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**Mar Cabezas, Carlos Pitillas**

**ANNALS of the University of Bucharest  
Philosophy Series**

Vol. LXIX, no. 1, 2020  
pp. 27 – 48.

**ANALELE  
UNIVERSITATII  
BUCURESTII**

# EMOTIONAL EMPTINESS AND CHILD NEGLECT: THE IMPACT OF CHRONIC FEELINGS OF EMPTINESS IN HUMAN CAPABILITIES

MAR CABEZAS<sup>1</sup>, CARLOS PITILLAS<sup>2</sup>

## *Abstract*

The present contribution aims to provide an analysis of the under-studied emotional state of emptiness. In order to do this, we firstly provide a description of the spectrum of emotional states of emptiness, their associated cognitions, antecedents and effects. Secondly, we focus on the cases where this state is chronified. By doing so, we aim to show the connection of chronic states of emptiness with neglect during childhood. Finally, we assume the Capability Approach developed by Martha Nussbaum as a normative framework that enables us to evaluate prolonged states of emotional emptiness and their effects upon the development of basic capabilities and the self as a potential instance of injustice.

*Keywords:* emotional states, self, depersonalization, Nussbaum, capabilities.

## **1. The invisibility of emotional emptiness**

The study of emotions and feelings, their mechanisms, bases and nature, as well as their role in human decision making, has made new progress as a result of the interest aroused in recent decades, both in the field of moral psychology and philosophy (see Sinnott-Armstrong 2008). Such is the case of researchers such as A. Damasio (1994), J. LeDoux (1998), J. N. Frijda (1994), R. Solomon (2003), or J. Prinz (2004), to name just a few.

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<sup>1</sup> Complutense University of Madrid. Email: <mcabez10@ucm.es>

<sup>2</sup> Complutense University of Madrid. Email: <cpitillas@comillas.edu>

Likewise, the emergence of the Capabilities Approach by M. Nussbaum and A. Sen (1993) has been especially relevant over the last decades in terms of theory of human flourishing and wellbeing. In fact, the presence of the affective dimension as one of the main basic human capabilities has contributed to the inclusion of emotions as a key object of study from a philosophical perspective, not only from a phenomenological or analytic perspective, but also from a normative point of view.

In this article, we aim to follow this background and explore the nature and relevance of an emotional state habitually misrepresented, namely: emptiness. Although “of all creatures on this earth, humans are the most emotional” (Lazarus and Lazarus 1994, 3), emptiness is a much under-studied emotional state, which calls for specific theoretical frameworks that could shed some light on its nature, phenomenology and impact on someone’s life.

As a preliminary delimitation, we would like to clarify that we will define emptiness as an emotional state. Despite the fact that, as Reber stated, the term emotion “has proven utterly refractory to definitional efforts” (1985, 234), and with it the rest of affective terms, we assume that emptiness can be analysed and characterised as an emotional state as opposed to primary and secondary emotions, on the one hand, and emotional attitudes such as hostility or love, on the other hand, as we will develop in the following section.

Likewise, we will neither delve into the open debates on the social construction of emotions versus the biologist approaches, nor will we address the conflicts between cognitive, sensitive and perceptual theories of emotions, as this would take us away from our main aim, namely, the exploration of the nature of emptiness and its role in achieving a sufficient threshold in terms of well-being. On the contrary, we will intertwine cognitive, physiological and bodily perceptive aspects of emptiness, but will not assume one unique approach on emotions.

Lastly, for the purpose of the present article, we will accept the main general thesis from the capability approach, as we assume that the study of emotional emptiness could be enriched in the light of this normative framework. Although this theory has its critics and different versions can be found within it, further debates between normative approaches would exceed the scope of this article. We will instead adopt

this approach as a proper background to some of our claims on the key role of emptiness in human flourishing and the construction of the self.

In order to do so, we aim to delve into the nature of emotional emptiness in order to improve the understanding of this affective state, combining both philosophical and psychological resources with a special focus on the relation between this emotional state and emotional neglect during childhood. Thus, we will explore the consequences of a chronified state of emptiness upon personal identity and the development of basic capabilities. The emotional state of emptiness or, also known as depersonalization in the psychological literature, when chronified, as we will show, jeopardizes some basic normative requirements regarding what a person should be provided with in order to properly develop. In our view, understanding this connection by establishing a bridge between philosophy and psychology could shed some light on the nature of emptiness and its role in the development of basic human capabilities. As Prinz affirms, we hope that “asking how one thing relates to another can lead to discoveries that we would not make if the question had not been asked” (2004, 41).

