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Objektive Stimmungen vs. psychic states. On the emotional phenomenology of Maximilian Beck

Abstract

This paper focuses on two aspects of Maximilian Beck's philosophical reflection: his adherence to naive (phenomenological) realism and his claim to the autonomous existence of the affective qualities of the objectual world. Therefore, my contribution will be structured as follows: after a brief overview of Beck's defence of naive realism (§2), I will attempt to show how, in his opinion, the affective qualities characterizing the world (i.e., the places and things we encounter) are in principle independent of the perceiver, possessing an objectivity of their own. It is pertinent to mention here that Beck calls these affective qualities "objective moods" (objektive Stimmungen) (§3). After that, I will try to illustrate the "externalist" aspects of Beck's theory of the apprehension of Stimmungen, highlighting its differences from the "projective empathy" theses that were circulating at the time, particularly in the version proposed by Theodor Lipps (§4). In the final section, I will present two arguments that Beck puts forward in support of his theory of the objectivity of the Stimmungen (§5).

Keywords

Maximilian Beck, Naive realism, Objective moods

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1. *Outside consciousness: Maximilian Beck's naive realism*

In his most significant work, titled *Wesen und Wert* (1925), Beck often reflects on the relationship between reality and consciousness. The concept of consciousness is central to his thinking but in a particular sense of “naive consciousness”. The decision to focus on this topic was perhaps driven by a desire to engage with the phenomenological realism debate concerning the relationship between “external” and “perceived reality”. The era saw the emergence of two different theoretical approaches – the more famous one of “critical realism”, supported by thinkers such as Reinach, Hartmann, Conrad Martius, etc., and the lesser known one of “naive realism”, of which Beck became an advocate. Both these approaches attribute a mind-independent existence to objects but differ in their understanding of the relationship between physical reality and perception. Essentially, critical realism posits a distinction between the object as it exists outside of consciousness and the object as it is perceived. Naive realism, on the other hand, equates these two dimensions, claiming a coincidence between the *object in itself* and the *object for me*, and thus between “physical” (i.e., outside consciousness) and perceptual reality¹.

Beck defends his position in a typescript titled *Rehabilitierung des “naïven Realismus”*² that can be dated to 1930. In this text, the author first presents and then rejects many theories that oppose the naive approach and formulates his personal thesis on the affective qualities that belong to objects of perception. In the text (RR: 2), Beck asserts an idea of knowledge that obeys the laws of natural intellect (*natürlicher Verstand*) and equates this naive concept of knowledge with that of consciousness (cf. De Santis 2022: 494). According to him, knowledge is the result of the correspondence between consciousness and object, and the relationship between the two is always primarily determined by the object (cf. De Santis 2022: 494). However, to fully understand this point, it is necessary to take a step back and return to Beck's aforementioned critique of Husserlian

¹ For more comprehensive insights into naive realism, refer to, for instance, Bower 2019. The essay offers a comparative analysis between the classical intentional approach to perception and the relational conception advocated by naive realism, honing in on the insights of Johannes Daubert (1877-1947) and his contrast with Husserl. In addition, see Ranieri 2021.

² I express my gratitude to Daniele De Santis (Carolina University, Prague) and Hamid Taieb (Humboldt University, Berlin) for providing me with the unpublished typescript text preserved at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich. For further details on the dating hypothesis, see De Santis (2022: 493).

identification of consciousness and intentionality, which the father of phenomenology had been working on since the *Logical investigations*. In response to Husserl, Beck establishes a distinction between consciousness (*Bewußtsein*) and psyche/soul (*Seele*), where the former represents the supra-individual and *passive* component of perception, while the latter deals with its subjective aspect. Moreover, since the psyche is involved in the active side of perception, intentionality, i.e. the way of directing and orienting *towards* the object³, belongs to it and not to consciousness.

