There is a decided tendency to think of emotions as coming from *deep within us* – from the profundity of our being. There, in the psychical and/or physiological depths, they are fully felt; there too, they *are our own*, exclusively so: others may have elicited or exacerbated them, but once they emerge in our innards they *belong to us*, they are considered to be *part of us*. As singular occurrences, they are felt to be uniquely ours: “ours to be in one way or another.”

This way of regarding emotion is strongly tempting, especially in Western modernity. It characterizes what Descartes called “passions”: that is, what we experience as the result of an elaborate internal apparatus that includes the senses, blood, animal spirits, the heart, and the brain. Other modern thinkers, however different in overall orientation, have followed suit – notably Kierkegaard, who sees emotions as revelatory of who we are at various stages on life’s way,

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with anxiety a key emotion throughout. In being anxious, we experience our life in its sheer possibility: as what is uniquely possible for each of us. Similarly, the Romantic preoccupation with melancholy (starting a tradition of reflection that eventually leads to Freud) presents us with a model of emotion not only as stemming from our personal depths but as something virtually unfathomable in its rootedness in our human subjectivity. For all these thinkers, emotion stems from somewhere within us, however this “within” is to be interpreted, whether psychically, somatically, or spiritually; consequently, we must think of it and deal with it in its unique interiority to our existence.

But all such emphasis on emotion as a creature of human and especially individual depth, tempting as it may be, overlooks another entire dimension of our emotional lives. This is its *peripherality*. I point to the way in which many emotions occur at the edges of our experience, and often remain there as well. Such emotions are not situated within us, in some psychical *bathos* or physiological substrate; they appear at, and often as, the perimeters of our ongoing experience. Their locus is extra-subjective, *out there* rather than *in here*; they are adherent rather than in-herent. We certainly feel them, but we take them
to be impinging upon us rather than as upwelling within us: as coming *to us* rather than coming *from us*.

We need to distinguish specifically “peripheral emotions” from the peripheral dimension of all emotions. The former refers to those emotions that are most explicitly and fully realized at the peripheries of our ongoing lives: especially those that come from being in the company of others where their transmission is favored but also when I am by myself and feeling emotions that seem to come to me from a certain elsewhere: “free-floating.” At the same time, all emotions have peripheral features – that is to say, distinctive edges in space and time. As such, they call for a close peri phenomenological description that pays special attention to all the ways in which they realize their edgewise being: their forming, being at, and (on occasion) exceeding their own edges. In actual experience, however, the two modes of peripherality often join forces. A first example will demonstrate this collaboration.

I receive a telephone call in New York from a friend in Santa Barbara. She tells me of the sudden onslaught of mud slides in that city. In the immediate wake of the fires that have denuded the surrounding hills, these slides were released by a torrential rain last night. They have devastated more than 100 houses – crushing them outright with
boulders brought down by the slides, inundating them with swiftly moving mud masses that measure up to 20 feet high; more than 15 people have been killed already, with more missing. Her voice is tremulous, charged with apprehension, filled with fear – not just for herself (her house is close to the danger zone but not in it) but for others who are more directly in harm’s way. Her fears extend to the future as well: the campus on which she teaches is endangered, and she cannot help but wonder if students will be willing to continue coming to a place that has shown itself to be so vulnerable to extremes of weather as Santa Barbara has now become. The intense emotion felt where she is – three thousand miles from where I’m at in Manhattan -- is conveyed instantaneously to me: I not merely infer her distress, I feel it directly. The effective edges of her emotional state – expressed not only in her words (“terrible,” “catastrophic”) but in the tense pauses between them – get through to me right away. I not only take in her literal words but I take over the emotion conveyed by her voice – a complex emotion composed of dismay, terror, and concern for the future. The jagged edges of her distraught emotional state enter into the outer edges of my listening self: her emotion has become mine through the intermeshing of their differential edges.
For an emotion to have an edge, the emotion itself need not have a simple structure, an obvious “handle”; it can be (and often is) composite; but if it is passed on to others, it must have an effective edge. By “effective” I mean that the edge needs to have enough of a shape to be perceived and recognized. It is this shape, amorphous as it may be by objective standards of measurement, that constitutes it as an edge. An emotion, no matter how diversely generated or currently configured, comes edged. Thanks to its edge, it possesses what William James calls “the sting of reality.” By means of the same edge, it can be transmitted to someone who is far away. When this happens, there is an experience of a genuinely peripheral emotion: an emotion that does not just present edges but that consists largely in such edgewise being. This was the case with what I experienced on the telephone with my friend in Santa Barbara.