That being said, the reason why emotional emptiness has received less attention, compared to other emotional and affective states, may be complex. However, we would like to start by suggesting some possible hypotheses that could explain the persistence of this oversight.

Firstly, emotional emptiness is hard to categorize due to its very nature. Whilst other emotional states can be categorized and divided as positive and negative in terms of valence, emptiness is harder to capture, being especially elusive similarly to what could also be said regarding surprise. Nevertheless, whilst surprise entails a clear and recognizable expression and reaction, emotional emptiness is less tangible at first sight, for it is connected to numbness. As a result, the metacognition of this emotional state is reduced with respect to classic emotions where it is easy to recognise what one is feeling, how and why. As a result, there are fewer internal movements to symbolize, communicate, and rebalance this emotional state.

One might think that emotional emptiness entails a negative emotional valence. However, this evaluation would refer to a second stage of reflection. In this sense, the possible negative experience linked

to emotional emptiness would be the result of a cognitive/narrative process about the absence of affective reaction ('I am not able to feel anything'). Emotional emptiness is neither negative or positive before a self-evaluation process takes place and characterizes what is happening (that is, the absence of a categorical emotional response). Thus, the negative emotional valence would be the result of the moment of awareness regarding those feelings of emptiness, rather than the emotional valence of emptiness *per se*. As such, not every subject would necessarily do this emotional meta-processing, which requires second-order mental responses (the subject giving meaning to her first response).

Secondly, it is important to highlight at this point, even though this will be developed in the following sections, that emptiness is an emotional state closely related to early emotional neglect, which, in turn, is one of the most invisible and sometimes even normalized forms of child mistreatment. As Gibson (2016) well reports, the loneliness of feeling ignored is just as painful as a physical injury, although it may not be visible. Thus, one of the clear antecedents of emotional emptiness is related to being to some degree ignored at an emotional level during childhood, which many times goes unnoticed. As a result, it seems sensible to state that emotional emptiness may suffer a double bias as an object of study. Firstly, during the first period of its manifestation, childhood, emotional emptiness is likely to be affected by the age bias, also called 'childism'. This term refers to the discrimination and prejudices faced by children in modern societies (Young-Bruehl 2012) consisting in ignoring their voices and needs for the sake of adulthood. Thus, that subtle discomfort goes unnoticed, and is minimized or even positively reinforced (the child seems to be very mature, quiet, respectful, and is praised consequently) so that what could have been interpreted as early alarms of emptiness and neglect becomes virtues in the eyes of society and their closer circle. Secondly, on its part, if emptiness becomes a usual affective state for the adult, then the emotional bias prevents this affective state to be visualized as required. The emotional dimension, and along with it, mental and emotional well-being, is still socially perceived as less relevant than our cognitive dimension and physical health, respectively (Prokhovnik 1999; Cabezas 2016). As a result, it is not surprising that emotional emptiness ends up

being at the core of the cases of epistemic injustice<sup>3</sup>, which tend to occur when the person is not provided with the right hermeneutical tools to make sense of her own experience. In other words, the two mentioned biases increase the difficulty to recognise cases of emotional emptiness and, in turn, can help generate double victimizations, working so as risk factor for instances of epistemic injustice. In fact, these two biases, the age bias and the emotional bias, could be interpreted in relation to epistemic injustice, so that the age bias could lead to testimonial injustice during childhood, and the emotional bias to hermeneutical injustice once emptiness has settled as a persistent emotional state during adulthood, both affecting the visibility of emotional emptiness. In sum, emotional emptiness rarely receives the required attention, firstly because during childhood, the child's petitions, voice, and feelings are in the hands of their caregivers' skill to interpret them properly; and afterwards, during adulthood, once the agent is socially relevant and prioritized, because the emotional dimension is often overshadowed. Emotional emptiness might end up being confused or eclipsed by other states such as apathy, indifference or depression. However, this emotional state, as we will argue in the following section, possesses its own set of antecedents, associated cognitions, and phenomenology.

