blue tones explains the expression “having the blues” more convincing than most etymological dictionaries:

777. The colors on the *minus* side are blue, red-blue and blue-red. They produce a restless, susceptible, anxious impression.

778. As yellow is always accompanied with light, so it may be said that blue still brings a principle of darkness with it.

779. This colour has a peculiar and almost indescribable effect on the eye. As a hue it is powerful, but it is on the negative side, and in its highest purity is, as it were, a stimulating negation. (Goethe 1840: 310-1)

The double principle of light and darkness, day and night at the origin of the Goethian colors is actually very consonant with the Chinese idea of moods. If we go back to *Zhuangzi*, we see in fact how the temporality of the “fungal matter” of moods is not a simple linear ecstasy, but rather a cyclic, “hyletic” temporality. The sentence “Days and night alternating before us” (日夜相代乎前) can in fact be intended with the implicit subject “moods”, and thus as an acknowledgement of the constant oscillation in our attunement (which is in this sense *like* natural cycles), but also as the *direct* coimplication of moods in the daily and seasonal cycles transforming the “colors” of things. One thousand years after Zhuangzi another Chinese thinker and art theorist, Liu Xie 劉勰 (465-522) included in his classic on poetics *The literary mind and the carving of dragons* (*Wén Xīn Diāo Lóng* 文心雕龍) a chapter titled *The color of things* (*wùsè* 物色) that frames this problem even more clearly:

Spring and autumn roll around, succeeding one another, and the *yin* and *yang* principles alternatingly darken and brighten. When objects in the physical world change, our minds are also affected. When the *yang* principle begins to ascend, ants burrow, and when the *yin* principle congeals, the mantis begins to feed. Insignificant as these insects are, even they are affected. Profoundly indeed are things moved by the four seasons. Excellent jade inspires the mind of the intelligent, and glorious flowers shower splendor upon the soul that is pure. All things exert influence on one another. Who is there that can rest unmoved? Thus, as the new year is rung in and the spring begins to burgeon, we experience a joyous mood; as the luxuriant summer rolls by, our minds become filled with happy thoughts; as the sky heightens and the air becomes clear and brisk, our hearts become darkened and heavy with distant thoughts; and when the ground is covered by boundless sleet and snow, our souls become burdened with serious and profound reflections. Many different things appear in the course of the year, and each has a number of phases. One responds with varying emotions to these varying phases, and the form of language used depends on the emotion. One single leaf may suggest something significant, and the chirping of insects is often enough to induce an inner mood. (Liu 2015: 245-6)

In Chinese and Japanese the character 色 (Ch. *sè*, Jp. *shiki*) has an array of meanings that greatly exceeds the sense of “color”, in ways curiously consonant to Husserl’s own inquiry. *Sè* refers in fact to the chromatic-hyletic manifestation of color but also to the endless variety of adumbrated manifestation, the “phenomenal” at large in its sense of endless “variety”. Moreover, the manifestation of *sè* is not simply objective, but rather recognized as the major factor of our emotive reactions and “enamorment” with the world. When Confucius in *Analects* (*Analects* IX: 18) laments “I have not yet seen one who loves virtue as he loves beauty” (吾未見好德如好色者也) he is actually using the character 色, reproachfully admitting how this primary, manifold affection by matter and desire holds an irreducible genetic priority over any kind of form, especially ethical ones. If we had to translate *sè* in full, we would have to recur to a clunky expression such as “the hyletic, emotive manifold of qualitative manifestation”.

I would like to highlight two last points in Liu Xie’s passage. First, the clarity with which the hyletic-chromatic shift between autumn and spring is described not as a *cause* of moods but as a shared “movement” (動) and “vibration” (搖) of such color-stuff and mind. Second, the identification of these two opposite *Regungen* or auras with the two genres of 陰 *yin* and 陽 *yang*.

Let us enucleate what are the chief features of these Chinese approaches to mood:

- mood occurs and unfolds through *images*; it happens in the world, as *resonance* of “heart” and “things”.

- This involvement in the world is unavoidably *hyletic*; oriented by a materiality that is not that of the material cause or of the substance in Aristotelian sense but is constitutive of reality as a pre-formal, qualitative element. Best examples of this kind of “stuff” are actually “quasi-things” (*Halbdinge*) in Schmitz’s sense, elements such as day, night, season and atmospheres.

- Indeed, such “atmospheric” quasi-materiality of moods is much more perceivable in substances that present themselves as *fluxes*: the material-immaterial continuum of dampness and mushrooms, wind, air and mist, water.

It seems that we are therefore allowed to paraphrase the “strange pre-Socratic question” that Luce Irigaray asks of Heidegger’s still too abstract being: “*of what* is mood made? What kind of matter might constitute it, if it shares so many traits with *hyle* in general?”

