



The interoceptive underpinnings of the feeling of being alive. Damasio's insights at work

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Abstract

The feeling of being alive still constitutes a major blind spot of contemporary affective sciences research. The mainstream view accepts it as an ‘umbrella notion’ comprising different states, such as M. Ratcliffe’s «feelings of being», T. Fuchs’s «feeling of being alive», E.M. Engelen’s «*Gefühl des Lebendigseins*», etc. In contrast, I argue for an account of the feeling of being alive as a unique feeling that can be described in several ways. Empirical support for this view comes mainly from Carvalho and Damasio’s hypothesis of the distinctiveness of the interoceptive system as the physiological underpinning of this feeling. This account is also in line with many other approaches recognizing the role of interoception proper in mind and subjectivity grounding, collected by Tsakiris and De Prester. Over recent decades, Damasio’s organic descriptions have been widely acknowledged as neurophysiological counterparts of philosophical/psychological concepts. However, in my view they have been often misinterpreted, especially due to the mainstream Ratcliffian interpretation mediating his ideas amongst philosophers. Throughout the paper, a critical inquiry into Damasio’s conceptualization is provided, by means of conceptual analysis and an overall taxonomy of the several affective states he has proposed over the past few decades. Ultimately, a critical discussion of his own account of the feeling of being alive is offered from a philosophical viewpoint.

Keywords Feeling · Aliveness · Damasio · Phenomenality · Body

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1 Introduction

Over recent decades, the feeling of being alive has attracted the attention of several scholars in different fields of the affective sciences community: Neuroscientists (Damasio, 2010, 2021; Panksepp, 1998), philosophers (Engelen, 2014; Colombetti, 2014; Ratcliffe, 2012, 2005; Slaby & Stephan, 2008), psychologists (Stern, 2010) and psychiatrists (Fuchs, 2012). Despite the collective effort, the definition of this peculiar feeling is still controversial. Many questions remain open: Are we dealing with several different ‘feelings’ of being alive? Or is there a unique feeling of being alive, as a whole, as a background feeling shaping our experience as living beings – that can simply be described in different ways? What are the distinctive features of this feeling, if so?

Feelings of Being Alive (Fingerhut & Marienberg, 2012), the main book dedicated to this subject, synthesizes the current state of research. The mainstream view accepts the feeling of being alive as an ‘umbrella term’ connoting different states, such as Ratcliffe’s «existential feelings» or «the feelings of being» (2012), Fuchs’s «feeling of being alive» (2012), Engelen’s «*Gefühl des Lebendigseins*» (2014), etc. The distinctive features of these peculiar feelings are also questionable.

In contrast, I argue for an account of the feeling of being alive as a *unique* feeling, which can be *described* in several ways. I find empirical evidence to support my view particularly in Carvalho and Damasio’s hypothesis of the distinctiveness of the interoceptive system (2021). This neuroscientific account is in line with several other approaches, underlining the role of interoception proper – as distinguished from proprioception and exteroception – in mind and consciousness (Tsakiris & De Prester, 2019). I’ll expand on the neuroscientific reasons grounding my account in the last paragraph, which is intended as the final *pars construens* of the paper’s argument. Philosophical reasons further support an account of the feeling of being alive as a unique feeling. This view seems to better ‘cut nature at its bones’ than the ‘umbrella’ notion: as I will show, Ockham’s razor might easily shave it off in favor of a more simple account of the feeling of being alive as a unique, continuous feeling with distinctive *features*. I will argue for this in the first four paragraphs, as the preliminary *pars destruens* of the mainstream view.

There are several reasons why I base my account on Damasio’s. Since *Descartes’ Error* (at least), he has always tried to trace back a multi-layered view of mind and consciousness as affectively marked. Moreover, like other neuroscientists such as Changeux (1983), Panksepp (1998), LeDoux (2002, 1996), and Edelman (1992, 1989), Damasio endorses an evolutionary view on affective states, mind and consciousness, working out the overlooked relevance of the whole body (Barile, 2007). Last but not least, over recent decades, some of his conceptualizations have become very popular in the affective sciences community, including outside neuroscience. Philosophers such as Ratcliffe (2012, 2005), Slaby and Stephan (2008), and Varga and Krueger (2013), psychologists such as Stern (2010, 1999, 1985) and also psychiatrists such as Fuchs (2017, 2012) acknowledge

Damasio's descriptions. In particular, they accept his organic portrayal of feelings as the neurophysiological counterpart of their philosophical/psychological concepts. However, in my view these accounts have often misinterpreted or 'subsumed' Damasio's ideas into their own. Among these scholars, Ratcliffe in particular accepts Damasio's descriptions as neurophysiological counterparts of his own «*existential feelings*» (2005: 52): I criticize this move in detail in paragraph two. Other philosophers such as Varga and Krueger (2013) or Slaby and Stephan (2008), endorsing the mainstream Ratcliffian account, consequently also adopt this position. It seems to me that the Ratcliffian *interpretation* is nowadays acting as a mediating influence on Damasio's ideas among philosophers. That's why, throughout the paper, I also offer a critical discussion of Damasio's conceptualizations and terminology, particularly of the feeling of being alive and the other affective states related. At the same time, I provide a systematic taxonomy of the several layers of affective states he has pointed out over recent decades (par. 1). The expected result will be to outline the several misinterpretations that have occurred and, hopefully, to avoid further misinterpretations.

In a nutshell, the paper is structured as follows. The first four paragraphs analyze what, according to the mainstream view, are understood as *different feelings*, both in Damasio and in philosophers' or psychologists' acknowledgement of his neurobiological descriptions. Feelings of being alive are recognized as «*primordial feelings*» (Damasio, 2010; but also, Colombetti, 2014), as the feeling of 'existence' (Damasio, 2010; Ratcliffe, 2008, 2012; Slaby & Stephan, 2008), as the feeling 'of the body' (Damasio, 2010; Ratcliffe, 2008, 2012) or as the feeling 'of life' (Damasio, 2010; Engelen, 2014; Fuchs, 2012; Stern, 2010). In my view, these 'supposed' different feelings rather outline the several *features* of the *same* feeling of being alive as a primordial feeling, as a feeling related to existence, as a bodily feeling (entrenched in aliveness and the related phenomenality). As a kind of *intermezzo*, the fifth paragraph expands on the problematic relationship between 'aliveness' and the 'phenomenal' feature recognized in the feeling of being alive understood as a 'bodily' feeling: This relationship can be somewhat puzzling, especially for philosophers.

Following this *pars destruens* of the mainstream view, the final paragraph of the paper is concerned with the positive argument of the neurophysiological reasons supporting an alternative account of the feeling of being alive as a unique, continuous, basic feeling. In line with several other approaches recognizing the role of interoception proper in mind and subjectivity grounding (Tsakiris & De Prester, 2019), my view finds neuroscientific support mainly in Carvalho and Damasio's (2021) and in Damasio and Damasio's (2022) insights on interoception. The paper ends with a consideration of the several theoretical reasons for criticizing also Damasio's own account of the feeling of being alive from a philosophical point of view.

1.1 The feeling of being alive as a 'primordial' feeling

This paragraph is devoted to a preliminary discussion of Damasio's account on which my proposal is mostly based. He classes the feeling of being alive among «*primordial feelings*» (Damasio, 2010; but also Colombetti, 2014). This is also one

of the several meanings of the feeling of being alive that I will analyze in the first four paragraphs of the paper.