## 2. Emptiness as an emotional state

Some people, sometimes, do not feel anything in the face of emotionally relevant situations. There is a subjective experience of feeling empty, the experience of an absence of emotional reaction. We all are subject to this emotional state. It may take place during our daily interactions with the world, and induce a sense of dissonance between what we would expect

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<sup>3</sup> Following M. Fricker's definition, an epistemic injustice is "a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower" (2007, 12), questioning so the speaker's credibility in the first version (testimonial injustice) and her ability to know what is relevant and what is not in the second version (hermeneutical injustice), which occurs when a gap in collective interpretive resources leaves someone at a disadvantaged position in order to make sense of her own experiences.

to feel and the actual failure to have such expected emotional response. This takes place, for example, when one would normally feel sad about breaking up with someone loved but, surprisingly, does not feel such sadness. It may also become present in situations when one would be expected to feel excited by positive events on one's life (*e.g.*, one's birthday, a promotion at work, a tender gesture from someone close) but fails to have such reaction. States of emotional emptiness consist of "a felt awareness of the absence of emotional disruption" (Roberts 2018, 2), and bring significant information along two directions of experience: the self's failure to be moved by events, and the world's (or the event's) failure to move the self. In this sense, it may bring up important existential questions regarding one's stance towards the world and social relationships and/or the worldly events' salience or significance.

In this section, we aim to delve into the cognitive, narrative and phenomenological aspects of emptiness, as well as to provide an account of the spectrum of states that could be included under this category.

Emptiness can be defined as an emotional state or a background feeling of longer duration than the occurrence of primary emotions. As such, it filters the emotionally relevant stimuli presented to the subject once this state has appeared (Isen 2002; Frijda, Meanstead, and Bem 2000). As a consequence, emotional emptiness would not be intentional, that is, it would not be oriented to a specific object as it occurs regarding emotions. It would rather constantly modulate our perception of the external world and ourselves (Frijda 1994; Damasio 1994). Likewise, emptiness as an emotional state would entail a cognitive component and a level of awareness more pervading than basic emotions do. Also, emotional states imply less intensity compared to primary emotions.

States of emotional emptiness can be said to take place along a continuum of intensity and pervasiveness (Sierra 2009). These states can range from short-lived episodes of emotional numbness or the absence of emotional response towards specific aspects of one's experience at one pole of the spectrum, and a permanent sense of dullness that can take place in face of a wide variety of situations, at the opposite pole. In its most pervasive and severe forms, emotional emptiness has been explored and described as characteristic of some forms of psychopathology (*e.g.*, depersonalization disorder; borderline personality disorder) as well

as a central aspect of posttraumatic stress reactions, as we will develop in the following section.

Emotional emptiness may be accompanied by the sense of being unable to feel one's own body state and bodily-based reactions to events (Sedeño *et al.* 2014; Tanaka, 2018), on the one hand, and our 'normal' affective responses towards relevant social situations (such as rage, interest, attraction, sadness or anxiety), on the other. In this sense, states of emotional emptiness tend to provoke correlated feelings of self-disconnection (insofar as there is an absence of felt connection to one's body) as well as social disconnection (insofar as one seems to be emotionally out of touch with what happens within significant interactions with others). The chronification of emptiness, along with its bodily and social correlates, may set the ground for a stable sense of nonexistence or social invisibility, which makes this state especially relevant also in terms of justice. The subject may feel pervasively empty, out of touch with reality, she may have doubts about 'being there' and, in a parallel fashion, may feel socially disengaged and invisible.

These feelings of social invisibility take form at a very basic level, which is different from what happens with the more regular feelings of functional invisibility that all of us experience when playing social roles which require our social presence to be in the background, *e.g.*, someone who works as a waiter is, and should be, functionally invisible to customers (Taipale 2016).