From the perspective of the phenomenology of perception, Beck's distinction has relevant consequences. In fact, he distinguishes between a *passive-receptive* sphere of consciousness (defined as a *tätigkeitsloses Sein*) and an active psychological "I", which tends towards the object in different intentional forms. This double articulation allows the author to avoid falling into subjectivism and to propose a new conception of correlativism⁴, in which "the subject and the object of knowledge are mutually dependent [and] neither exists without the other" (RR: 6). In this way he succeeds in defending, on the one hand, a naive vision of knowledge and, on the other, the link with the subjective dimension, thereby overcoming the false opposition between the *objective-in-itself* and the *subjective-for-us* (cf. De Santis 2023a: 66; De Santis 2023b). Beck thus promotes a realist perspectivism in which objects are seen as entities that present themselves objectively to consciousness, without neutralizing the distance between subject and object (cf. RR: 9). The natural concept of knowledge proposed by the author is therefore capable of "knowing" the world in its objectivity; appearing as "indestructible through all changes in worldview, religion, philosophy, and science" (RR: 3). In defending the idea of a natural apprehen-

³ Since intentionality has no object of its own, but only refers to the ego's modes of being directed and oriented towards the object (already given to consciousness), it is defined by Beck as *gegenstandslos*, i.e., "objectless". See Beck (1938: 63) and De Santis (2022: 488).

⁴ For Beck, the term "correlativism" denotes the mutual conditioning of "being" and "knowledge", a perspective that distinguishes him from both Husserl and Heidegger. The reasons for this contrast with the two preeminent phenomenologists of his time are complex. In essence, while Husserlian reflection on correlativism falls into an aporia, failing to combine a naive and "mind-independent" vision of knowledge with the relational I bond between the perceiver and the perceived, Heideggerian reflection diverges by embracing absolute continuity between subject and object, where knowledge manifests as a "mode of being" of *Dasein*. Conversely, Beck's "conciliarist" view appears to interpret correlation as a relationship between "an objective object of knowledge and an equally objectively determined viewpoint" (De Santis 2022: 495). For further insights, refer to De Santis (2023: 63-8; 2023b).

sion of the world, Beck, in particular, criticizes the thesis that propounds that the objects of reality only exist in consciousness, and claims the undeniably objective side of perception, since: “Despite all theories to the contrary, every normal human being – even the most enlightened, the least naive, the most scientifically trained – believes he has only really known something when he thinks he has grasped it as objectively existing, regardless of the act of cognition itself” (RR: 3; slightly modified).

The naive conception of knowledge is thus “so indestructible that everyone must presuppose it implicitly while denying it explicitly!” (RR: 3). The fact that this assumption is indemonstrable (*unbeweisbar*) does not seem to be an obstacle to its recognition, since “in sensible intuition we experience the real actual world (*wirkliche Welt*) itself in an immediate and intuitive way, and not just by thinking” (RR: 28). This implies that even the sensible qualities (*sinnliche Qualitäten*) of external reality (forms, colours, tones, smells, tastes, etc.) are immediately given to us in sensory perception; they are not “subjective excrescences of those who experience them” (RR: 4), i.e., mere cognitive acts of the perceiver, but objects characterized by an autonomous existence. For this reason, the apprehension of sensible qualities cannot simply be interpreted as a “physicalistic-physiological-psychological process”, since “we perceive much more and differently than the most popular (*vulgarisch*) theories of perception claim” (RR: 29), grasping both the organic-sensible and affective aspects in a single act of perception. All our intuitions are therefore not fantasies, dreams or illusions, but genuine realities obeying objective laws: “The world of being (*Seinswelt*) comes to us only through the world of appearance (*Scheinwelt*)” (RR: 32). In other words, as Beck writes almost at the end of his work (RR: 36): the subject must face up to the experiential limitations of human cognition and recognize that objective reality follows its own laws, which he must accept as autonomous and independent of him. He therefore believes it is necessary to downsize the “subjective trace” in favour of a strongly *object-oriented* idea of perception. This also applies to the emotional connotations we ascribe to things, which are traditionally seen as reflecting the subject’s personal view of the world. On the contrary, Beck’s position insists on the objectivity of moods “radiated” by objects – moods that he calls *objektive Stimmungen*.

The topic of the objectivity of moods is specifically addressed in Beck’s 1925 work, in which he outlines a philosophy of values linked to aesthetics (also in the classical sense). In particular, the first part of the work deals with the emotional sphere. Although Beck probably did not have the ambition to develop a systematic theory on this topic, here he proposes an

interesting perceptual hypothesis on the affective relationship between the subject and the world, reflecting on the emotions felt in certain environments or landscapes. Of particular relevance to my research is the opening chapter of the first volume, in which Beck expresses his strenuous opposition to all theories of empathy.