Following in James's footsteps (1884), Damasio has always characterised mind and consciousness in bodily terms and as affectively marked. Even if broadly criticized¹, over recent decades his organic portrayal of feelings have also been widely acknowledged outside neuroscience as neurophysiological counterpart of philosophical/psychological concepts by several scholars². As I will argue, however, his own conceptualizations have been often misinterpreted, especially in the equation of the affective layer of «*primordial feelings*» (2010) – within which the feeling of being alive is comprised – and the previously recognized layer of «*background feelings*» (1999, 2003), to which these scholars usually refer. Though he highlights a deep continuity and intimate relationship between these feelings (2010: 125), the *primordial* feeling of being alive and the higher affective layer of *background* feelings cannot be accepted as if they were the same. I argue for this point in a few steps.

I now introduce this fundamental feeling as a critical element of the 'self' process, which I had not deemed necessary to note in earlier approaches to this problem. I call it primordial feeling, and I note that it has a definite quality, a valence, somewhere along the pleasure-to-pain range. It is the primitive behind all feelings of emotion and therefore is the basis of all feelings caused by interactions between objects and organism (Damasio, 2010: 185).

In my view this layer of feeling also illuminates Damasio's past taxonomies of affective states, which can be somewhat idiosyncratic³. In the following, I try not only to assemble but also to systematize specific aspects of Damasio's neurobiological modelling of emotions/feelings. The expected outcome is to outline in particular the relationship and the differences between primordial feelings and the other 'felt' states, especially at the background level. The resulting overall taxonomy sums up and orders the main kinds of affective states and their distinctive features, from the most complex level to the lowest:

(EXTEROCEPTION)

III level. Feelings of (standard) emotions: Ex., feeling the *fear of* 'the lion' or the *shame of* 'a bad action', etc. Feelings of emotions are «variations on complex body feelings [II level, below] caused by and referred to a *specific object*» (Damasio, 2010: 76; *my emphases [NoA]*).

¹ See Nannini, 2020; Barile, 2016; Lenzen, 2004; Panksepp, 2003, amongst others.

² Philosophers, such as Ratcliffe (2012, 2005), Varga and Krueger (2013), and Slaby and Stephan (2008); psychologists, such as Stern (2010, 1999, 1985); and psychiatrists, such as Fuchs (2017, 2012).

³ Damasio always focussed not only on standard *emotional*-feelings, but especially non-standard recognized, less cognitively structured affective states such as *background* emotions (1994), *background* feelings (1999), *primordial* feelings (2010), etc. As an example, the affective state he christens «background emotion» is not shared among the conventional taxonomies of emotions: That's why I will adopt the notation *background emotion** whenever referring to this concept of his.

(PROPRIOCEPTION)

Ila level. Bodily feelings: «Images [*felt maps*] of *other* aspects [joints, striated musculature, some viscera] of the organism *combined* with those of the internal state [the organism *as a whole*]» (2010: 76; *my emphases [NoA]*). Bodily feelings are images⁴ of other aspects of the organism combined with ‘images’ of the overall internal state of the body (provided by the deeper level of *primordial* feelings [below, I level]). *Background* feelings [below, IIb level] are subsumed under this layer of feelings.

I Ib level. Background feelings: Ex., feeling «tense», «relaxed», «cheerful», etc.; *current, discrete* states of ‘basic feelings’, at a conscious, reflective level (that is, being aware – i.e., ‘in the *attentional* focus’), emerging singularly from the awareness of the corresponding background emotions* (1999: 286). Since they are «just a small step up from primordial feelings» (2010: 125), background feelings are *discrete* differentiations of the grounding level of primordial feelings [I level, below].

(INTEROCEPTION PROPER)

I level. Primordial feelings: The «feeling of existence» (2010: 22), the «wordless affirmation that I am alive», the «feeling that my own body exists» (2010: 185). Primordial feelings are «images [*felt (aware) maps* of smooth musculature, internal milieu] of an [overall] *organism’s* internal state» (2010: 76), considered *as a whole*, not as several, discrete states.

N.B. All the states from level III to level I involve *awareness* – understood as ‘being in the *attentional* focus’. In particular, *primordial* feelings require awareness understood as *wakefulness* (2010: 187–89).

Ob level. Background emotions*: «Tension», «relaxation», «malaise», «wellness», «edginess», etc. *Current* (at the moment ‘ t_0 ’), *discrete* but complex *collections* of automatic bodily states, arising from the overall configuration of the state of the body *as a whole* (1994: 152). When ‘felt’ (i.e., aware), at an upper layer of complexity, they become the corresponding background *feelings* [IIb level]. Background emotions* are, so to speak, already ‘there’, even when still out of the attentional focus (*unaware*);

Oa level. So-called ‘internal states’: Automatic bodily states such as «homeostatic changes», «hormonal level variations», «pain and pleasure behaviours», «appetites», «disease», «fatigue»⁵ (2010: 125).

Damasio’s ‘primordial feelings’ – basic feelings on which all other feelings are grounded – is intertwined in particular with ‘background feelings’. These feelings, belonging to a higher layer than primordial feelings, can thus be better understood as distinctive *differentiations* of the lower, grounding level of primordial feelings, namely, the *overall* feelings of the body (2010: 22, 185). Damasio embraces an

⁴ Feelings are «images» – i.e., «experienced [*felt*] maps» (Damasio, 2010: 76). I deal specifically with the *still representationalist* account of ‘images’ and the ‘felt’ (experienced) feature later on, in paragraph six.

⁵ Incidentally, Damasio here classes ‘fatigue’ among the so-called ‘internal states’, while in earlier versions of his taxonomy he included ‘fatigue’ in the more complex level of background *feelings* (1999: 286; *my emphases [NoA]*).

‘umbrella view’ of the *primordial* feelings as well, comprising feelings as the «feeling of existence» (2010: 22), the «feeling that my own body exists», the «wordless affirmation that I am alive» – i.e., the feeling of being alive itself (2010: 185).

The overall classification provided, together with a conceptual analysis of Damasio’s neurophysiological descriptions, is also intended to work out the several misinterpretations that have occurred over time. However, such misinterpretations are also due to Damasio himself, who has often proposed quite ‘peculiar’ conceptualizations⁶. Despite its popularity, his account has often been misinterpreted or ‘subsumed’ under others’ accounts. As a first example: Even if explicitly quoting Damasio, in my view philosophers like Varga and Krueger misinterpret the very feeling of being alive (Varga & Krueger, 2013: 273). Referring to a previous version of this concept by Damasio⁷, they understand the *primordial* ‘feeling of life’ [I level of the taxonomy provided] as being equivalent to the layer of background *emotions** [Ob level]. These philosophers are among the few researchers accepting such a non-standard level of *emotions** as *background emotions**, while also including them in the shared classifications of the affective states (Varga & Krueger, 2013: 283). However, they assume the concept of background *emotions** to be just the same as ‘background *feelings**’⁸. In this regard, they seem to underestimate the fact that Damasio has always proposed an account of emotions as different from feelings⁹ (i.e., the *awareness* of the correspondent – background – *emotions**¹⁰). Background feelings/*emotions** are not at all shared concepts in our conceptual armoire: «Background feelings indicate the temporary inner ‘temperature’ of the organism. What we feel are not *discrete* bodily changes as such, but *more complex states*, such as “wellness”, “relaxation” or “tension”: These are indexes of the condition of the body *as a whole*,

⁶ See note 3.