The transmission of emotion is not confined to one-on-one conversations. Sometimes we “pick up” an emotion from a crowd of people we have just joined – say, their sadness. We may not know exactly from where in particular this sadness stems; all we know is that it reaches us, as if proffered to our attention. As we first encounter it, it is at the periphery of our consciousness. As such, it is decidedly liminal,
a threshold we are invited to cross. Its emotional locus is peripheral: outside myself but also outside other members of the crowd from whom I take up the emotion. Such picking up by the edge, at the edge, occurs not only in the midst of crowds whose “collective effervescence” (Durkeim) fosters such effects, sometimes in virtually irresistible ways – as at the Nuremburg rallies. But also when in solitary states, readers of novels are accustomed to situations where the reader feels that she experiences the emotions of certain figures quite directly: say, Swann's jealousy in *Remembrance of Things Past*. From perusing the pages of Proust's novel she enters directly into Swann's emotional state despite the fact that “Swann” is not a real person but a fictitious character.

In each of the cases just mentioned – whether in cell phone conversations, direct pick-up from a crowd one has joined, or from fictional figures, we witness an extraordinary situation in which we experience emotions that are not our own. They do not belong originally, much less exclusively, to myself as the subject who undergoes them. It’s true that the way I subsequently process them – take them in and take them up – is something that does belong to me. This is the _endogeny_ of

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2 I owe this formulation to Aaron Bernstein in his essay, “Anxiety,” p. 7: “I am experiencing emotions that are not mine” (his italics).
emotion and is to be distinguished from the *exophany* of emotions: their overt manifestation. Such exophany characterizes emotion in its bare appearing, and it cannot be reduced to the endogenous process of dealing with it. This appearing may well precipitate *exogeny* – generation from without, whereby the emotion works as a precipitant of other events – but in and by itself it is sheer showing, an emotional display that is out there before me.

II

The edges of my emotional life intersect with the edges of the emotional lives of others, real or fictive. It is a matter of an edge-to-edge situation, and as such it is the emotional analogue of other edge-fraught situations – for instance, the experience of being “up against the wall,” as when migrants find themselves confronted with a massive structure that abruptly forecloses any further movement forward; or, more mundanely, when the tire of the car I am parking cozens up to a curb. The difference between the two ways of being edge-to-edge is that the edges of physical things are more or less unrelenting – forcibly so with walls and street curbs, less so with the way the edges of my body fit
closely with the clothes I am wearing. In all such cases, however, the material structure of one set of edges is contiguous with that of another set. Whereas with emotional edge-to-edge situations we are dealing with something essentially labile: something that is more likely to involve interpenetration than confrontation. Edges in these circumstances may have “character” – allowing us to identify them as emotions of a given kind (anger, fear, joy) – but they don't have a structure that directly reflects the materiality of their actual composition. Moreover, they are yielding: not merely as giving way to insistently applied pressure but as reflecting the actual circumstance in which I and others are mutually embroiled, touching at each others’ edges in ways that are not mere registrations of an encounter but that incorporate the encounter and modify it in ways that are variously synchronized and re-synchronized.

Take my experience of the Woman’s March in New York City in January, 2017 – when I found myself profoundly moved to be part of an enormous mass of people who were experiencing, together, a common revulsion at the election of Donald Trump. It was not that everyone in this mass of marchers was experiencing exactly the same emotion; instead, it was a situation in which an emotion roughly characterizable
as “chagrin-plus-anger” was being shared out, however diversely it was experienced by individual marchers. Such sharing-out occurred at the edges and through the edges of the marchers – not just because they were walking shoulder-to-shoulder en masse (this was a material condition of the experience) but because their emotional experiences became deeply confluent. This was especially evident in the case of the phenomenon of the swelling non-articulate outcries that were passed on by the crowd: coming from behind, moving through the part of the marchers where one was situated, and then passing on to those in front. At each stage, these outcries (close to collective howls) were conveyed by the edges of the acoustic masses that moved through the entire crowd with a rhythm and a wave pattern of their own. The result was that one complex but coherent emotion emerged from a heterogeneous conflux of intersecting emotional intensities that were communicating at their acoustic edges, both those that were near and those farther away. All this was situated in an extraordinary interplay of near and far spaces for which no precise spatial metric could be given. (how far back did a given howl originate? This was not possible to determine exactly.) The marchers felt themselves to be immersed in a densely qualitative matrix of emotional intersectionalities that put on dramatic display.
what Theresa Brennan has analyzed under the heading of “the transmission of affect.”

III

In addition to such transmissive situations that involve whole groups of people, there are peripheral emotions one undergoes on one’s own: for example, a pleasant state of mind as experienced in the lilt of a day in which most things have gone right. We feel uplifted, alleviated emotionally even though we can’t trace this to a single cause. This is not a matter of a pointedly affirmative emotion such as joy – which for Spinoza is the emblematic example of a positive affect (one that increases our “force of existing” in and by itself). Rather, the pleasure seems to descend upon us, like a nimbus coming from we know not where.