3. *Mood as a fluid discourse*

At the beginning of her book *The forgetting of air in Martin Heidegger*, Luce Irigaray argues that the apparent weirdness of such a question is actually symptomatic of a deep, fundamental mistrust of philosophy for whatever forces on thought a state of flow:

The metaphysical is written neither on/in water, non on/in air, nor on/in fire [...]. Its abysses, whether from on high or on low, doubtless find their explanation in the forgetting of those elements that do not have the same density. [...] The clearing of the opening, “of what” can this be? – one could have asked him this. This old philosophical question seems not to have been put to him. It was, doubtless, too innocent. Too ignorant, Too simple. Too little complicit with the history of philosophy. Too “sensible,” or too “physical” not to have been forgotten. [...] Would Being and thinking be made of the same matter? Of the same element? (Irigaray 1999: 4)

Irigaray’s answer is that such “being” is actually made up by that “unthinkable that exceeds all declaration, all saying. Or posing, phenomenon, or form”, a medium that keeps itself “diaphanous, translucent, transparent” (Irigaray 1999: 4-5): air, or better a phenomenolog-

ical air that is declined as feminine, other from presence and yet precondition of it. Irigaray's rediscovery of such air, which holds more than a passing resemblance with Schmitz's notion of atmosphere, leads her to criticize Heidegger and his own hidden complicity with metaphysics. The phenomenological observations in *The forgetting of air* are on spot: as we have seen these fleeting conglomerates of matter, mood and air (or other elements) are an origin but not an *arché*, "a substratum both immobile and mobile, permanent and flowing where multiple temporal divisions remain forever possible" (Irigaray 1999: 8).

But Irigaray's conception of metaphysics here might be at the same time too sweeping and too limited. On one hand, she never asks herself whether this oblivion of air produced itself in a minor key or not at all in extra-European cultures; on the other, even within European culture a full history of flowing elements such as water, air and fire is actually a complex and nuanced one.

3.1. *Ki and mood*

If we look at the first half of this question, the case of China and Japan seems even too perfect: when it comes to identify a continuity between this primary affection, mood and air, the Sino-Japanese idea of 氣 *ki* (Chinese *qi*) delivers even more than Irigaray or we would ask for. Mood, hyletic affections, meteorological and seasonal shifts, light, darkness, the aura and emotive charge of things, breathing as a living-bodily and expressive rhythm: all of them and more are gathered together as different aspects of this same proto-phenomenon. Both Zhuangzi and Liu Xie are widely employing this concept, after all. The same instable and living-bodily "breath" is what organizes and *precedes* the visible form of our physical body (形 *xing*, see Sommer 2010). When some disciples ask Zhuangzi how can he be singing and playing music just after his wife's death, his answer is neither that of the Stoic nor that of the Epicurean, but rather revolves around the acknowledgement of this pre-corporeal flux constituting life, personality and mood at the same time:

Zhuangzi said, "You're wrong. When she first died, do you think I didn't grieve like anyone else? But I looked back to her beginning and the time before she was born. Not only the time before she was born, but the time before she had a body. Not only the time before she had a body, but the time before she had a spirit. In the midst of the jumble of wonder and mystery, a change took place and she had a spirit. Another change and she had a body. Another change and

she was born. Now there's been another change and she's dead. It's just like the progression of the four seasons: spring, summer, fall, winter. Now she's going to lie down peacefully in a vast room. If I were to follow after her bawling and sobbing, it would show that I don't understand anything about fate. So I stopped". (tr. Watson 140-1)

Ki is not only a general principle of animation at the base of bodily existence, just like the Greek *psyche/pneuma*, Indian *prana* and Hebraic *ruah*, all terms ultimately referring to wind and air. It is also full of internal declinations, such as the aforementioned and well-known genres of *yin* and *yang*, corresponding to polysemous couples of opposites such as "clear" and "dark", "hot" and "cold", "cheerful" and "dull" – all terms, we ought to notice, that can refer equally well, *co-originarily* to external and internal states, atmospheric situations and moods. These elements are, literally, configurations of *ki*, modes of it. But the myriad of changes in psychological, physical and atmospheric phenomena is not explained *causally* through *ki*, since it is not anything resembling an object. It is rather the hyletic or quasi-thingly element that can be seen flowing *through* and *as* these phenomena themselves, not unlike what would happen with colors or wind-breath, never given as autonomous "things" and yet emerging with their own emotive force through such interactions.

Historically this observation has therefore been at the basis of a double "atmospheric economy". The first dealing with the way in which this flow eventually affected the somatic body, giving birth to the Chinese medical paradigm (see Kuriyama 1999 for an enlightening comparison between Chinese and Greek conceptions of the body). The other is the categorization of the patterns of *ki* active in a house, garden or city, 風水 in Chinese; the term could be translated "geomancy", if the choice of earth did not display once again the European uneasiness for a "translation into discourse of fluid realities". *Fengshui* 風水 in fact is literally a discourse on "wind" 風 and "water" 水, an inquiry into a non-physical, qualitative spatiality that will become central again to modern Japanese philosophy, for instance in Watsuji Tetsurō's *Fūdo* (Watsuji 1961).