⁷ «According to Damasio, background *emotions* comprise our general “state of being” in the world (Damasio, 2003: 44), the minimal throb and pulse that is “the feeling of life itself” (Damasio, 1994: 150)» (Varga & Krueger, 2013: 273; *my emphasis* [NoA]).

⁸ «We suggest that this form of synchronic, tight interaction with the caretaker provides the infant with a variety of background *feelings* that can be differentiated by the extent to which they are permeated by a sense of proximity to others. Thus, background *emotions* are characterized by different senses of ‘proximity to others’» (Varga & Krueger, 2013: 83; *my emphases* [NoA]).

⁹ A *caveat* here: As an example, we might try to ‘split’, so to speak, the overall bodily *state* (Damasio’s «background *emotion**») — of ‘tension’, for instance — from ‘tension’ as *felt* («background *feeling*») just theoretically, for the analysis’s sake. However, from an experiential point of view, the background *emotion*/feeling* of ‘tension’, for ex., rather look like just two sides of the same coin. There is a structural ‘mirroring’ relationship between background *emotions** [Ob level] and the corresponding background *feelings* [IIB level] (see Barile, 2014). As Fuchs recognizes, in fact, as soon as ‘tension’, for ex., comes about, it is at least ‘dimly’ *felt* as well, since it is hard to imagine what, for example, ‘tension’ or ‘wellness’ or ‘edginess’ could be if nothing is ‘felt’. In my view, it also depends on how differently we might understand ‘feeling’: Damasio considers ‘feeling’ as a synonym of ‘aware’ – i.e., being in the attentional focus, at a reflective level – while the phenomenological tradition understands ‘feeling’ as arising at a pre-reflective level already.

¹⁰ Damasio always distinguished the standard recognized *emotional-feelings* (arising from ‘proper’ emotions – i.e., primary and secondary emotions, connected to exteroception) from what he christens «background feelings», arising *not* from standard emotions, but from the awareness of the correspondent «background *emotions**». He explicitly maintains that: «The background feeling is our image of the body landscape when it is *not* shaken by [proper] *emotion*» (Damasio, 1994: 150–151; *my emphases* [NoA]).

perceptions, resulting in a *reflective* level from the *awareness* of the *complex collection* of bodily changes [the so-called «background emotions»]» (Damasio, 1999: 286–287; *my emphases* [NoA]).

In my view Varga and Krueger's equation of the (*primordial*) 'feeling of life' with the lowest level of *background* emotions* does not work, for several reasons. First, primordial feelings belong to the 'I level' of the provided taxonomy – i.e., the *aware* level of interoception – while background emotions* belong to the lower '0b level' of the *unaware* (but complex) bodily states. Moreover, even if accepting the (mis) identification of background *emotions** with the correspondent background *feelings*, the *primordial* 'feeling of life' is *not* a background feeling. Primordial feelings [I level] such as the feeling of being alive are defined as maps of an overall organism's internal state (Damasio, 2010: 76), considered as a whole, and not as several, discrete states, as background feelings are [IIb level]. Even if both are 'feelings', arising at an aware level [I, II level], they cannot be acknowledged as the same concept.

To conclude, it seems to me that, even if explicitly quoting Damasio's texts, Varga and Krueger share the most frequent misinterpretation of Damasio's conceptualizations amongst philosophers, i.e., the equation of primordial feelings (within which the feeling of being alive belongs) to the upper layer of background feelings. In so doing, they seem to be following Ratcliffe's acknowledgement of Damasio's *background* feelings, as the neurophysiological counterparts of his *existential* feeling (Ratcliffe, 2005, 2010). In this regard, however, Varga and Krueger are not at all the only ones: I realize that the Ratcliffian *interpretation* mainly mediates the acquisition of Damasio's ideas among the philosophers' audience nowadays, rather than Damasio's own proposals. That's particularly relevant for the affective layer of the (primordial) feeling of being alive at issue. I expand on this argument in the following.

1.2 The feeling of 'existence'

According to the mainstream view (Fingerhut & Marienberg, 2012), the feeling of being alive can be further understood as 'the feeling of *existence*' (Damasio, 2010; Ratcliffe, 2005, 2012), included in the 'umbrella notion'. Following a neuroscientific analysis, this feeling as associated with 'sheer existence' is mainly acknowledged according to a grounded, biological meaning¹¹. However, the feeling of being alive as the feeling 'of existence' turns out to be also especially suited to a philosophical investigation. Among philosophers, Slaby and Stephan in particular comprise the «feeling of life» (2008: 510) in Ratcliffe's taxonomy of «*existential* feelings» (Ratcliffe, 2005, 2008). For his part, Ratcliffe himself accepts Damasio's organic descriptions as the neurophysiologic counterparts of his seminal concept. However, by quoting directly Damasio's texts, I'll highlight the differences between his

¹¹ «Primordial feelings (...) signify the existence of my living body» (Damasio, 2010: 185); «They provide a direct experience of one's own living body, wordless, unadorned, and connected to nothing but sheer existence» (2010: 21).

own definition of the feeling of being alive as the *primordial* feeling ‘of existence’ (Damasio, 2010) and the misinterpretation of this feeling as a *background* feeling by Ratcliffe (2010, 2005) – and, consequently, by others inspired by his philosophical account.

As influential researchers in the affective science domain, with their outstanding concept of «affective intentionality» Slaby and Stephan try to make sense of the intricate debate on the feeling/emotion problem, intentionality, and the related bodily dimension of feelings (Slaby, 2007; Slaby & Stephan, 2008). In particular, they catalogue the feeling «alive» (Slaby & Stephan, 2008: 510) in Ratcliffe’s classification of «*existential* feelings» (Ratcliffe, 2005: 45). According to Slaby and Stephan’s summary of Ratcliffe’s conceptualizations, what Damasio understands as the [primordial] ‘feeling of existence’ would thus belong to the very first level of existential feelings – among «‘pure’ [bodily] existential feelings» (Slaby & Stephan, 2008: 510). In contrast, and following Damasio’s own conceptualization, the [primordial] ‘feeling alive’ as the ‘feeling of existence’, classed among Ratcliffe’s existential feelings, seems somewhat questionable to me. I argue this point in a few steps.

First, Ratcliffe himself does not acquire Damasio’s terminology ‘philologically’, so to speak: He rather interprets Damasio’s concepts along with his own philosophical account from the very beginning. Ratcliffe acknowledges Damasio’s *background* feelings as neurobiological evidence of his own *existential* feelings, comprising «the feeling of life itself, the sense of being» (Ratcliffe, 2005: 52). Moreover, according to his phenomenological view, Damasio’s ‘feeling alive’ would turn into a ‘sense of being-*in-the-world*’ (Ratcliffe, 2005: 52). Damasio understands what Ratcliffe indicates as «the feeling of life itself» not as a background feeling, but as a feeling that can be traced back to the previous, deeper level of *primordial* feelings (Damasio, 2010: 185). Even if the relationship between background feelings and primordial feelings is intimate (2010: 125), these concepts cannot be simply equated. Background feelings – such as (felt) ‘tension’ or (felt) ‘edginess’ – are *discrete* feelings (i.e., different kinds of feelings, such as «edginess», «wellness», «malaise», etc. (1999: 286)). Damasio, instead¹², classes «the feeling of being alive» as the «feeling of existence» among the so-called ‘primordial’ feelings, namely, the *overall* feelings of the body (2010: 22, 185).