2. Objective Stimmungen vs. *psychic states*

The first chapter of *Wesen und Wert* (1925) is entirely devoted to the question of the objecthood of the world (*Die Gegenständlichkeit der Welt*). For the purposes of this paper, it is the most important place in the work, since in the various sections Beck addresses the main theoretical points of his “emotional phenomenology”. Here we find an exploration of the concepts of *Lust* and value (*Wert*) (§1), a semantic analysis of the difference between sensation (*Empfindung*) and feeling (*Gefühl*) (§2), an investigation into the conditions of objectual experience (§3), followed by a reflection on perception (*Wahrnehmung*) and its independence of both sensation and impulse (*Reiz*) (§4). I paid particular attention to the last part, titled *Gegen die Einfühlungstheorien*, where Beck focuses on the projectivist consequences of the empathic approach. In his view, such an approach is guilty of reducing things to mere correlates of consciousness, shifting the focus from the objects themselves to the subjectivity that perceives them. I believe the entire paragraph can be interpreted as Beck’s attempt to develop an anti-psychological phenomenology of feeling, akin to what Geiger (1911) and later Max Scheler (1973) had already accomplished to some extent.

Beck’s critique is directed at all theories of empathy, without explicitly referring to a specific view or author, to show precisely that in any empathic process it is assumed that every sensation or feeling is generated by the ego, and that, consequently, everything perceived can only be the result of a projective act of the subject. In particular, the philosopher ascribes this fallacy to the wrong assimilation of object qualities to psychic states, which creates a false overlapping between the emotional tones of the ego (*Ichstimmungen*, cf. Beck 1925: 148) and those belonging to the object (*objektive Stimmungen*), thereby generating a falsified (*gefälscht*) sensory experience. As on other occasions, Beck argues *ex negativo*, that is, he tries to explain objective moods by what they are not. In the *pars destruens* of the text, he exposes the false theoretical assumptions on which the empathic-projective conception of perception is based, and

then devotes the *pars costruens* to clarifying the extra-psychic character of objective moods, insisting on their independence from consciousness. In fact, objective moods are not feelings generated by the perceiver (through introjection or projection), but emotionally connoted determinations (*Bestimmtheiten*) referring to external reality. Beck concludes his final remarks by stating that:

The world we perceive, such as a landscape of spruce trees, mossy ground, and blue sky, is not simply extensive, large, shaped, grouped, green, blue, fragrant, quiet, etc. [...]. "The forest is austere". The naive consciousness speaks of *austere* and *cheerful* landscapes, of *melancholy*, *sadness* of a sky, weather, wood, pasture; it speaks of the *wilderness*, the *magnificence*, the *sublimity* of the mountain, etc. Such determinations are called "*moods*" (*Stimmungen*) (Beck 1925: 118)

However, Beck points out that it is by no means certain that all the qualities we perceive are emotionally charged—some may even remain simply sensory qualities. For example, when we speak of a dull and grey (*trüb*) colour, sky, or landscape, it may be possible that these adjectives refer to a simple visual act, describing what we *see* and not what we *feel*. If, on the other hand, we experience feelings, thoughts, or affective states as grey and dull, we are no longer perceiving mere sensory qualities, but something more, characterized by precise affective connotations. Similarly, when we describe a gaze as sweet or sharp, a colour as strong or delicate, a sound as bright, dull, deep, etc., we should realize that our ordinary perception is always affectively connoted.

According to Beck, the mistake lies precisely in explaining this perception either as a transfer of feelings from subject to object or as an associative mechanism, which we still consider to be the most plausible explanations (cf. Beck 1925: 119). With arguments similar to those of Max Scheler (1973), the author, therefore, rules out the use of associationist, metaphorical, biographical, or imitative explanations, and acknowledges that objective feelings have undeniable efficacy and independence, even though they do not belong to an "I" or a consciousness.