Thinking *ki* only through these two discourses, obviously interconnected, would however neglect the philosophically much more interesting development of its meanings in Japanese language. Whereas in Chinese the sense of *qi* is today mostly limited to traditional medicine and *fengshui*, in Japan a host of psychophysical phenomena are daily

described through the lens of *ki*. Among those, as we already noted, we can stress the fact that *mood*, *kibun* 気分, is fully identified with a “fraction” 分 or “comprehension” of *ki* 気. In other words, when the indistinct and formless flow of *ki* is somehow specified by a reflection and definition, which implies specific “stuff” (again, first and chiefly in the sense of *hyle*) and subjectivities, by means of this “division” it is also “understandable” as such.

In other expressions, *ki* seems also to describe the state of the living body, emotions, states of attention and intention, the broader elements of atmosphere (*fun'iki* 雰囲気) and weather (*tenki* 天気). We report here a scheme proposing a partial organization of these linguistic elements along two axes (fig. 1). The first, horizontal, goes from the individual living body (*Leib*) up to the general field of atmosphere and (semi-objectified) weather and cosmos, passing through the “shared *ki*” of interpersonal atmospheric attunement. The second, vertical, goes from what could be called the “cognitive-affective” duality of *ki*, proceeding from the almost unreflective affectedness of the three “ground concepts” of *kimochi* 気持ち (“personal affection”), *kibun* 気分 (“mood”) and *fun'iki* 雰囲気 (“atmosphere”) up to relatively intentional and personal acts such as willing (*iki* 意気) or being actively conscious of something (*ki o tsukeru* 気を付ける, literally “applying one’s *ki* onto”).

What we can immediately gather from this still rough mapping is that several key terms of the neophenomenological vocabulary – mood, atmosphere, living body – and of phenomenology at large – intention and affection for instance – all have a place in this unsystematic cloud of *ki* concepts. The overlap is so consistent that it hardly seems to be coincidental, so that several Japanese philosophers have tried to approach the “non-concept” of *ki* in a hybrid notion, trying to turn it into an originally Japanese phenomenological tool.

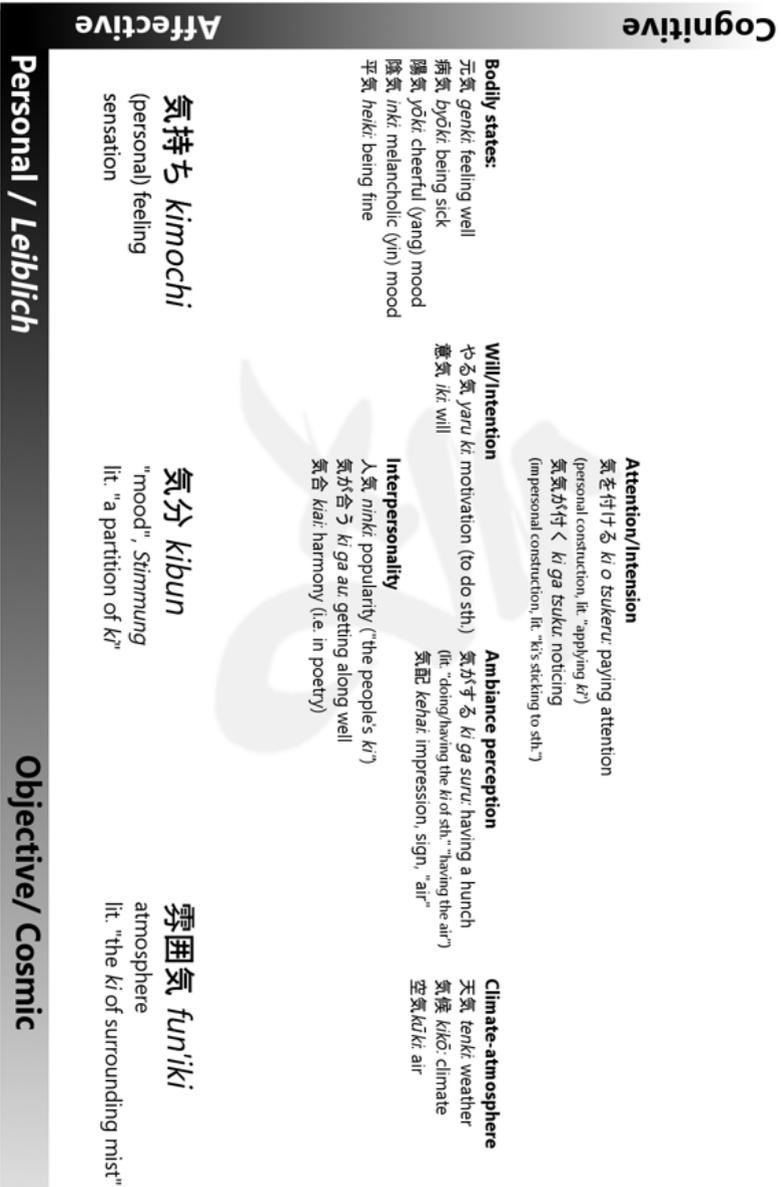


Fig. 1.