For his part, Ratcliffe shares with Damasio the view that background feelings are non-specific (objectless) and they allow us to experience things as ‘wholes’ (Ratcliffe, 2005: 52). Despite the recognized paternity, however, it seems to me that existential feelings mainly differ in that they concern a relationship *to the world* considered *as a whole*¹³. In contrast, Damasio’s background feelings involve a relationship *to the body, as a whole*, and not to the world, as a whole – even if the body is *in* the world, and does not exist in isolation. This remark is even more evident and

¹² I thank V. Bizzari, D. Vespermann, C. Tewes, S. Tirkkonen, A. Buritica, O. Bader and the whole T. Fuchs’s lively research group in Heidelberg for the several formal and informal discussions, which helped me in enlightening this and other aspects analyzed in the paper. Particularly Bizzari’s work (2018) helped me to deepen the *Körper / Leib* distinction.

¹³ Even if endorsing Ratcliffe’s account, Varga and Krueger too recognize this difference with Damasio: Ratcliffe’s conceptualizations are rather *world-oriented* than *internally-oriented* (Varga & Krueger, 2013: 272).

significant for the previous, deeper level of primordial feelings, from which background feelings originate. More precisely, Ratcliffe defines existential feelings (as kinds of background feelings) as «pre-intentional» rather than intentional themselves, i.e., as conditions of possibility of other intentional states (Colombetti & Ratcliffe, 2012: 147). The core difference between existential feelings and background/primordial feelings (in Damasio's sense), I believe, results in Ratcliffe's 'subsumption' of Damasio's concepts under his own phenomenological account, particularly in the constitutive relationship *to the world* – i.e., their intentionality. An additional acknowledgement of the feeling of being alive as the 'feeling of the body' will better highlight the differences existing between Ratcliffe and Damasio.

1.3 The feeling 'of the body'

According to the 'umbrella' view, the feeling of being alive can be also accepted as 'the feeling of the body' (Damasio, 2010; Colombetti & Ratcliffe, 2012). This definition focuses in particular on the key role of the body: Staying in the background in standard emotional-feelings, the body comes into the foreground in 'lower level' feelings such as the primordial feeling of being alive.

The feeling of being alive accepted as the «feeling that my own body exist[s]» (Damasio, 2010: 185) requires a preliminary clarification on how we understand this feeling as a bodily feeling. In this regard, Ratcliffe is highly analytic: In his recognition of existential feelings as bodily feelings, he clarifies that the phrasing 'bodily feeling' is insensitive to the distinction between two possible kinds of bodily experience. Referring to Merleau-Ponty's analysis of touch experience (1945), Ratcliffe points out that the *feeling* body [*Leib*] has to be distinguished from the *felt* body [*Körper*] – that is, from the body as an object. He understands existential feelings as «neither noetic nor noematic» feelings, but as «ways of finding oneself in the world» (Colombetti & Ratcliffe, 2012: 147). The body turns out to be the 'medium' – rather than the intentional object of the related bodily feelings – of our relationship with the world: No ontological or theoretical disentanglement is conceivable, either for bodily feelings (among which existential feelings are classed). Again, Ratcliffe's approach to the bodily feature of feelings turns out to be very *world-oriented*.

In contrast, Damasio states: «Primordial feelings [to which the feeling of being alive belongs] result from *nothing but the living body* and *precede any interaction* between the machinery of life regulation and any *object*» (2010: 101; *my emphases* [NoA]). The primordial 'feeling of life' (understood as the feeling 'of the body') as conceptualized by Damasio turns out to be a feeling 'of the body' and not the feeling of the body as 'being-in-the-world'. Nevertheless, the body *is* in the world: It cannot exist in isolation. Damasio is not embracing a different ontology: He has not in mind the body as a kind of 'monadic' entity. He is just *focussing* on the body rather than the intentional relationship with the world, as in standard intentional feelings, from which the feeling of being alive differs. For his part, Ratcliffe states explicitly: «Perception of the body and perception of what is outside cannot be disentangled» (2010: 364), as also supported by Gibson (1979: 126) and the related enactivist approaches. Consequently, he acknowledges Damasio's organic description of the «feeling of life», the

«feeling of being» as the ‘feeling of *being-in-the-world*’, *through the body* (Colombetti & Ratcliffe, 2012: 147) – conceiving of the body as the ‘medium’, shaping our structural relationship to the world. Despite the recognized similarity, however, in my view the feeling of being alive understood as the feeling of the body as a ‘medium’ is Ratcliffe’s *own* interpretation. Moreover, this phenomenological understanding – rather than Damasio’s conceptualizations proper – largely mediates Damasio’s argument among his audience outside neuroscience nowadays.

To offer an example of the philosopher’s mainstream influence: Varga and Krueger claim that «according to Damasio, background emotions comprise our general “state of being in the world”» (Varga & Krueger, 2013: 273), referring to a quote by Damasio himself (Damasio, 2003: 44). However, in this very passage, there is an evident Ratcliffian ‘add-on’: In Damasio’s first-hand quote *there is no such a phrase* as «in the world» after «the state of being»¹⁴. According to him, the ‘feeling of being alive’ (and the other primordial feelings to which it belongs) is *independent* of any connection to any object in the world. This, I believe, is explicitly clarified in the following passage: «There is some deeper feeling to be guessed and then found in the depths of the conscious mind. It is the feeling that my own body exists, and it is present, *independently of any object with which it interacts*, as a rock-solid, wordless affirmation that I am alive» (Damasio, 2010: 185; *my emphases* [NoA]). Both Damasio’s background feelings, and especially primordial feelings on which they are based, involve a relationship *to the body, as a whole* (Damasio, 2010: 76), and not a relationship *to the world, as a whole* (Ratcliffe, 2005: 52) – even if the body is *in* the world anyway, and it does not exist in isolation. Concerning the questionable intentionality¹⁵ of the feeling of being alive described as ‘the feeling of the body’ as a whole, some further explanations need to be added.

First, regarding the ‘independence’ of any connection to any object in the world (Damasio, 2010: 185): Even if the interrelation provided cannot be a kind of standard intentional relationship from the body to the world, in my view there has to be something like a body-world interrelation anyway, that is *not* intentional. Otherwise, the question of how the body might be able to experience itself *as a whole* (Damasio, 2010: 76), without any contact with the world as a kind of ‘other’ or border of the organism, seems hard to explain. As Engelen also illustrates, examples of the experience of feeling the body as a whole (as a unit, to which all the sensations belong) include the entire body being exposed to the sun, or when the whole body is submerged in water. But, also, the body slipping through a narrow hole, so that it is touched or enveloped, and the boundaries of the same body become ‘felt’ (Engelen, 2012: 243).

¹⁴ «The ever-changing result of this cauldron of interactions is our ‘state of being’, good, bad, or somewhere in between» (Damasio, 2003: 44).

¹⁵ In my view Damasio’s formulation of the deepest level of primordial feelings (2010) definitely endorses a *non-intentional* account of this kind of non-emotional feelings, at least in the standard meaning of intentionality. Following his latest analysis, both according to the meaning of «aboutness» and the meaning of «directedness» (Goldie, 2002), Damasio’s *background* feelings – and above all the *primordial* feelings on which they are based – turn out to be *not* intentional (see Barile, 2014).

Second: To be ‘objectless’ (that is, the main feature of ‘background’ states as background feelings and existential feelings as well) does not mean *not* being-*in-the-world*. In my view it is rather a matter of ‘focus’, so to speak. Damasio underlines that, while standard emotional-feelings focus on the specific/aspecific object of emotions rather than the body, background feelings, such as «tension» or «surging», or the primordial feeling of being alive, for instance, reveal an intrinsic relationship to our own body as a whole – so, coming into the foreground. In contrast, in feelings connected to emotions or other more cognitively structured states, the body always stands ‘in the background’, unattended.