Again, referring to the description of a melancholic landscape, Beck points out that the affective quality of melancholy (*Schwermut*) is perceived independently of our personal mood, and imposes itself with such undeniable insistence (*unleugbare Eindringlichkeit*) that we are almost forced to recognize this *Stimmung* as part of the landscape itself. The text states:

It is not a description, but a falsification of experience by reflection, when we say that the moods of a landscape are given to us only as the expression of an

imaginative I [*hineinphantasierten Ich*] within the landscape: I hear and see the raging of the storm and the loudly roaring sea- without thinking of the storm and the sea as animated. I see the castle standing proud, I see the seriousness of the tall red and white firs and spruces under which I walk, without having to identify with them: even psychically, I am completely detached from this anger, this pride, this seriousness: I perceive them without being angry, proud, or serious myself. These qualities stand in front of me as objectively as the storm and the lake, the castle, the firs, and the spruces themselves. I see the dull, gloomy, sad *atmosphere* (*Stimmung*) out there, on the street, without thinking that the elements generating this emotional tone in me – i.e., the weather, the sky, the rain, the street, the houses – are, singly or together, animate or sentient. And I feel the cheerfulness of the melody without considering it, its sounds, or even the instrument, as an emotional I (*fühlendes Ich*). (Beck 1925: 145-6; emphasis mine)

Recognizing the existence of objective affective qualities does not, therefore, imply admitting some form of animism or panpsychism, since objective moods are emotional tones that are “objectively present in objects” (Beck 1925: 127) and emanate from inanimate things (*seelenlose Dinge*). The specific nature of *objektive Stimmungen* is thus that of being non-subjective and non-introjected sentimental characters, which refuse to be explained by recourse to the empathic mechanism. In fact, as De Santis (2022: 495) has observed, the rehabilitation of naive realism allows Beck to reject a form of correlativism that depends exclusively on subjectivity. In this way, he avoids the mistake of interpreting the relationship to the object as the product of a purely subjective point of view.

3. Not empathic, but pathic: Beck against the Einfühlungstheorien

As already mentioned, Beck’s critique of empathy theories is mainly directed against the projectivist thesis developed by Theodor Lipps⁵. To

⁵ An advocate of a psychologistic approach, Theodor Lipps aimed at redefining the concept of empathy in an anti-romantic sense, i.e., linking it to psychological processes such as splitting, projection, and transfer of experiences (cf. Lipps 1883). In particular, he did not admit that objects can autonomously evoke certain emotional tones but defended the thesis that the subject finds in the empathized object nothing more than a sentimental content produced by the subject himself, which is projected on the object at the moment of its apperception. This “hydraulic mechanism” (cf. Pinotti 2011) is valid for all types of empathy identified by Lipps, in which every experience (of an object, a mood experienced through an object, a natural element or another human being) is the result of a projection of the perceiver onto the perceived, in which “I objectify or project myself into the object. [...] I find the mood in the object; in short, I empathized with it” (Lipps 1909: 226).

simplify his complex argument, I have classified his objections into three broad categories: 1) the criticism of projectivism; 2) the criticism of introjectionism; 3) the rejection of other derived explanatory hypotheses, such as the theories of recollection (*Erinnerung*) and association (*Assoziation*). Each of these categories can be traced back to the same error of interpretation, namely that of regarding *objektive Stimmungen* as “the result of a specific psychic act [*seelischer Akt*] in which we reproduce our own mood in the object, believing that “we perceive outside what we instead feel inside [*hineinfühlen*]” (Beck 1925: 130).

Beck argues that the classical mechanism of empathy usually consists of two steps and both are incorrect. The first step is the introjection of the emotional states generated in us by the objectual perception, and the second is the projection onto the object of the emotional states previously introjected by the subject. At other times, empathy may instead occur as a form of identification (*Hineinversetzen*) with perceived objects (Beck 1925: 131). Even in this context, perception is inevitably linked to the mood of the perceiver, to his past experiences (“recollection theory”), or to events/objects connected to each other by certain principles, such as that of analogy (“associationism”). In both cases, however, since the empathic dynamic itself is based on continuously intertwining processes, it is difficult to clearly distinguish the introjective moment from the projective one.