3.2. *The (problematic) phenomenology of ki*

Among these works we can count Yuasa Yasuo's study of Asian notions of the body (Yuasa 1987), Yamaguchi Ichirō study of *ki* in religious and spiritual traditions (Yamaguchi 1997) and the more recent and explicitly neo-phenomenological introduction to *ki* by Hisayama Yuho (Hisayama 2014). Another Japanese phenomenologist approaching *ki* from a Schmitzean perspective is Ogawa Tadashi, who in his volume *Kaze no genshōgaku to fun'iki* dedicates a particular attention also to the deep relation between this primal "mood", atmosphere and *ki* phenomena:

Contemporary phenomenology turns its attention more and more to what is "between" human being and things, to what is "between" subject and object. We could even say that the concepts of "subject" and "object" have already lost their validity as absolutes. Different concepts such as "passivity" (Husserl), *Stimmung* (Heidegger) and "atmosphere" (Hermann Schmitz and Gernot Böhme) are all addressing this "between". [...] The various forms of subject-object dualism, that is the forms of thought that consider human being as independent and isolated from the world of things and things as something separated from humans, existing independently in opposition to a subject, are being slowly discarded. Between human and object exists instead the preliminary disclosure of a world that embraces both: this world is neither human being nor a thing and yet it gives to both their common, hidden ground. What is this *third thing*, neither human nor object? It is what we call "mood" (*kibun* 気分) or "atmosphere" (*fun'iki* 雰囲気). This trajectory of thought has very old origins in East Asia: the common element between *kibun* and *fun'iki* in fact is *ki*. [...] *Ki* and *mood* (*kibun*) are discovered out of the disclosure of this dimension, in which according to Husserl world and self-correspond and belong to each other. Both mood and atmosphere are possible because human existence unfolds in the world and mood and atmosphere themselves are first of all something that reveals itself within the world of human existence. [...] It is because one is affected by moods, because one is surrounded by atmospheres, that he or she can understand things and grasp concepts. Heidegger writes that "to understand something is always to be captured by a *Stimmung*". Inside such moods and by our attunement to them and atmospheres we are thrown in a certain direction and a given a determination; at the same time, however, we also project ourselves (*Entwurf*) into a new understanding and clarification of things. [...] "Mood is contagious". Mood is not human interiority or experience, nor a thing or a being: mood refers more than everything what is revealed "between" world and human being. Mood (*kibun*) like night and wind, a look and a noise, is a kind of *Halbding*. It appears in the dimension that underlies human and world. It is a kind of *ki*. (Ogawa 2000 7-11)

As it is already quite clear in this passage, Ogawa's approach is that of an eager universalism: he has no qualms in explaining the East Asian concept of *ki* through a phenomenological lens – which quite insightfully stresses some surprising continuities between Schmitz's thought and more "orthodox" phenomenology, even Husserl's. Even more, he regrets that somebody might oppose to the concept of *ki* considering it "a metaphysical phantasy, the ancient connection of macrocosm and microcosm" (Ogawa 2000: 7). Still, the objection may linger: given the still very much alive Eurocentrism of philosophy as a discipline, the exoticism of the ideographic writing, the fact that practical interactions of *ki* are at the basis of practices of embodiment (martial arts and so on) that are ultimately irreducible to verbal analysis. Is it really possible, as Ogawa wishes, to get rid *ki* of such "metaphysical dregs", in order to *purify* it into a new phenomenological tool? Or it has to remain an anthropological curiosity, unavailable and inapplicable to the "Western mind", or at least to the kind of propositional understanding that forms the bulk of European philosophy and science?

What if we simply put under brackets our own "ontological catalogue" (Griffero), including the tag of what is "metaphysical", and observe *as a phenomenon* what is concretely signified through *ki* in China and Japan? The question of why the role that such *epochè* might play in intercultural understanding is never addressed rises up, but we will have to leave it aside for the moment being.

Let us try to summarize instead what can be told about *ki*: considering the examples above at least six traits can be highlighted:

- it exists contemporarily on different scales: a) bodily (as state of *Leib*, not in a somatic sense); b) psychic and inter-psychic (affecting relations with objects and other living beings); c) cosmic (as weather and "world");
- it is essentially *between*: a) self and other; b) self and world;
- it expresses itself through affects and effects/will. It is therefore at the same time: a) passive (as a primary affection); b) active (orienting force, direction and spontaneity of one's activity);
- it is internal and external at the same time, acting in a parallel fashion that is described as: a) flow, implying a "discontinuous continuity" between outer and inner; b) reverberation, suggesting a full parallelism that is not, however, a "cause";
- there is a *quality* of *ki* but no *quantity* in a strict sense;

- *ki* is elemental, hyletic “stuff”, but not substantial. It is a quasi-thing, a quasi-substance preceding (phenomenologically more than chronologically) actual manifestations.

