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Philosophical Explorations

An International Journal for the Philosophy of Mind and Action

ISSN: 1386-9795 (Print) 1741-5918 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rpex20

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**To cite this article:** Susana Ramírez-Vizcaya (03 Oct 2025): Skills without affectivity? Integrating affective experiences into the philosophy of skills, Philosophical Explorations, DOI: 10.1080/13869795.2025.2568525

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/13869795.2025.2568525

PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATIONS
https://doi.org/10.1080/13869795.2025.2568525

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# Skills without affectivity? Integrating affective experiences into the philosophy of skills

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**ABSTRACT**

In this paper, I emphasise the relevance of affectivity in skilled acquisition and performance, an aspect that remains undertheorised in the philosophy of skills. Drawing on a phenomenologically informed enactivist framework, I argue that affectivity is not a mere by-product but an integral dimension of skilled agency. I identify two key ways in which affectivity shapes the dynamics of skilled performance. First, I discuss how affective appraisals serve as pre-reflective indicators of normative adequacy or inadequacy during performance, guiding corrections, sustaining motivation, and fostering creativity. Second, I examine self-esteem as an existential feeling that configures our sense of agency and practical engagement with the world. In this context, I analyse the phenomenon of stereotype threat to show how interpersonal interactions and sociocultural norms modulate self-esteem, and how repeated exposure to negative stereotypes can gradually erode it, thereby undermining an agent's skilful performance. These insights invite a reconceptualisation of affectivity as central not only to the execution and development of skilled action, but also to its possible breakdown.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**
Received 19 October 2024
Accepted 13 September 2025

**KEYWORDS**
Skilled action; affectivity; situated normativity; existential feelings; self-esteem; stereotype threat

## 1. Introduction

Although skills have been extensively studied in the philosophy of mind and action, their affective dimension has yet to receive systematic treatment. Compared to aspects such as perception, attention, cognitive control, and propositional knowledge – which have been extensively theorised – affectivity remains a largely undertheorised topic in contemporary philosophical accounts of skilled action.[1]

The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Skill and Expertise (Fridland and Pavese 2021), for example, includes only one chapter on emotion (Eickers and Prinz 2021), and that chapter focuses not on the role of affect in skilled performance, but on emotional recognition as a social skill. The Handbook editors themselves acknowledge that, although connections between skill and emotion are implicit in a few discussions, the topic remains underexplored in philosophy – unlike perception, which has received

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sustained attention within 4E (embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended) approaches (Fridland and Pavese 2021). Kath Bicknell (2021, 610) also notes this lack of engagement with the topic by pointing out that 'the impacts of physiological change or affective and emotion states […] remain almost absent' from discussions on skilled action. She adds: 'there is little about any positive role that emotions or affects – joy, exhilaration, sadness, anger, or (as in the case studies below) anxiety – may play in decision-making or motor control' (599).

If we follow authors such as Hubert Dreyfus (2002) and Alva Nöe (2005) in taking seriously the embodied and situated nature of skills, then the widespread neglect of affectivity in contemporary philosophical research on skilled action constitutes a significant gap. As several phenomenologically inspired works in enactive cognitive science have underscored, a living, acting body is fundamentally a feeling, affective body (Colombetti 2007, 2014; Colombetti and Thompson 2008; Thompson 2007). Building on these insights, this paper aims to contribute to a more systematic account of the role of affectivity in skilled action.

My main claim in this paper is that affectivity should not be treated as a secondary factor that merely accompanies skilful performance, but as constitutive of skilled action in at least two interrelated ways. First, affective experiences provide agents with a pre-reflective, bodily sense of how well or poorly their actions are unfolding, thereby guiding norm-sensitive adjustments in real time. Second, at a deeper existential level, affective orientations such as self-esteem configure how agents find themselves in the world, thus broadening or limiting the range of possibilities that appear available to them. This basic affective orientation – or 'existential feeling' (Ratcliffe 2005) – is not only important in its own right, but also foundational for the first role, as it modulates the experience of adequacy or inadequacy during performance.

I argue that these two constitutive roles of affectivity in skilled action correspond to affective appraisals of (1) one's actions and their products and (2) oneself. However, they are also simultaneously appraisals of the world as a practical field of possibilities for action. Importantly, these appraisals are not treated here as disembodied intellectual interpretations of bodily and environmental stimuli. Instead, following enactive approaches to affectivity (Colombetti 2007, 2014; Slaby 2012; Thompson 2007), they are understood as corporeal affections through which agents make sense of their situation. As Colombetti (2007, 324) puts it,

> the experience of appraisal is thoroughly corporeal; the emotionally aroused body […] is immediately available as such to the subject's experience, namely, it does not need the mediation of a separate non-corporeal appraising experience. The emotionally aroused body is rather that through which the subject evaluates her world.

However, it is important to note that affective appraisals, as I understand them here, do not exclude reflective evaluations. On the contrary, they are complementary: propositional evaluations can feed back into affective appraisals, and these embodied appraisals can in turn be reflected upon, verbalised, and woven into a narrative that reshapes our affective landscape. It should also be noted that the roles presented here do not exhaust the diversity and complexity of the interactions between affective phenomena and skills. Still, they may open the door to a deeper exploration of affectivity as a critical component of what Kath Bicknell and John Sutton (2022) call 'ecologies of skill'.