The view of the world proposed in *Wesen und Wert*, however, is exactly the opposite. This is because it fights vigorously not only against subjectivism but also against the consequent devaluation of the object pole, which is actually absorbed into the subject. According to Beck, it is precisely this fusion (*Verschmolzenheit*) between the subject and objects (sometimes described as *Nicht-Ich-Gegenstände*) that leads to projectivism and introjectionism, which reject the notion that feelings not generated by the subject can also exist. Only those who can rely on (or return to) their naive conscience can truly grasp the objectivity of *Stimmungen*, and understand them as real, external affective states that the subject should recognize once and for all, renouncing “clinging to its own mood, which is thrown on the world as a mere loose tinsel [*loser flitter*]” (Beck 1925: 140).

Even the absence of a genetic perspective – which asks about the roots and reasons for ascribing affective qualities to the objectual world – does not invalidate the value of Beck’s reflections, which are in any case remarkable for their strong emphasis on the primacy of *explaining* over *understanding*, to use Dilthey’s terms (see Dilthey 1990). Despite this “explanatory gap”, Beck does not refrain from presenting some arguments

to support his theory. In the last section, I will mention two of them, which can be named “subject disposition” and “emotional discrepancy”.

4. *Subject disposition and emotional discrepancy*

If the idea that the perception of objects can produce a certain mood (Beck 1925: 144) is fully accepted, the contention on the extra-psychicity of feelings is much more difficult to share because of its counter-intuitiveness.

A first objection to this view is that objects cannot possess emotional qualities independent of the perceiver, since they are not “I’s” and have no self-consciousness (Beck 1925: 145). Another objection concerns the subjective connotation of perception, which seems to confirm that the perceiver empathizes with things, which instead remain inert. Beck addresses these issues by responding to the following possible provocations: 1) How can one speak of objective moods if perceptual experiences of different nuances and intensities can occur in front of the same landscape? and 2) If the subject feels a certain atmosphere (joy, melancholy, restlessness, etc.) in front of a landscape, but reacts to it with a different or contrasting mood, can we still speak of *objektive Stimmungen*?

He responds to the first objection by referring to the concept of the “subject disposition” of the perceiver, by which he means the capacity to receive and filter a certain objective mood in a personal way: “Just as one must have eyes and ears open to see and hear, so one must be inclined to [*disponiert*] to perceive moods. [...] Not all shades are suitable for all eyes, and the same applies to moods” (Beck 1925: 146).

The author seems to state here that even the same objective expressive qualities can be perceived with greater or lesser intensity and depth, depending on the sensitivity of the subject and his predisposition to perceive a certain mood at a given moment. Consequently, the melancholy of a landscape can be experienced by the subject in the form of an emotional tone that can cover a spectrum of intensities within the same expressive quality, without in any way contradicting the contention of objective moods. What really matters is that in each of these cases, we have the clear, certain consciousness (*Bewusstsein*) of perceiving something that was already out there beforehand, and not something that is only projected out (*hinausprojiziert*) by our own act (Beck 1925: 146). In other words, a landscape has a certain objective quality that can be perceived

more or less intensely (e.g., with gradations from “very sad” to “not very happy”), depending on the disposition of the perceiver⁶.

In response to the second provocative question, the author instead examines the so-called “experiences of discrepancy” (Böhme 2001), which occur when we feel that the affective tone emanating from an object, environment, or landscape is in contrast or opposition to our mood. This happens, for example, when “we notice a certain cheerfulness out there and at the same time regret that it is not able to cheer us up” (Beck 1925: 130)⁷. Remaining consistent in his approach, the author does not focus on the possible sociological explanations but considers such discrepancy phenomena as an *intuitive* confirmation of the existence of objective affective qualities, which are not (at least in the first instance) subjectively conditioned, but endowed with their own power and authority. Consequently, Beck radically rejects the idea that theories of empathy can make even a minimal contribution to an authentic understanding of perceptual reality since they *de facto* exclude the principle of the expressiveness of the inanimate world. Moreover, from his point of view, any emotional involvement of the percipient is something subordinate to the existence of the external emotional capability of touching, involving, or even grasping the percipient. Affirming his view, Beck writes: “The general tendency of perception to imprint on the perceiver the emotional tonality of what is perceived – whether it is realized or not – is something secondary. Its effect on the ego must not be confused with its cause (*Ursache*) in the perceived object” (Beck 1925: 148).