Emotional emptiness is not the simple absence of emotion, such as when we are not paying attention to something significant that is taking place and, therefore, we do not react ('I wasn't aware that my parents were having fights, so I never was worried'). Emotional emptiness is an emotional state, a background feeling with its particular quality and structure (Roberts 2018), subjectively contoured as an actual experience that consists of a failure to react in an expected fashion ('My parents were fighting all the time. I saw it, but couldn't feel anything about it'). For these reasons, emotional emptiness may be felt by the person as a very relevant emotional state, something that may stimulate the elaboration of self-narratives ('What kind of person am I, if I cannot feel happy when I am with the people I care about?'), that may provoke uncomfortable feelings of social isolation, surprise, guilt, and even

despair ('I cannot get rid of this feeling of emptiness'), and that may be felt as threatening to one's survival or social wellbeing ('Everything feels void of importance, so how can I know what I like or what I need? How can I make decisions in life?'). Moreover, in addition to the biases previously mentioned with regard to emptiness as an under-studied state, emotional emptiness is not easily identified out of two complementary reasons. On the one hand, it may be hard to detect by external observers. On the other hand, it may be rapidly overshadowed by the aforementioned feelings of guilt and loneliness, something that would make it hard to detect by the subject. As Gibson (2016) also portrays, in line with Roberts, emotional emptiness sometimes appears in the form of a question ('Why do I feel so miserable when I have everything?'), especially when the subject is not able to name it as such emptiness. As Roberts puts it, "emotional absences can bear psychological, epistemic and behavioural significance for the subject in many of the ways that ordinary emotions can" (2018, 9).

In psychotherapy, some patients complain about their inability to respond emotionally, to be moved, to feel anything inside, and the consequential feelings of nonexistence, which is often paralleled by feelings of boredom, lifelessness, or loss of energy in the clinician (Music 2009). For these reasons, active strategies of regulation or transformation of this emotional state may be put in motion by the subject, something that has been often reported in the clinical literature regarding chronic feelings of emptiness. By way of example, a significant proportion of borderline personality disorder patients use self-injuries or risky behaviours as attempts at self-reanimation (Swanell *et al.* 2012).

In the psychological literature, emotional states of emptiness or numbness have primarily been studied under the term 'depersonalization', given the relation between emotional emptiness and the construction of the self. This term denotes a state in which the sense of self and the quality of first-person experience is altered, such that the person feels alienated from themselves (depersonalization) and their surroundings (derealization) (Medford 2012), which would explain its associations with feelings of loneliness.

People who undergo emotional emptiness or depersonalization episodes, use metaphors such as being 'cut-off' from the world and from

oneself, being 'inside a bubble', feeling 'as if in a dream', or witnessing one's experience 'from behind a pane of glass', for example. As already stated, depersonalization or emotional emptiness can be a phenomenon of non-clinical nature, which may take place in ordinary situations, but it may also evolve towards levels of intensity and pervasiveness that provoke great suffering and functional impairment. Brief episodes of mild depersonalization are common in up to 70% of the general population (Sierra 2009), especially when under stressful situations or fatigue. For example, it takes place during the first minutes (or hours) after waking up, when we feel like in a fuzzy state, devoid of acute emotional reactions, going through the motions (taking a shower, having breakfast, even engaging in conversation with others) like automatons. It may also be present after long, stressful working days. It can show higher levels of intensity after a recent loss, an accident, or any event of high emotional impact. The narratives surrounding depersonalization or emotional emptiness in these situations tend to focus on the sense of 'feeling as if it had not actually happened', 'seeing it happen from outside', 'knowing it has happened, but feeling empty nonetheless'. In this sense, even though the term 'depersonalization' may sound clinical or bound to forms of psychopathology, it actually designates the whole spectrum of states of emotional emptiness, which can range from low to high levels of pervasiveness. When such levels of pervasiveness are close to the high end of the spectrum, we speak about 'clinical' depersonalization.

Within the manifestations that are closest to pathology, depersonalization may involve a persistent diminution or loss of emotional reactivity (*de-affectualization*), experiences of being outside one's body (*desomatization*), or a sense of being mentally empty (*deideation*), among others. The co-occurrence and crystallization of these experiences as a syndrome has been linked to severe early emotional trauma (Laoide, Egan, and Osborn 2018; Simeon *et al.* 2001; 2003), and it can be considered as 'a disorder of presence' (Dewe, Watson, and Braithwaite 2016), as we will explain in the next section.