It is from the six points of this reduction that we ought to begin a reflection on mood able not only to expand its study to non-European sources, but also to rediscover it as an interaction of hyletic and imaginary within a reciprocal disclosure and reflection of person and cosmos, not only in Asia.

4. *Humors as mood*

This last point is an important one. In fact, in the context of a collective research about “mood”, I first expected my contribution to be focused on East Asian concepts. Perhaps, eventually, on a comparison between Chinese and Japanese theories and expressions on one side and the European notions of “mood” and *Stimmung* on the other (assuming that they are clear enough in the first place; they are not). As the analysis proceeded, however, a simple contrasting method did not seem so meaningful. Is the erasure of the hyletic qualities of mood, its efficacy on the living-body, its flowing modes so perfect within European culture? Is there nothing that can not only translate, but *be* the homeomorphic mirror of the East Asian *ki* model? Lastly, is Irigaray correct to assume that European thought so thoroughly discarded fluxes and hyletic metaphors beside the solid ones?

Among the several discussions on “mood”, in effect, a notable absent has been another word: the Latin *humor*, despite its having a philosophical, medical, magical and scientific past much richer than those of “mood” or *Stimmung*. By *humor* I do not refer, obviously, to the sense of “laughter, comicity” that is common meaning of the word in English today, but rather to the original idea of “emotively and elementally attuned fluids” still evident in the Italian *umore*, and from which the English meaning derives. Despite its long and complex pedigree, the paradigm of humors, which was struggling but still remembered well into the 19th century, has been now demoted to an almost absolute irrelevance (so much that the English *mood* was chosen for the whole year of contributions on the topic in an Italian venue). At best,

the theory of *humores* is treated as a matter of history of ideas or simple superstition resurfacing in commercial astrology. Here is a most concise definition of *humoralism* from the *Webster medical dictionary*:

Humoralism: “An ancient theory holding that health came from balance between the bodily liquids termed humors. Disease was thought to arise when imbalance occurred between the humors. The humors were phlegm (water), blood, gall (black bile, thought to be secreted by the kidneys and spleen) and choler (yellow bile secreted by the liver). The humoral theory was devised well before Hippocrates, and it was not definitively demolished until 1858. The word humor lives on as a medical term for liquid or semiliquid substances in the body and as a euphemism for mood (such as being “in good humor”). (*Webster medical dictionary* 2003: 204)

The four humors of the Hippocratic system, later perfected by Galen, are therefore *both* a “liquid matter”, something that in other words “flows” within the body with a distinctive quality but no stable shape *and* a “euphemism for mood”, a modulation of emotive life. The *hyletic* and bodily aspect of humor is grasped in its original unity with emotive life through an array of specific configurations. Most of the discredit that humoralism faces today is due to its description as a false *causal* theory of bodily and psychological consciousness. While it is hard to deny outright the causal elements of such theory (which was refined in a medical context, after all), we also ought to remember that the causal, physical paradigm that stands at the center of modern Western science and medicine risks to make us retroactively blind to the actual dynamics of what was later dubbed “magical thinking”. One of the most important features of this perspective on phenomena is in fact its “correlative” ontology, by means of which one thing, while still being one thing, discloses within its internal horizon a myriad of *other* objects, all while being itself. Magic, art and religion are all co-originating from the possibility for a thing to be more than a simple object and to “become transparent”, turning into a series of images – or, in a neo-phenomenological sense, into an atmosphere. Here is a more interesting description of humors in Ioan Couliano’s classic *Eros and magic in the Renaissance*:

The psychology of antiquity was founded on a very interesting quaternary classification, which deduced the principal temperaments from the predominance in the organism of one of the four humors: yellow bile, phlegm, blood, and black bile, *atra bilis*, in Greek *melaina cholos*, hence the word melancholy. The four elements, the cardinal points, the divisions of the day and of human life

correspond to those four liquids of the organism. The series of yellow bile comprises fire, the wind Eurus, summer, high noon, and maturity; that of phlegm water, the Auster, winter, night, old age; that of blood air, the Zephyr, spring, morning, youth; that of black bile the earth, the wind Boreas, autumn, evening, and the age of sixty. The predominance of one of the humors determines the four temperaments: choleric or bilious, sanguine, phlegmatic, and melancholic. Somatic traits, or complexion (in Latin, mixture of humors), bear a close relationship to character. (Culianu 2011:46)