1.4 *Being alive and feeling of being alive*

Last but not least, we can understand the feeling of being alive as «the wordless affirmation that I am alive» (Damasio, 2010: 185), «the feeling of life» (Fuchs, 2012; Engelen, 2014, 2007): Such a definition illuminates this feeling as being entrenched in the organic bases as ‘life’ and ‘aliveness’ in the most intimate way. The biological backgrounds of the feeling of being alive can be mainly identified in «vitalities» (as particularly related to ‘aliveness’) and «conation» (Fuchs, 2012: 153). Nevertheless, there’s a crucial distinctiveness between just being alive and feeling of being alive (Engelen, 2014).

It is not trivial to recognize that ‘being’ alive, as such, is not yet ‘feeling’ of being alive. Engelen focusses on a distinction that is often overlooked in literature: ‘Aliveness’ is certainly a prerequisite, but just ‘being’ alive is not ‘feeling’ of being alive – at an experiential level (2012: 253–55). Instead, in all living beings we can recognize a capacity for *sensing* that is not yet feeling ‘as’ alive (2012: 240). Among the other requisites¹⁶, the capacity for relating sensations to the body to which they belong (2012: 242) seems to be the most fundamental. The body could be grasped as a unit, should these sensations be related to an organism conceived *as a whole*, and should that be possible when experiencing its boundaries (2012: 243). Engelen clarifies that this capacity does not already entail a reflective *concept* of ‘self’ (2012: 240): She openly embraces a critical view on the current debates in the analytic philosophical tradition, following instead the Aristotelian account of life-mind continuity (Engelen, 2012: 255).

This approach is shared with Fuchs, who underlines the ‘integration feature’ as a pivotal requisite for a living being to experience the *feeling* of being alive (Fuchs, 2012: 159). He focuses on the continuity – that is, not identity – rather than on the differences between aliveness and the related feeling of being alive. However, Fuchs also confirms the integration feature as crucial for the continuity between life and experience, life and feeling (life and mind, ultimately). In an irreducible embodied view (Fuchs, 2021), he recognises in third-person approaches of affective neuroscience (Damasio, 1999; Panksepp, 1998, etc.) the necessary biological descriptions of the integration processes in the brain (Fuchs, 2012: 150–152). In more detail, Fuchs

¹⁶ Other requirements are, for ex., a basic sense of mobility, of possibility and discrimination, and a rudimental sense of time (Engelen, 2012: 239).

highlights «vitalities» and «conation» as the biological backgrounds of the feeling of being alive (2012: 152). ‘Aliveness’, in particular, is recognized as a fundamental component of «vitalities» – as already proposed by D. Stern¹⁷ (2010, 1999, 1985).

Stern finally identified ‘vitalities’ as «a manifestation of life, of being alive» (2010: 3), endorsing a quite intuitive understanding of ‘life’ or ‘aliveness’. His most precise definition of this ‘vital’ component can be traced back to arousal¹⁸ (see also Colombetti, 2014; M.J. RoCHAT & Gallese, 2022). Since his earliest studies, Stern has always considered the vital processes of breathing, pulse, and heartbeat (amongst others) as «foundational» for vitalities (1985: 54). Interestingly, he has also recognized Damasio’s *background* feelings as an equivalent concept to vitalities, previously described as «contours»¹⁹. Moreover, Stern understood vitality as a «general feeling of the body as constantly present» (Køppe et al., 2008: 171). In my view, this last analogy might be better conceived in terms of Damasio’s latest concept of *primordial* feelings – such as the overall feeling of being alive – rather than as *discrete* background feelings, i.e., ‘tension’ or ‘relaxation’, or ‘explosion’, etc. (Damasio, 1999: 286). I would still compare vitalities to background feelings: However, we had better identify the «general feeling of the body as constantly present» (Køppe et al., 2008: 171), on which vitalities are based (as recognized by Stern), with the deepest level of Damasio’s primordial feeling of being alive. Finally, Stern further understood vitalities as ‘experiences’, since «they are the *felt experience* of force – in movement – with a temporal contour, and a *sense of aliveness*, of going somewhere» (2010: 8; *my emphases [NoA]*). This interpretation outlines also the intrinsic phenomenality of vitalities, at a pre-reflective level of consciousness. In sum: ‘Vitality’ (and ‘conation’), as related to aliveness as the physiological groundings of the feeling of being alive (Fuchs, 2012: 152), also reveal an intimate connection with a primordial, pre-reflective level of consciousness. This view is in line with several other approaches, acknowledging the feeling of being ‘alive’ as a primitive form of *phenomenal* consciousness (Engelen, 2014; Fuchs, 2012; Zahavi, 1999), recognized by phenomenology. Having accepted this form of pre-reflective consciousness, *how* to relate the experiential level of ‘feeling’ to the bodily ground of ‘aliveness’, however, remains puzzling. I will go deeper into this question in a short *intermezzo* before the final paragraph of the paper.

¹⁷ Stern finally described vitalities as «dynamic forms of vitality», as *Gestalten*, composed of movement, force, temporal contouring, space and directionality, and ‘aliveness’ – defined as an «emergent property» (Stern, 2010: 19).

¹⁸ «Only when the contents are yoked to arousal do they take on a dynamic form of vitality. This is what gives them the feel of flowing and *aliveness* – of being human» (Stern, 2010: 23; *my emphases [NoA]*).

¹⁹ Stern’s understanding of vitalities as «contours» (1999) rightly assimilates vitalities to Damasio’s «background feelings» (Køppe et al., 2008: X): «Vitality affects are thus supposed to be modulation of this background feeling» (Køppe et al., 2008: 173). Examples of ‘vitalities’ are «exploding», «rushing», «tense», «accelerating», «relaxing», «pulling», etc. (Stern, 2010: 7). The same states also appear in the list of Damasio’s background feelings (1999: 286). In Stern’s view especially vitalities defined as ‘contours’ (1999) do not concern content. They are usually obscured by the content itself (of emotions, of thoughts, etc.) they accompany, as shapes, as kinds of ‘frames’. Damasio too underlines that background feelings, such as «tension» or «surging», for instance, reveal an intrinsic relationship with our own body rather than with the object (of the emotion, of thoughts, etc.) – so, coming into the foreground.

Summing up this first section of the paper: Damasio peculiarly describes the feeling of being alive, the «wordless affirmation that I am alive» (2010: 185) as a *primordial*, basic feeling (but also Colombetti, 2014) – on which all other feelings are grounded. He classes this feeling amongst other primordial feelings (i.e., the «feeling of existence» (2010: 22), the «feeling that my own body exists» (2010: 185)). As I showed in the previous paragraphs, according to the mainstream view (Fingerhut & Marienberg, 2012) these feelings are recognized outside neuroscience as different *kinds* of feelings of *being alive*: Ratcliffe’s «existential feelings» or «the feelings of being» (2012), Fuchs’s «feeling of being alive» (2012), Engelen’s «*Gefühl des Lebendigseins*» (2014), etc. In contrast, I see philosophical reasons to reject this view and argue instead for an account of the feeling of being alive as a *unique* feeling, with several distinctive *features* – such as being a ‘primordial’ feeling, related to ‘existence’, a ‘bodily’ feeling (mainly grounded on ‘aliveness’ and the entrenched ‘phenomenality’). Ockham’s razor can easily shave the mainstream ‘umbrella notion’ off in favor of a more elegant and simple account of the feeling of being alive as a unique, continuous basic feeling with those distinctive features. Following this *pars destruens*, I will show neuroscientific reasons for supporting this view in the last paragraph.