Emotional emptiness is therefore the core of the phenomenon of depersonalization from most accounts in the subclinical as well as the clinical range. This seems to be supported by neuroimaging evidence that consistently shows reduced neural responses in brain regions

involved in emotion processing (i.e., the insula), accompanied by hyperactivation of regions involved in the inhibition of emotional responses (the ventrolateral prefrontal cortex), among subjects undergoing depersonalization (Medford 2012; Medford *et al.* 2016; Sierra and Berrios 1998; Phillips *et al.* 2000).

On a phenomenological dimension, these subjects can recognize the emotional relevance of situations presented to them, but fail to experience an emotional response. At the same time, they experience an increase in cognitive reflection regarding the absence of an emotional response, something that may take the form of self-centred rumination or compulsive self-scrutiny ('Why cannot I feel anything?').

Thus, subjects affected by consistent states of emptiness find themselves in an emotional paradox: they fail to be emotionally moved by events and interactions and, at the same time, they *suffer* intensely from this absence of emotional reactivity. A patient reported this paradox acutely: "I can feel numb of feelings, almost empty inside. I hate the fact that I can't feel things as I used to" (Sierra 2009, 27).

This is consistent with our contention that emotional emptiness is not the mere absence of a reaction, but an emotional state *per se*, which can become an object of reflection, have subjective significance, and be subject to attempts at modification.

### **3. Chronic emotional emptiness and the neglected self**

In this section, we aim to focus on the most relevant antecedents of chronic emptiness in order to better understand the impact of this emotional state on the construction of the self. As has been stated, the most severe manifestations of emotional emptiness, as studied in the depersonalization literature, seem to be related to cumulative trauma during childhood. Specifically, early emotional neglect seems to play an important role in the development of clinical depersonalization (Laoide, Egan, and Osborn 2018; Simeon *et al.* 2001; 2003), which, as previously argued, constitutes one of the main manifestations of chronic emotional emptiness as studied by psychology.

Emotional states of emptiness take place along a gradient of intensity and pervasiveness. The higher grades of this state (referred within clinical psychology as ‘clinical depersonalization’ or ‘depersonalization disorder’) seem to be related to histories of early emotional neglect. In turn, early neglect promotes the chronification of states of emptiness, as we will argue, something that can compromise the development of a sense of self.

Emotional neglect entails the caregiver’s failure to attend to, respond to and/or emotionally support the child: the caregivers are “emotionally distant and unresponsive to the child’s bids for comfort and help” (Shaffer, Yates, and Egeland 2009, 38). This may vary in scope, from a generalized absence of emotional availability to neglect that is associated to discriminate contexts or interactions (Music 2009).

Emotional neglect may come about through different paths, such as parental bereavement or depression; parental narcissism; addicted parents; achievement-centred parents; etc. Differently from types of traumatization that mainly impact upon the body, emotional neglect may function as a microtraumatic experience: it may happen insidiously, outside of the reach of language, relatively inaccessible to conscious processing and, hence, to the deployment of adaptive coping mechanisms (Craştropol 2015). The child’s experience has been described in a variety of forms, such as feeling ‘unwelcome’ (Ferenzci 1929) or ‘disregarded’ (Willock 1986) and, as a result, *empty*. Paradoxically, it may be common that, although the child receives many material attentions, her emotional needs are ignored, which makes it difficult to recognize this type of neglect, both for the victim and for caregivers and their social network. A child can, therefore, be severely emotionally neglected even if her material, physical, and educational needs are widely covered, which links emotional emptiness to instances of epistemic injustice as previously mentioned.

Several authors have suggested that states of emotional emptiness may function as forms of adaptation in face of early emotional neglect (O’Hagan 1993; Shaffer, Yates, and Egeland 2009; Norman *et al.* 2012; Doyle 2014; Gibson 2016). For example, studies on the effects of maternal depression have shown that, in the face of the depressed mother’s ‘still face’ (*i.e.* a face devoid of emotional expression) the infant