These four liquids are produced *within* the human bodies but they are at the same time manifestations of what is *without* it, bodily echoes and manifestations of four fundamental elements, or “modes of matter”: fire, air, water and earth. Moreover, each humor corresponds to a season of the year, a stage of life, an organ, a wind, later on an astrological planet, an alchemical element, an animal and, most importantly for us, a “color” and a fundamental emotive tone. The first important insight of this characterization of mood is that it concretely integrates it with specific personalities, differentiating it from emotions in a manner that is not obvious in the modern idea of consciousness. The emotive “complexion” of someone is not a matter of a disembodied self or of singular mind states, but it defined by what is *recurrent* and *typical* enough to characterize an embodied personality and aspects of the world and yet *mobile* enough to allow oscillation and variety, without turning into a stable, objective state. Here are the tables of the four humors depicted in the collection of emblems *Minerva Britanna or a garden of heroical devises* (1612: 126-9; here below, fig. 2, in order *melancholic, phlegmatic, choleric* and *sanguine*) by Henry Peachham:

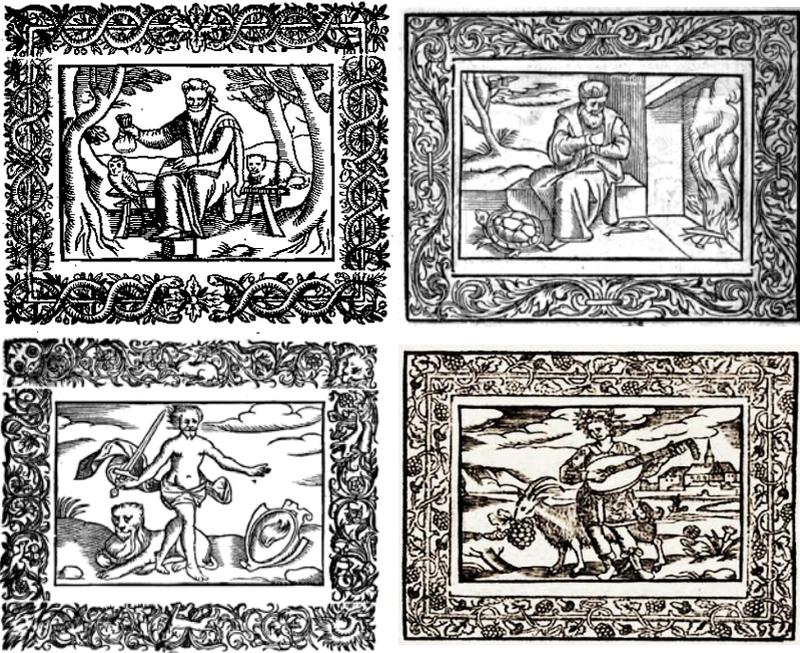


Fig. 2. Four humors (melancholic, phlegmatic, choleric, sanguine),
by Henry Peacham, *Minerva Britanna or a garden of heroical devises*, 1612

As in the earlier and nobler example of Dürer's *Melancholia* (1514), these elementally attuned moods are very literally envisioned as "stuff" surrounding and arising from a human figure, not in an anatomically objective way but in an imaginary, emblematic field or atmosphere. In the case of Dürer's engraving, critics have been discussing endlessly about the role and significance of the large arrays of objects in the space of the painting. However, the philosophically relevant truism what we can assert in our context is that none of them holds a specific sense individually, in itself, but all of them together are opened up in and as the common spatialized feeling or "dark atmosphere" of the "black bile mood". There is a meaning in their accumulation and multiplication.

The total scientific discredit with which the theory of humors is now met, with its holistic, qualitative but all-too-clearly metaphoric or im-

aginary approach, should not however have us underestimate its impressive historical influence. Not only in the Greek and Roman world, but also in the Arabic one, during the Renaissance and in Elizabethan times. The definitive rejection of humoral theory dates back only to mid 19th century, and still in 1910 Charles Richet (1850-1935), who would win the Nobel prize three years later for his research on anaphylaxis, opened the International Congress of Physiology with a reflection on humors:

All of us at this present moment are, consciously or unconsciously, humoralists – that is to say, we look upon the chemical constitution of our humours as being the basis of all biological phenomena; and we understand that word “humour” in the most general sense, for we not only think of the circulating or secreted humours, such as the blood, the bile, the milk, the urine, and the gastric juice, but also of the liquids which enter into the composition of our tissues; in other words, of all the chemical substances in solution of which the living organism is composed. It is by the chemical evolution of the substances contained in the plasmatic liquids that life is constituted. (Richet 1910: 4)

Such chemical body is surely in a state of constant exchange with what is only apparently external. Such exchange, however, is here clearly limited to what is observable as a physical process and describable chemically. Richet has no kindness for the classical humoral theory based on the non-observable ensemble of four elements:

Strange to say, Hippocrates, Galen, and all the physicians who followed them during sixteen centuries, describe humours which they had never seen, and which no one will ever see, for they do not exist. There was the blood, the yellow bile, the black bile, and the phlegm. The blood and bile have certainly an actual existence; but where is the black bile, which causes melancholy? And this extraordinary phlegm or pituitary secretion – this strange liquid, which is the cause of tumours, of chlorosis, of rheumatism, and cacochymia – where is it? Who will ever see it? Who has ever seen it? What can we say of this fanciful classification of humours into four groups, of which two are absolutely imaginary? [...] What is truly extraordinary, what surpasses our wildest dreams, is the fact that for sixteen hundred years all physicians and all physiologists remained bound in the shackles of this incomprehensible error of the four cardinal humours. (Richet 1910: 4)

Richet’s synthesis is interesting. As a physiologist, he proposes a concept of the body that is not that of a closed system, but that of a flow that goes beyond the limits of skin and flesh and lets it exist within and as a medium (here admittedly conceived in chemical terms), an

atmospheric solution that makes it up internally and lets it act externally. The study of anaphylaxis will eventually lead Richet to envision a “humoral identity”, both physical and psychological, structured by this flux of almost undetectable humors. This portrait of this plasmatic evolution of the individual has more than a few Bergsonian overtones, and Richet and Bergson were in fact close friends, sharing even a passion for spiritism.

Despite this intellectual depth accompanying Richet’s medical research, his horrified admiration for the madness of ancient humorism does not lead him to ask himself whether these “sixteen centuries of blindness” are due not to the simple idiocy of ancients, but rather to some paradigm discontinuity. He is involuntarily close to the solution as he mockingly states that the ancient elements were “half real and half imaginary”.

In fact, while the diminutive humoral alterations described by Richet are “wholly real” phenomena, phlegm and black bile are macroscopic, symbolically recognized in earth and water even outside human bodies, and yet a product of imagination. In a certain sense, the difference between modern chemical humors and ancient ones is the same that separates the four ancient elements and Mendeleev’s ones: the latter are stable organization of an objectified matter; the latter are not simply a categorization of actual, visible phenomena, but also, as Bachelard will observe, tools for of “specialized *Einführung*”. Here is why an element can be a mood, a season, a color, a distinctive *Regungen* (motory-pathic suggestions such as upward, downward, rush, sloth) and bodily island rather than actual organs (such as the burning stomach of the choleric or the literal *spleen* of the melancholic).

Even the different numbers and organizations of such elements across different cultures, their cultural contingency and lack of universality, ostensibly proving that they are bogus from the physicist’s perspective, resembles much more the situation of a group of painters depicting the same landscape with different palettes of colors, ranging from black ink only to three, four, five different tones. We have already seen the dyadic organization in *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 elaborated in China and adopted in Japan, grasping together phenomena of mood, light, weather and atmosphere as an alternation of bright and dark *ki*. Chinese culture has however also what are often (and incorrectly) called “five elements”, the 五行 *wuxing* (Jp. *gogyō*). These “five phases” are “water”, “fire”, “metal”, “wood” and “earth” compose two different

series, one of generation and one of opposition, connecting them in turn to colors, seasons, flavors, organs, directions (earth, the fifth element, resides in the center) and periods of the year (earth is the midpoint in which the season turns). They also represent five kinds of *leiblich* and cosmic movement: water is downwards, metal inwards, fire upwards, wood outwards and earth has the function of turning, and each phase of matter is obviously connected to a different mood: joy (fire), pensiveness (earth), sadness (metal), fear (water) and anger (wood). The Chinese peculiarity, if we compare the five phases with the four Greek elements, is the major stress on transformation and movement: they are in this sense closer to hyletic matter and less prone to be hypostasized as actual, static beings.

Another important humoral pattern is that of the three ayurvedic *dosha* in India. *Vāta* (dryness, light, movement, briskness, variable and melancholic mood), *Pitta* (transformation, liquidity, heat, sharpness, bright, analytic and overreacting mood) and *Kapha* (nutrition, water, smoothness and softness, peaceful and passive mood) are a threefold distinction which was communicating with Greek humor theory both in ancient times and during the Muslim conquer of India. The list might be longer: the sevenfold theory of bodily *chakras* developed by Hinduism also connects macrocosmic principles and moods in seven correlative fields or “circles” ascending in sequence within the living body. Ideally one could include even Mesoamerican and African elemental-humoral patterns that have no eminent written tradition and yet show the same trends in different places and different times. With Vico, we might say that such elements and humors are “fantastic universals”, thus saying something essential about the makeup of human experience.