1.5 *Intermezzo: Life as experience?*

This short interlude is intended to deepen the intimate relationship between the organic ground of ‘aliveness’ and the phenomenal level of ‘experience’ that the feeling of being alive reveals (Fuchs, 2012: 149). This intertwinement can be somewhat questionable²⁰.

Both Engelen and Fuchs recognize in the feeling of being alive the threshold between life and experience (Engelen, 2012: 240; Fuchs, 2012: 151–152). Neurobiological descriptions of just ‘being’ alive might result in being unable to recognize, *per se*, the pre-reflective, phenomenal feature connected to the body, conceived not only as the *living* (organic) body but also as the *lived* body, as the subject of experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). On the other side, organic descriptions might be understood as the grounding components of phenomenality itself. However, phenomenology is not biology ‘as such’ (Engelen, 2012: 241) and we have to admit too

²⁰ Neurophenomenology (Varela, 1996) certainly contributed to facing the ‘old-fashioned’ problem of ‘filling the gap’ between the so-called third-person approach of empirical sciences and the first-person view of phenomenology. Adopted as a *nom de guerre* against the reductionist programme of ‘neurophilosophy’ (Churchland, 1986), ‘neurophenomenology’ proposed the working hypothesis that «phenomenological accounts of the *structure of experience* and their *counterparts* in cognitive science *relate* to each other through *reciprocal constraints*» (Varela, 1996: 343; *my emphases [NoA]*). Since then, the main problem has concerned *how* to ‘naturalize phenomenology’ (Petitot et al., 1999), how to bridge phenomenology and the cognitive sciences – cognitive neurosciences, in particular – and the multiple ways to realise this research programme «without engaging in naturalistic reductionism» (Gallagher, 2012: 93).

that the concept of ‘aliveness’ is often grasped in a somewhat intuitive way. Even according to a biological meaning²¹, it is difficult to provide a rigorous definition of ‘life’, mainly due to its ambiguity. Following a phenomenological analysis, for ex., a ‘living’ system might be regarded both as just the ‘living’ body, the physiological organism (the body as an object [*Körper*]) and as the ‘lived’, experienced body – the body as a subject of experience [*Leib*] (Husserl, 1952; Merleau-Ponty, 1945). According to this double-sided description, ‘aliveness’ turns out to be connected to the ‘living’ body, the physiological organism, while the feeling of being alive seems to be associated instead with the ‘lived’ body. Nevertheless, as Fuchs maintains, we can also recognize a fundamental continuity between life and experience, *Leben* and *Erleben* (as not just etymologically supported), in the very double-faced description of the body, as *Körper* and as *Leib* (Fuchs, 2012: 149).

In line with the living systems’ pre-reflective awareness supported by Zahavi (1999), Engelen agrees that the feeling of being alive constitutes a simple form of phenomenal consciousness (2014, 2012). Engelen recognizes in all living beings a capacity for sensation, but that this is not the same as *feeling* alive, at least not on its own. For a living being also feeling of being alive, among the other requirements, she needs the capacity for relating *reflexively* the sensations to a unit, to an organism conceived *as a whole*. If a living being just ‘has’ sensations and the reflexive relationship does not exist, she feels, but she does not feel that ‘she’ feels. A living being that feels does not necessarily experience herself ‘as’ alive if she is not able to also relate reflexively her sensations to her organism as a unit (2012: 255). At this level, an organism is already provided with a certain degree of reflexivity²² – that is different from (and not yet) reflectivity. The capacity to relate these sensations to the organism as a whole, conceived as a unit, does not necessarily entail a concept of ‘self’ at a higher, reflective level. Regarding this, Engelen claims: «Da dass *Lebendigkeit* des *Körpers* nicht dafür ausreicht, dass er sich auch *fühlt*, benötigt man ein Modell, mittels dessen man zeigen kann, wie es dazu kommt, dass wir, *ohne bereits über ein Begriff des Selbst* zu verfügen, unser Empfinden phänomenal als solches wahrnehmen und auf *eine Einheit beziehen*»²³. A living being can experience the *feeling* of ‘being alive’ without necessarily knowing that ‘she’ (as a reflective concept) is feeling: At this level, a reflective (higher-order) awareness is not required. The feeling of being alive thus encompasses the simplest form of phenomenal consciousness only, at a pre-reflective level. This primordial self-awareness does not require a reflective awareness of the body as an object [*Körper*], as the content of the reflective activity, at a higher-order level (Engelen, 2012: 240).

²¹ For the most recent attempts to define ‘life’, see Tetz & Tetz (2020); Vitas & Dobovišek (2019); and the classic Schrödinger (1944).

²² She understands ‘reflexivity’ according to a very basic meaning, such as in ‘identity’, the ‘less than’, or ‘equal’ relationships (Engelen, 2012: note 23).

²³ «Since the body’s aliveness is not enough for it to also *feel* alive, we need a model by means of which we can show how it comes about that, *without already having a concept of ‘ourselves’*, we perceive our sensation phenomenally as such and *refer it to a unit*» (2012: 251; *my emphases and my English translation* [NoA]).

Fuchs shares this perspective: In his view, the feeling of being alive offers privileged access to grasping the very continuity – that is not identity (in Lewis’s (1966) understanding) – between the organic ground of life [*Leben*] and the phenomenal level of experience [*Erleben*] (Fuchs, 2012: 152). In the footsteps of the enactivist approach to mind and consciousness (Varela, 1991), he also argues for the continuity between biology and phenomenology, without embracing ontological reductionism. Fuchs recognizes third-person approaches of affective neuroscience (Damasio, 1999, 2003; Panksepp, 1998; etc.) as providing effective biological descriptions of the related «feeling of being alive», at the ‘aliveness’ ground (Fuchs, 2012: 154). Nevertheless, he also stresses that, from a phenomenological perspective, neuroscientific descriptions might be unable to grasp, *per se*, the experiential level: They usually miss, for instance, the recognition of the double-sided understanding of the body, both as a ‘living’ body *and* as a ‘lived’ body (Husserl, 1952; Merleau-Ponty, 1945). In particular, third-person modellings²⁴ ignore the primordial *pre-reflective* self-awareness related to the lived body [*Leib*] (Fuchs, 2012: 154). The most recent enactivist approaches, focussing on the *affective* dimension (Durt et al., 2017; Colombetti, 2014) endorse an integrated approach to the organic ground of ‘aliveness’ and the phenomenal level of ‘experience’ right from the start (Thompson, 2007; Gallagher, 2003a). In particular, I concur with Gallagher’s suggestion of a «mutual enlightenment» and constraint between neuroscientific descriptions and phenomenological conceptualizations (1997) as an effective and promising strategy²⁵.