There is nothing dramatic, much less melodramatic, in this kind of circumstance. Just for this reason, we rarely thematize it. Indeed, we often lack a distinctive name for such a circumstance, and for this

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reason it, and a host of other such non-dramatic passing emotions, have been neglected in many previous discussions of emotion – as if not worth our concerted attention. Yet they call for scrutiny as showing us a dimension of our emotional life that is rarely explored as such: that of emotions at and as the edge, what I am here calling “peripheral emotions.” Such emotions are “edgy” – by which I do not mean such as to put us on edge: to make us uneasy, nervous, distractable. Rather, being at the edge of an emotion is a distinctive manner in which our emotional life is lived at the periphery of our fully engaged experiences. Such emotional edgefulness is literally ec-static, something that takes us out of ourselves -- out of our habitual self-repeating selves. They also take somewhere else than where deeply felt emotions seem to come from. For they come not from within us but from without, and as such they transport us outside our habitual ways of being in the world. How can we understand better this emotional elsewhere, this outer edge of our affective lives where certain emotions appear to consist almost entirely in their very peripherality?

IV
An important caveat: just because emotions, gentle and strong, are often conveyed to us through their edges, and reach us through our own sensory edges, does not mean that they are superficial phenomena. “Peripheral” does not signify trivial or inconsequential. Just as Cézanne brought Mt. St. Victoire to our collective attention by an adroit interplay between the colors and edges of this mountain – showing its majesty in paintings that can be considered masterful edgeworks (including the treatment of the edges of the presented image) -- so the edges of emotions, like bodily gestures, often contain in compressed form a sense and a force of emotion not otherwise accessible. Far from being merely indicative signs of experience and meaning extrinsic to the experience, the edges of emotions are intrinsically telling: they tell us things we might not otherwise know, and they tell it on their own surface and in their own terms. The alarm in the voice of my Santa Barbara friend was situated all in its edge – in the expressive configurations of her words as she talked to me with such urgency. She didn’t have to say to me explicitly “this is a dire situation”: this message was evident in the emotional edges of the words she spoke and in the pauses between them. It was located in the tonality of her speech – what I heard in her words -- that the extent of her alarm became evident. We are reminded
here of Wittgenstein’s axiom that in matters of language “the depths are often on the surface.”

If St. Augustine could speak of the “innumerable dens and caverns of memory,” we can say of peripheral emotions something like the reverse: these emotions are found in the openings and at the surfaces of felt meaning. This meaning, whatever its origins and history, is brought to a mode of manifestation set forth by edges: the edges we hear, the edges we see, and the edges we imagine -- all of these, all at once, in a dense but coherent amalgam of emotionality. Looked at this way, emotions, far from being “messy” as we are tempted to say, come to us with a precision all their own. I maintain that this precision – implicit as it often is – is due largely to their edge-structure. For it is in their edges that emotions come to their fullest expressive being.

At the same time, emotional edges – as with edges of many other kinds – are capable of taking us beyond themselves. They invite their own transcending, taking us to places unknown and unanticipated. Listening to my friend on the phone, I actively imagined what it would be like to be buried in a sudden mud slide – how to cope with it if it

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were to enter my house, driving me onto the roof. Edges, including emotional edges, have an *other side* to which we can gain access by an active emotional imagination. We can enter thereby into entire emotional edge-worlds that are *somewhere else* than in the immediate affective present. In this way the “fixities and definites” of customary emotional life are at least momentarily transcended, and we are *shown elsewhere*.

Sartre considered emotions as efforts to transform “magically” certain alarming or frustrating circumstances. But he missed the specific means by which this happens: the edges by which we both grasp the immediate emotional import and through which we can enter into worlds not otherwise accessible. These worlds are sometimes imaginary and so purely possible, but sometimes they are perfectly real. But we could not get to either kind of world except through the edges of the emotions we experience.

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Not only do emotions have distinctive edges but the fact that this is so suggests that emotions themselves need to be understood differently. Emotions are not only subjective states, mere passing episodes – in short, something merely transitory and trivial, mercurial and passing. (Much less are they the opposite: fixed and predictable as if they were tokens of types.) More importantly, they are not exclusively my possession. Instead, they are the kind of thing that flourishes in a third space that is neither strictly subjective – as belonging to an “inner self” -- nor transindividual: as with a disembodied spiritual self that is reputed to rise above raw emotion. Emotions occupy an intermediate space: an in-betweenness (bayniyya) in Ibn Arabi’s word. In that space, they are neither wholly stable nor are they entirely in flux. Instead, they are events with edges: where edges give the requisite determinacy for an emotion to be expressed and recognized as such, to be nameable (however imperfectly), and to have sequelae in the life of the subject. These same edges are the means by which we get in touch with our emotions, and through which these same emotions show themselves to ourselves and to others.

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