5. *A phenomenology of elements*

These patterns might seem to have a merely anthropological value, with their imaginary quality and their incompatibility with the scientific paradigm³. But a phenomenologist, unlike a scientist, does not have to

³ Which does not outright equates with their inefficacy: the qi-based system of acupuncture, for instance, has been the object of a string of very diplomatic statements by the World Health Organization, which acknowledge for instance that its efficacy is confirmed by “clinical experience, but not necessarily controlled clinical

discard a phenomenon once it recognizes it as imaginary. Something might very well be “actual” (*wirklich*) without being “real” (*reel*). Husserl himself worked quite intensively on the different noetic activity that distinguishes the “presentation” of a real object and the “presentification” (*Vergegenwärtigung*) of an irreality (Husserl 2005). My thesis here is that we should recognize how this humoral-elemental flux, in all the cultural patterns in which it can be expressed, from *ki* systems to European elements, is an *adequate reflection* of our being full of and acting out the fundamental modes of atmospheres. The cluster of mood/humor/*ki* is in this sense a “fact of unreality”, a model that derives its efficacy not from a catalogue of “real” things, objects that are reified and thought as precedent and independent from our consciousness (a philosophical naiveté, after all), but from the reciprocal disclosure of a material worlds and embodied consciousness. A consciousness that moreover by appearing within atmospheres exists not only among and between things, but also among and between common feelings and ideas, inserted in a world-nexus that is *cultural* as well.

Husserl was obviously never interested in such cultural contents of imagination (his accounts on the matter are actually poor especially for this dearth of good examples) and he never asked what the relation between the imaginary and *hyle* might be, prompting Sartre’s criticism on this point (Sartre 1962: 137). Even Sartre, however, while admitting that the very makeup of the world is possible only through such “annihilation” by fantasy, does not elaborate how this process might involve the living body and matter as well. Heidegger, as Irigaray noted, is very much anchored to an image of earth, which unfortunately has also the function of covering up the experiences of flux and imagination that are highlighted by the East Asian *ki* and by humor patterns in general. There is however at least one modern European thinker who deeply cared about this “material imagination” of moods and reflected upon it along the pattern of the four ancient elements: Gaston Bachelard. Indeed, it is through his analysis of elements that Bachelard gets progressively invested in phenomenology as a method (Vydra 2004). His five volumes *La psychanalyse du feu* (1938), *L’eau et les rêves* (1942), *L’air et les songes* (1943), *La terre et reveries du repos* (1946) e *La terre et les reveries de la volonté* (1948) collectively trace a poetic phenomenology of the four elements, conceived nor as chemical object nor as

trials” (<http://apps.who.int/medicinedocs/en/d/Jh2947e/5.6.html>, retrieved on April 11, 2019).

conventional metaphors or even archetypes, but as *active irrealities*, foci in the co-constitution of human and world.

On voit donc l'intérêt d'une *Einfühlung* spécialisée, le bénéfice qu'on a à se fondre dans une matière particulière plutôt que se disperser dans un univers indifférencié. Aux objets, aux matières différentes, aux "éléments", nous demanderons à la fois leur spécifique densité d'être et leur exacte énergie de devenir. Aux phénomènes nous demanderons des conseils de changement, des leçons de mobilité substantielle, bref une physique détaillée de l'imagination dynamique. En particulier les phénomènes aériens nous donneront des leçons très générales et très importantes de montée, d'ascension, de sublimation. (Bachelard 2007: 16)

The two ecological *media* of water and air are thus what exposes us most clearly to this "fluid of imagination", might we call it *humor* or *ki* – a mist, breath, an internal-external shapeless mixture of aerial and liquid that can burn up into fire-choleric or clump down into earth-melancholia. Here we see a system that actively expresses the same fundamental duality of the Chinese *ying-yang*, a rhythmic dialectic that exists both in the body (as breathing, *Engung-Weitung* of the living body, sense of vitality and fatigue) and as the primary atmosphere of light and darkness, summer and winter. No matter the specific pattern of humors/*ki*, what is remarkable is this insistence on fluidity and waves, the attention for constructive (and sometimes disruptive) contrapositions.

6. A short conclusion

I think that we must reach a conclusion here, chiefly to avoid the risk of adding too much materials to an already overly generic discussion. Regrettably, many observations had to remain incipient suggestions. I would like to defend, however, the methodological core of my argument: clearly, what I am proposing here is not a return of humor theory in medicine, just as I would not submit to bloodletting by leeches in case of a fever. What I tried was rather to observe through this clash with the concepts of *ki* and *humor* the fundamental but still too "empty" notion of mood. Empty of body, empty of that material imagination, the "specialized *Einfühlungen*" that it needs in order to really be a disclosure of-and-with the world. I like to think that such a study also has

to pass through a discovery of cultural alterity, forcing us to acknowledge how a collective and cultural imprinting is already present in the atmosphere, without denying its phenomenologically “first” character. This detour into the foreign leads moreover to discover in a new, more sympathetic light even a piece of theory so discredited as the theory of humors. Despite their too hasty exclusion from the “ontological catalogue”, elements and humors remain potent “hormones for thought” (Bachelard): key tools for a phenomenology trying, who knows, to bring mind and feelings back into the world.

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