1.6 Damasio’s insights at work

As the final *pars construens* of the paper, I will provide not only philosophical, but also neuroscientific reasons for supporting an account of the feeling of being alive as a unique feeling, with distinctive features. My view is mainly grounded on Damasio’s conceptual breakdown based on his work on interoception (Damasio & Damasio, 2022; Carvalho & Damasio, 2021). This neuroscientific hypothesis is also in line with other approaches underlining the role of interoception proper (Tsakiris & De Prester, 2019) for mind and consciousness grounding. I found empirical support especially in

²⁴ Among the several possible accounts – third-person, first-person and even second-person approaches (Thompson, 2001) – dealing with how third-person data may correlate with a first-person view, we ‘ought to visit’ Dennett’s proposal of the so-called «heterophenomenology» (2007, 2003, 1991). He introduced «heterophenomenology» in 1991, as a third-person methodology for studying consciousness from ‘outside’ – i.e., the mental life of ‘others’ as publicly manifested, utilizing the subjects’ reports (interviews and behaviours). In defending heterophenomenology from the several critiques addressed to his first proposal (1991, 2003), Dennett finally argues for an account of heterophenomenology as «the maximally open-minded intersubjective science of consciousness» (2007: 264), rejecting both eliminativism (Churchland, 1986) and mysterianism (Levine, 1983, 1994; McGinn, 1999) about Hard Problems (Chalmers, 1995, 1996).

²⁵ Among the several ways of ‘naturalizing phenomenology’, synopsized in Gallagher and Schmicking (2010), Zahavi, for ex., proposes a ‘moderate’ naturalisation: «To naturalize phenomenology might simply be a question of letting phenomenology engage in a fruitful exchange and collaboration with empirical science» (Zahavi, 2010: 2–19).

Carvalho and Damasio's (2021) insights of the distinctiveness of the interoceptive system: Particularly, in the *continuity* of the interoceptive flow – at the basis of feelings.

The cross-influence between neural and *non*-neural worlds—facilitated by the atypical INS structures and arrangement—permits the assembling of the graded, qualitative, fluid and *continually* body-linked representations we *experience* as feelings. (...) They also call attention to the incompleteness of the view that mental processes result exclusively from canonical, synaptic transmission (Carvalho & Damasio, 2021: 7; *my emphases [NoA]*).

In the footsteps of Sherrington (1948), interoception proper²⁶ is accepted as different from proprioception, into which it is usually assimilated. Despite the similarities, the peculiar features of the Interoceptive Nervous System (INS) would result in an unusual anatomical and physiological structure and its overall arrangement (Carvalho & Damasio, 2021: 2). In sum, their hypothesis is this distinctiveness consisting of:

- (Physiologically): The poor myelinated or non-myelinated fibres composing the INS allow slower signalling, and, above all, increase the exposure of these fibres to *non*-neural signalling (humoral, chemical, etc.), resulting from the direct influence of molecules present in the extracellular space (2021: 3). Moreover, these molecules, released by diffusion²⁷ through some recognized gaps in the blood-brain-barrier (BBB), would thus directly influence such neurons²⁸.
- (Anatomically): «INS exhibits multiple *direct* entry points for interoceptive information along the neuraxis, peripherally as well as centrally. This constitutes a *unique physiological design* that highlights the distinctiveness of interoception, yet it is commonly ignored» (2021: 3; *my emphases [NoA]*).

The authors are confident that «shedding light on the anatomy and physiology of the INS is likely to advance our understanding of feelings and, ultimately, of the conscious process itself» (2021: 8). In particular, they trace back to two parallel features such an entrenched relationship between interoception and feelings: Beyond the distinctive *continuity* of the interoceptive flow as the basis for the continuity and fluidity of experience (2021: 6), the typical *vagueness* of such feelings (as supported

²⁶ I thank M. Heller for his interest in my work and the precious advice for this and other sections of the paper. In particular, he made me aware of the importance of the polarity made by the exteroceptive and interoceptive systems also from a psychological practical perspective (Heller, 2017, 2022). Despite the relevance of this distinction, however, it remains in the background of this article, because of its different focus.

²⁷ «Chemical agents are released into the extracellular space, away from synaptic gaps, and reach their target(s) by *diffusion*» (Carvalho & Damasio, 2021: 4; *my emphases [NoA]*).

²⁸ «The gaps in the BBB have a similar functional role, exposing neuronal structures to chemical factors present in the bloodstream (as happens in spinal ganglia) or in the cerebrospinal fluid (in the case of circumventricular organs such as the *area postrema*). The exposed structures gain the ability to sense circulating molecules, detect metabolic changes, and respond accordingly» (Carvalho & Damasio, 2021: 4).

by the characteristic modulation at the biological level) is another key aspect²⁹. Their hypothesis, based on the distinctiveness of INS (when compared to the exteroceptive system), also provides a plausible neurophysiological description surrounding the qualitative and subjective aspects of the arising feelings. Incidentally, this view is in line with several other accounts recognizing interoception proper and homeostasis as the bases of the lived, subjective experience (Tsakiris & De Prester, 2019).

The *atypical* traits of the INS and the *direct* interactions between neural and *non-neural* physiological compartments of the organism, neither of which is present in exteroceptive systems, plausibly explain the *qualitative* and *subjective* aspects of feelings, thus accounting for their conscious nature (Carvalho & Damasio, 2021: 1; *my emphases [NoA]*).

They admit: «How the nervous system is able to generate subjective mental states such as feelings has been a major scientific mystery» (2021: 8; *my emphasis [NoA]*). However, Carvalho and Damasio hypothesize the resulting properties of the non-myelinated structures of INS — such as a superior sensitivity to the surrounding circulating molecules, a sensitivity to extra-synaptic neurotransmitters (non-synaptic) signalling, a uniqueness of body-brain interface, and a direct interaction in between — as the best candidates to explain the qualitative, subjective and conscious features of feelings (2021: 4, 5). Several different fields of research would provide further support for this hypothesis: Evolutionarily, original structures such as signalling by extracellular diffusion, denuded axons and permeable barriers between the bloodstream and neural matter were replaced by more specialized structures such as, respectively, synapses, myelin and blood-brain-barrier (BBB). Since these original structures were not completely replaced, this suggests they still play a physiological role, proposed as being related to interoception and as underpinning subjectivity (2021: 7). Additionally, psychopathological studies show altered interoceptive processes related to several disorders such as anxiety, depression and eating disorders. Further corroboration would come from other fields, such as meditation practice or neuropharmacology, both calling for the involvement of interoceptive feedback (2021: 6).

In my view the recognized continuity of the interoceptive flow as parallel to the continuous and fluid flow of our subjective experience might strengthen the argument for the feeling of being alive as a *unique, continuous*, basic feeling of the body as a whole. It exhibits the recognized distinctive features of being a primordial feeling (on which all the other feelings are based), of being related to ‘sheer’ existence³⁰, and of being a bodily feeling as entrenched with aliveness and phenomenality (subjectivity) in the most intimate way. This continuous flow, usually staying in the background, comes suddenly and dramatically into the foreground when disrupted in several psychopathologies (Tsakiris et al., 2006; Sacks, 1987).

²⁹ «The characteristic vagueness of some homeostatic feelings—such as well-being, malaise, nausea, etc.—may be related to the fact that interoceptive pathways are conspicuously exposed and exquisitely sensitive to surrounding modulation» (Carvalho & Damasio, 2021: 6).

³⁰ A. Damasio and H. Damasio (2022) comprise the feeling of ‘existence’ among «homeostatic feelings», «subtler feelings of existence that follow unimpeded regulatory states closer to homeostatic balance» (p. 2232), puzzling once more the reader with this further, ‘peculiar’ labelling (adopted also in Carvalho and Damasio (2021)).