goes into a response that starts with protest and attempts at recovering mother's emotional presence, continues with affective and behavioral disorganization, and ends with the child entering a dissociative, emotionally unresponsive state (Adamson & Frick 2003). This is a state that protects the infant from the overwhelming pain and terror of being in a situation of emotional neglect. However, as this type of situations gets repeated and becomes predictable, the state may develop into a trait (Perry *et al.* 1995): the child will use emotional numbness as a preferred state in face of diverse interpersonal situations. Thus, emotional emptiness may start as a response to relational trauma and become an integral part of the person's coping style. Previously and in a similar vein, Green developed this idea under the concept of the 'dead mother complex'. According to Green, when the mother's<sup>4</sup> expressions and availability are undermined by loss or intense sadness, the child experiences a loss in the presence of the object: the mother is no longer there, despite her physical presence. Mother's face has become expressionless; it functions as a 'negative mirror' (Lemma 2009). For the child, this poses an almost unsolvable emotional problem. The child's attempts to reanimate or recover their mother fails systematically so that, eventually, the child will identify with the dead mother, entering a state of emotional emptiness and numbness herself (Green 1986). According to this author, identification with the empty, absent mother not only affords a reduction of emotional pain, but also helps the child feel closer, more connected to the lost mother ('by being alike, we are together'). Contemporary authors such as Stern (1995) have contributed further knowledge about the psychological sequence of the child's responses to emotional neglect, concretely in the form of parental depression. In Stern's case, the endpoint of the sequence is also a

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<sup>4</sup> In the time when Green developed his thesis, evidence about the significance of fathers or other adults as primary attachment figures was scarce, and the psychological literature concerning early development was centred on the role of mothers. This is probably the reason why Green spoke of this phenomenon as involving the mother exclusively. We believe that his description of a loss in the presence of the object may be well applied to interactions with any caregiving adult who suffers from depression or other forms of psychological absence (*e.g.*, dissociative states).

reorganization of the child's experience that may easily manifest as an imitation of the mother's emptiness:

"Along with these invariants coming from mother, there are the resonant invariants evoked in the infant: the flight of his animation, a deflation of his posture, a fall in positive affect and facial expressivity, a decrease in activation, and so on (1995, 100)."

It is noteworthy to mention how the elements of this description fit closely with our exploration of the states of emotional emptiness: emotional deactivation, absence of affective expression, a sense of emptiness ('a flight of his animation'). Stern goes on to describe other forms of reorganization that may take place in face of an emotionally unresponsive parent: the child's attempts at reanimating mother; the child's isolated play with the mother as background; and the child's sense of emotional falsehood within interactions. All of these have something in common: the child renounces to the experience and spontaneous expression of her subjective states, and becomes 'someone else'. Under conditions of neglect, the child's adaptations involve a progressive disconnection from her own affective reactions (i.e., surprise, rage, fear, desperation), that is to say, the stabilization of emptiness as a regular emotional state, and the progressive deployment of relational strategies that ensure a (albeit unsatisfactory) sense of connection.

In a similar vein, Winnicott (1965) had previously explored the idea of a 'false self' that develops among children who are exposed to parental impingements to their psychological cohesion. The 'false self' serves protective functions: it preserves the 'real self' from annihilation by parents who are perceived as rejecting, and it serves attachment functions. It enables a sense of connection to caregivers who show less than optimal responsiveness towards the child (Daehnert 1998). Crittenden (2017) has also shown that, in the face of expectable rejection or neglect, children may suspend the sensitivity towards their own emotional states. This shows a clear connection to the chronification of the emotional state of emptiness. The child would acquire self-organizing principles based on the defensive sequestering of certain (or all) of her subjective states, to ensure some kind of connection to others (Storolow

and Atwood 1992). This line of thought seems to be supported by social research that shows that humans may respond with emotional numbness to social rejection (Baumeister, DeWall, and Vohs 2009). Terms such as “normotic” (Bollas 1987, as cited in Music 2009) and “normopaths” (McDougall 1986 as cited in Music 2009) have been used to describe adults who seem emotionally empty, tend to ‘go through the motions’ of interpersonal life, and seem psychologically ‘unborn’. These individuals may have been raised “in families where their ‘real selves’ were not mirrored or facilitated, with parents not alive to their children’s inner reality” (Music 2009, 143).