From his remarks, it is evident that Beck’s naive and externalist approach diverges significantly from Husserlian transcendental idealism, offering originality vis-à-vis the realist phenomenology of his time. Beck’s theory of perception demonstrates a more radical inclination towards the

⁶ In another passage, it is stated: “If moods are perceptible, objective qualities, why are they not always felt by everyone in their objective identity with themselves? Why does what seems sad to one person appear not really funny to another? Why does one person not perceive the austerity of the tall forest that another sees? Answer: This is as little an objection as blindness or deafness is to the objectivity of color and sound” (Beck 1925: 146).

⁷ Böhme’s argument closely resembles Beck’s (hence the comparison). In the *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik* he states: “Despite the mood of sadness I feel, the cheerful atmosphere around me has an effect on me, i.e., a tendency to change my mood. Whether this tendency is somehow halted or perhaps even rejected, the sadness is nevertheless altered, becoming more concentrated in me and may even in some ways become alien to me, since I am, in any case, influenced by the cheerful atmosphere outside” (Böhme 2001: 48).

objects than that articulated by other thinkers of the “Munich Circle” (consider, for instance, Geiger’s 1911 essay mentioned earlier), as it unequivocally excludes projectivism in all its forms.

Moreover, the author appears to anticipate certain contemporary aesthetic-phenomenological perspectives, particularly Hermann Schmitz’s New Phenomenology, which has pushed the boundaries of past phenomenological positions and gained recognition for its novelty. In my view, a closer alignment with Beckian theories can be discerned in Schmitz’s reflections on atmospheres, developed since 1969 (see Schmitz 2019). Indeed, the theory of objective moods bears striking resemblance to Schmitz’s neophenomenological “theory of atmospheres”, which elucidates the extraspsychic origin of feelings. According to Schmitz, feelings of all kinds (moods, emotions, affective states, etc.) must be understood as “spatially effused atmospheres” (Schmitz 2023: 45), i.e., emotional tones that do not primarily belong to the perceiving subject but are literally “in the air” or “anchored” (in the sense of Metzger 1941) to certain objects or environments. By employing the term “atmosphere” in a precise technical sense, Schmitz emphasizes the objective nature of feelings and emotional qualities perceived in objects, denoting them as intrinsic properties of things and places rather than creations of the perceiver’s inner world, as empathy theories suggest.

Given the breadth and complexity of this subject, I will only outline one potential, yet fruitful, application of Beck’s thought within contemporary phenomenology. Over the past fifty years, there has been a growing interest in the emotional sphere, explored from various perspectives, including not only humanistic but also scientific approaches. Schmitz’s proposal focuses on the forms of ordinary affective experience wherein individuals are not *subjects of* something but *subjects to* something, acknowledging that the affective tones experienced are external to us⁸. The emphasis on the *pathic* dimension of sensory perception constitutes a particularly innovative aspect of the New Phenomenology, echoing the insights Beck highlighted a century ago, as evident in the distinction between *Bewusstsein* and *Seele*. For this reason, I believe that Beckian theses can fruitfully dialogue with the atmospheric perspective, which is

⁸ In Griffero’s words (2020: 58): “In the framework of a pathic aesthetics, the expression ‘subject of perception’ – understood as a subjective genitive – gives way to the expression ‘subject to perception’. I thus realize I am a product of perception, a ‘me’ rather than an ‘I’: I do not first exist and then, among other things, perceive, but I exist only insofar as I perceive”.

increasingly influential and finds application in many other fields of study, such as architecture, urban planning, psychopathology, pedagogy, and even law⁹.

The main purpose of this article has been to clarify the key theoretical aspects of Beck's thoughts and consider their implications for the philosophy of perception. Specifically, Beck's rejection of the projective-empathic tradition, the de-psychicization of the emotional, and the "affective authority" of the objectual world underscore his significance as an author worthy of rediscovery. This endeavor not only aims to bring Beck out of obscurity but also seeks to reveal the rich potential of his philosophy for contemporary aesthetic and phenomenological inquiries.

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⁹ This expansion has taken place over the past three decades, mainly due to the contributions of Gernot Böhme and Tonino Griffero. They not only expanded Schmitz's thesis on atmospheres, but also proposed its application to different disciplines. This allowed many other authors to "specialize" in the application of atmospheric theory to their respective fields of inquiry. For the sake of brevity, I will mention only two introductory works on the subject: Böhme 2019 and Griffero 2014.

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