Even if neuroscientifically based on Carvalho and Damasio's physiological hypothesis (2021), however, my view is also different from Damasio's. In his taxonomy, he classes *different kinds* of primordial 'feelings': The «feeling of existence» (2010: 22), the «feeling that my own body exists», and the «wordless affirmation that I am alive» (2010: 185) – to which the feeling of being alive would belong. All these (supposed) different 'feelings' seem to me simply the multiple descriptions of different facets of the same, *unique, continuous* feeling 'of life' – as the feeling of the body as a whole. In particular, I see Damasio's account of the 'other' primordial feelings missing the *distinctiveness* that would give them the status of different kinds of primordial feelings. Such a distinctiveness as discrete states ('tension', 'malaise', etc.) rather belongs to the upper level of *background* feelings (based on the primordial level of the feeling of being alive and of the (supposed) other primordial feelings (1999: 286)). As I showed in the fourth paragraph, Stern too has recognized a «general feeling of the body as constantly present», on which vitalities are based (Køppe et al., 2008: 171). However, he equated this level of description of 'the general feeling of the body' with the upper level of background feelings, instead of with Damasio's *primordial* feeling of being alive. Furthermore, Damasio usually takes into consideration primordial feelings 'altogether', without providing any distinctive features beyond their different 'labelling'. He even sometimes employs the singular phrasing 'primordial feeling' rather than the plural (2010: 185).

Moreover, from the philosophical side, further critiques can be addressed to his account. First, Damasio conceives features such as 'directedness', 'experience', 'subjectivity', etc. as arising at a reflective level rather than at a pre-reflective level of description. In the footsteps of M. Johnson's studies (1987), he rejects the standard cognitive representational format – he describes feelings as «images» (Damasio, 2010: 89). However, he still defines the deepest primordial feelings in *representationalist* terms (Sass, 2003: 171, Barile, 2009; Fuchs, 2017: ch. 4.1.3), at a reflective level. Starting from the grounding level of primordial feelings, Damasio depicts all bodily feelings as perceptual «maps»: When experienced, these maps – i.e., neural states, «pattern of activity in the brain» (2010: 65) – become «images». The representational activity generating these images emerges at a reflective level, even if the representational format is an 'image' rather than a standard cognitive representation. Moreover, he describes primordial feelings as «spontaneous reflections of the state of the living body» (2010: 101).

One other element must be added to the scaffolding provided by the internal milieu's relative invariance: the fact that the body proper remains inseparably attached to the brain at all times. This attachment underlies the generation of primordial feelings and the unique relationship between the *body, as an object*, and the *brain that represents that object* (Damasio, 2010: 154; *my emphases* [NoA]).

As also recognized by Varga and Krueger, Damasio explicitly conceives the body «as object» (Varga & Krueger, 2013: 273): According to a phenomenological interpretation, as *Körper* rather than as *Leib*, as the object of a reflective activity of the brain, rather than as the subject of experience, at a pre-reflective level (Husserl, 1952; Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Nevertheless, the resulting properties of this

reflective activity of mapping the body as an object, feeding back ‘images’ (that are *felt* – i.e., ‘aware’ maps) are: ‘Directedness’, ‘experience’, ‘subjectivity’, ‘first personal’ characterization, ‘uniqueness’, feeling ‘like’ (Carvalho & Damasio, 2021; Damasio, 2010). These features can be easily traced back to a phenomenological understanding of the body as the *lived* body [*Leib*] rather than to the *living* body – as the ‘object’ of reflective activity.

Despite the differences with the phenomenological accounts, but also in contrast with other reductionist organic perspectives, however, Damasio’s descriptions seem to be open to at least a ‘waving’ in between the phenomenological double-sided description of the body as the *living* body and as the *lived* body. He even sometimes ‘overlaps’ these two understandings. Moreover, Damasio recognizes a distinctiveness in the relationship between the body as an ‘object’ and as a ‘subject’ of the inner perception, which can be traced back to the very distinctiveness of the interoceptive process from the exteroceptive process. In particular, it consists of the uniqueness of the interaction between the subject (generated by the central nervous system) and the object of interoception – the body (Carvalho & Damasio, 2021: 2). He seems also to be ‘waving’ in between, respectively, a *reflective* and a *pre-reflective* level of description. According to a phenomenological understanding, all the characteristics of feelings he outlines already emerge at a pre-reflective level of consciousness: In contrast, Damasio identifies features such as ‘directedness’, ‘subjectivity’, etc. at a reflective level, through a representational (mapping) activity. Nevertheless, particularly regarding the feeling of being alive, he endorses an ontological antireductionism between the grounding, biological level of ‘aliveness’ and the experiential level of ‘feeling’, which is in line with enactivist approaches (Fuchs, 2017; Colombetti, 2014; Thompson, 2007). Ultimately, despite his enlightening descriptions of ‘feeling’ and also mind and consciousness in neurophysiological terms, Damasio’s theoretical framework remains often puzzling for philosophers.

2 Conclusion

In opposition to the mainstream view (Fingerhut & Marienberg, 2012), this philosophical inquiry pursued the general aim of arguing for an account of the feeling of being alive as a unique feeling, that can be described in different ways. Its distinctive features turned out to be: A ‘primordial’ feeling, an ‘existential’ feeling, a ‘bodily’ feeling (entrenched in ‘aliveness’ and ‘phenomenality’). In line with several other approaches recognizing the role of interoception proper in mind and subjectivity grounding (Tsakiris & De Prester, 2019), my account found neuroscientific support particularly in the recognized continuity of the interoceptive flow (Carvalho & Damasio, 2021: 7), further endorsed by Damasio and Damasio (2022). This continuous, uninterrupted flow usually stays in the background, unattended, but it comes suddenly and dramatically into the foreground in psychopathologies when disrupted (Tsakiris & De Prester, 2019; Sacks, 1987).

Throughout the paper, I also outlined the differences between Damasio’s own conceptualizations and the several misinterpretations occurred over the last decades by the scholars acknowledging his organic descriptions as the neurophysiological

underpinnings of their own concepts (Varga & Krueger, 2013; Ratcliffe, 2012; Slaby & Stephan, 2008; Stern, 2010). Particularly, such misinterpretations are recognized in the *primordial* feeling of being alive (Damasio, 2010) as equated with the previously identified levels of *background* feeling/emotion* (1999). These scholars usually adopt this questionable equivalence, often in the footsteps of Ratcliffe's interpretation of Damasio's ideas. As a result, in the philosophical acknowledgement of Damasio's organic descriptions, some relevant features have been 'lost in translation': The irreducible non-intentional account (at least, according to the standard meaning of intentionality); the difference between background feelings as discrete states and the overall, primordial feelings as the feeling of being alive; the key role of the body (and the entrenched phenomenality) as coming into the 'foreground', etc. That's why I quoted as much as possible Damasio's *own* texts and also provided an overall taxonomy of the affective states he focussed on over recent decades. However, from the philosophical side, I also proposed a critical discussion of Damasio's own account of the feeling of being alive, working out the need for a more robust theoretical framework. His approach is still fascinating but also sometimes perplexing, especially for philosophers.

To conclude: Despite the multidisciplinary explanatory effort, the feeling of being alive at issue still constitutes a major blind spot of contemporary affective sciences research. There's no shared definition nor consensus about its distinctive features. Nevertheless, beyond the theoretical interest, further investigations into this feeling are required also from a practical point of view, especially for clinicians. The recognized lack of the feeling of being alive in depressive states (Fuchs, 2005, 2012; Glannon, 2002) or in Cotard's syndrome (Radovich, 2017; Ratcliffe, 2004) – as in other psychiatric disorders – is, still, a challenging issue, not only from a medical and psychological point of view but also from a social perspective.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest I have no conflict of interest to declare.

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