#### **4. Chronic emotional emptiness and basic capabilities**

We have so far explored the nature, phenomenology, antecedents and potential effects of emotional emptiness. We have also established a connection between emotional emptiness and early trauma. Given this connection, the emotional state of emptiness, when perpetuated, even though it can realize a protective function in the short-term, can also hijack human basic capacities, affecting the integral development of personal identity in the long-term, which becomes clear when emptiness is described as a phenomenon of clinical depersonalization.

Needless to say, in terms also of ethical demands, emotional emptiness stemming from the experience of emotional neglect during childhood may lead to a painful emotional loneliness which, in the long-term, can negatively affect the decisions we make regarding ourselves and our relationships, since emptiness may affect the construction of identity and our ability to regulate ourselves, and trust and interact with others.

At this point, the goal of this section is to suggest how the elucidation on the long-term effects of emotional emptiness can be enriched in the light of the Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum 2011). In order to do so, we will explore the capabilities of ‘emotions’, ‘practical reason’, and ‘affiliation’, following Nussbaum’s list, and their connections to the construction of the self, which may be jeopardized when the emotional state of emptiness is maintained in time.

The Capabilities Approach can be interpreted as a particularly functional normative framework. Concretely, Nussbaum's contribution provides content to the discourse on rights focusing on how "social context sets the conditions for individual freedoms" (Unterhalter *et al.* 2007, 13) and so it can become a key tool to identify subtle handicaps in human flourishing.

From this approach, capabilities are freedoms of a person to do or be something that is of her value. They entail two interwoven elements. The first one would be the idea of opportunity and the second one would be related to capacity or skill. These two elements, when combined, would generate the notion of capability. In a normative sense, human beings need to be provided with opportunities and abilities in order to conduct the life that is worth living for each of them.

This theory also distinguishes between capabilities, as previously described, and functionings, namely the realized capabilities, that is, the actual states of doing or being. Likewise, a third element is taken into account: the conversion factors, which would refer to the means that are necessary to gain a certain capability and transform it into a functioning.

Emotional states can therefore be understood as internal conversion factors, becoming relevant in terms of justice, although they may often be overshadowed by material external conversion factors<sup>5</sup> in normative discourses on what a human being deserves in order to sufficiently develop. Emotional emptiness, given its narratives directly affecting the image and construction of the self, especially when it becomes persistent, can clearly jeopardize some basic capabilities distinguished by Nussbaum (2011), such as 'emotions', 'practical reason', and 'affiliation' and, as a result, can also truncate the ability to transform other capabilities in functionings, since the ten core capabilities described by Nussbaum are highly interconnected.

In fact, the Capabilities Approach demands that human beings be provided with the necessary means and skills to freely live the life they consider worth living; human beings should therefore be able to choose

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<sup>5</sup> This oversight would be clearly related to the emotional bias mentioned in the first section.

what they want to achieve in their lives. The Capabilities Approach can consequently be interpreted as a normative framework in which to theorize on the repercussions concerning the effects of emotional emptiness.

Given the fact that the Capabilities Approach focuses on what a person "is actually able to do and to be" (Nussbaum 2000, 5), we believe that, by analysing the effects of persistent emotional emptiness, we can ascertain its devastating consequences for the self, and its role in perpetuating long-term subtle psychological deprivations. In this sense, it is key for both, children's wellbeing and wellbecoming.

Firstly, Nussbaum describes the general (almost umbrella) capability of 'emotions' as:

"Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development)." (2011, 141)

Emotional emptiness, when it takes place chronically or pervades several areas of the person's emotional life, compromises this capability, as it imposes a handicap in the possibility of building attachments to others and in general to the person's emotional development. If this capability is crucial to the development of the self, then it is sensible to highlight that emotional emptiness can in some cases lead to the perpetuation of instances of subtle injustice toward the person who suffers from this.

Hence, if these capabilities should be granted in terms of justice to a minimum sufficient threshold, then it is important to notice how emotional emptiness is not a value neutral emotional state, but a state that can serve as an alarm to identify subtle cases of neglect even when other material needs are met. Music (2009) argues that neglected children tend to have a diminished affective and social life. He argues that these children present with

“(...) a lack of awareness of minds and mental states, a lack of stories and imagination, a deficit in emotional expression and language, a lack of a sense of agency, and maybe more than anything, a lack of much capacity for ordinary enjoyment.” (153)

This is something that puts them in danger of suffering a kind of ‘second-order’ neglect: being oblivious to their own internal states, they tend to not to express needs in social contexts, and therefore go socially unnoticed. In this fashion, neglect tends to perpetuate itself subtly. Moreover, emotional emptiness during childhood can jeopardize a variety of capabilities at the same time. Needless to say, the lack of imagination mentioned by Music conforms the fourth basic human capability according to Nussbaum in terms of “being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one’s own choice” and “being able to have pleasurable experiences” (Nussbaum 2011, 41), which is widely lost in a prolonged state of emptiness.

Secondly, the capability of ‘practical reason’ would refer to “being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life” (2011, 141). However, if the ‘real self’ is eclipsed and the feelings of emptiness as well as the disconnection to oneself are chronified, practical reasoning as described would not become achievable in a fulfilling way. Moreover, it can be argued that the emotional dimension works as some sort of inner compass<sup>6</sup> in the process of moral reasoning, by helping subjects discriminate situations, anticipate results, or participate in the other’s subjective experience, among others. Neuroscientific research seems to show that rational decision-making processes are based upon the brain’s continuous assessment of somato-affective states (Damasio 1994). Therefore, it could be said that individuals who have lost contact with a diverse range of

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<sup>6</sup> By this we do not mean that emotions should be taken as normative criteria (‘you should do what your emotions tell you to do’). Rather, we mean that emotions can work as alarms to detect moral relevant situations as well as we suggest that the moral dimension, as a result of our social nature, cannot be understood without the emotional element in evolutionary terms, in line with Damasio’s thesis (2003).

emotional reactions, and whose main affective response is emptiness, have lost an essential inner device of practical reasoning and moral orientation, probably resulting in self-harm and/or neglect rather than harm toward others, but equally morally relevant. As a result, emotional emptiness would truncate moral agency in a full sense.

Thirdly, Nussbaum describes the capability of 'affiliation' as:

"A. Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (...)

B. Having the social bases of self-respect and nonhumiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others." (2011, 141-42)

In relation to the capability of affiliation, Nussbaum has defended that "fully human functioning requires affiliation and reciprocity with others" (2000, 244). Again, this is deeply truncated when a state of emptiness is maintained in time, given its effects mentioned in the previous section. If a person is not able to be concerned with the emotional and social aspects of her reality, then the capability of affiliation becomes impossible to realize.

To put it in a different way, positive self-relationships are required to accomplish the self-respect at the core of the capability of affiliation. However, states of emptiness and numbness attack this possibility directly. This, in turn, jeopardizes the likelihood of becoming an independent adult with sense of worthiness (Honneth 2004), able to conduct her life, on the one hand, and the capability of creating quality affective bonds with the others, on the other hand. In other words, if the self is diminished through prolonged states of emptiness, the achievement of positive self-relationships (self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem) seems impossible and, in turn, without these, the development of an undistorted self who is able to make key decisions for herself, and choose what is worthy for her life, becomes highly improbable.

#### 4. Conclusion

If a welfare society aims to provide its citizens with a sufficient equal level of functionings and capabilities (Nussbaum 2006), then such a society should be concerned with the subtle instances of injustice that at first sight may not seem severe but that in long-term imply a sometimes invisible and 'corrosive disadvantage' (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007), as it is the case with chronic emotional emptiness.

Thus, we have shown its relation to child emotional neglect and its avoidable and unfair long-lasting negative effects through the normative framework of the Capability Approach.

By doing so we hope, not only to have provided an in-depth look at the emotional phenomenon of emptiness, but also to have enriched the normative debate on what a human being needs to be provided with in order to accomplish a sufficient level of agency.

Building upon the reviewed psychological literature, and with the Capability Approach as background, we would like to conclude, first, that a deep study of neglected emotional states may shed some light not only on the study of emotions, but on other fields, such as practical philosophy, offering new paths to identify instances of subtle injustice. Second, that human beings, in light of the negative effects described throughout this article, should actively be offered as many tools as possible to prevent, alleviate, and overcome the corrosive effects of recurring emotional states as well as to identify and interpret those states in their non-severe form, as a way to gain agency and self awareness.

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