The remainder of the paper is structured in two main sections. In Section 2, I focus on the role of affective phenomena in indicating to agents how good or poor, correct or incorrect, optimal or suboptimal, appropriate or inappropriate, their actions and their outcomes are, according to norms that derive both from individual style and from the sociocultural practice in which their performance is embedded. These affective appraisals not only provide a bodily sense of normative adequacy, but also move the agent to act in ways that improve her grip on the situation.

In Section 3, I examine the role that self-esteem plays in skill acquisition and performance as a bodily sense of 'I can' (or 'I cannot') that operates in the background of experience, configuring our practical engagements with the world. I use the phenomenon of stereotype threat to illustrate how sociocultural dynamics can influence skilled performance through their impact on self-esteem. Together, these sections support the claim that affectivity is not a contingent accompaniment to skilled action, but a constitutive dimension of both its development and its execution.

## 2. Affective experiences as indicators of normativity

In delineating the stages of skill acquisition, Hubert Dreyfus posits emotional involvement as a condition for progressing from a stage of competence, characterised by a disinterested attitude of rule-following, to a stage of expertise, in which one immediately perceives the situation as calling for a specific course of action. As he puts it, '[s]uch emotional involvement seems to be necessary to facilitate the switchover from detached, analytical rule following to an entirely different engaged, holistic mode of experience', in which the learner is able to make the 'situational response that is characteristic of expertise' (2005, 53).

Although Dreyfus does not offer a detailed account of how emotional involvement contributes to the development of expertise, he does suggest that positive and negative emotions indicate to performers whether their actions are unfolding in line with what the situation demands, thus reinforcing successful responses while discouraging unsuccessful ones (2002, 370). This idea derives from Merleau-Ponty's notion of maximal grip, which Dreyfus frequently invokes to explain how agents can act skilfully without the need for a mental representation of a goal. Maximal grip, in Dreyfus' words, 'names the body's tendency to refine its responses so as to bring the current situation closer to an optimal grip' (2002, 367).

Arguably, Dreyfus would agree that this process of refining one's grip on the situation is not merely a matter of sensorimotor adjustment, but also involves a form of affective appraisal that indicates whether one's performance is going better or worse, closer to or further from what feels like an optimal configuration. This is expressed in his claim that '[a]s we cope, we experience ourselves to be getting a better or worse grip on the situation' (2005, 57). Such appraisal is not a detached reflection carried out retrospectively, but a pre-reflective, embodied experience that arises in the midst of action and guides the agent's ongoing engagement with the situation.

In what follows, I examine the role of affective experiences in indicating a situated form of normativity in skilled action. I begin by discussing how negatively valenced affective appraisals signal to agents that their performance is falling short – being suboptimal, inappropriate, or incorrect – thus moving them to refine their actions. I argue that

while these experiences can support the development of skill, they may also lead to withdrawal, particularly during the early stages of learning. I then turn to positively valenced affective experiences, such as joy or exhilaration, which indicate success. I contend that these experiences foster continued engagement and creative exploration. Unlike negative appraisals, positive affective appraisals have received little attention in the philosophical literature on skilled action, despite their crucial role in supporting long-term skill development.

### 2.1. Negative affective appraisal as an indicator of failure

According to Dreyfus (2005, 57), when experts face disturbances in the flow of their actions, they make intuitive adjustments that reduce their 'sense of uneasiness'. This sense of uneasiness can be understood as an affective appraisal that signals to them that their actions require refinement. In Dreyfus' (2002, 378) words, '[p]art of that experience is a sense that when one's situation deviates from some optimal body-environment relationship, one's activity takes one closer to that optimum and thereby relieves the "tension" of the deviation'.

Even if experts cannot immediately correct their performance, this sense of uneasiness indicates a suboptimal situation that calls for their attention. It may lead them to consider, for instance, that they need to practise more, change the strings of their instrument, or get better rest. In any case, the crucial point is that, prior to any reflection, experts are already sensitive to the normativity of their domain and experience deviations from it as affective tension or uneasiness.

A similar idea has been further developed by Erik Rietveld (2008) in his account of situated normativity, drawing on Wittgenstein's (1966) notion of 'directed discontent' (see also Rietveld and Brouwers 2017). Rietveld characterises this experience as an 'affective behaviour' in the sense that it is a 'fast reaction of appreciation' that is both 'affective and behavioural at the same time' (2008, 976). This conception closely resembles the notion of affective appraisal outlined in the previous section, in that it involves an immediate bodily sensitivity to how things stand, rather than a detached evaluation. Additionally, Rietveld's emphasis on its behavioural dimension adds a new layer to this kind of affective appraisal, one that resonates with Dreyfus's conception of uneasiness as an affection that moves the agent to act in order to improve her grip on the situation.

Focusing on craftsmanship practices such as architecture and tailoring, Rietveld (2008) describes directed discontent as an indicator 'of normative (in)adequacy' (986), experienced by experts as a 'normative tension' (974) when aspects of the object they are working on appear to them as 'not (yet) correct' (983). This tension moves them to improve the situation by engaging with the relevant affordances. As an indicator of normativity, directed discontent is gradually reduced as experts perceive the object becoming 'more and more correct […] until finally reaching a point of correctness and zero discontent' (981), where they no longer feel any tendency to act differently.

Importantly, directed discontent does not require experts to refer to or be guided by explicit rules or criteria. Through extensive training within a socio-cultural practice, they have already incorporated the established patterns of their domain. Nonetheless, I agree with Rietveld (2008, 978) that this affective experience is normative, since it 'concerns the correctness of an object for the appreciator within its context'. This 'situated

normativity', as he calls it, 'has more to do with a concrete physical activation of the neural (pre-)motor system, autonomic arousal, muscle tension, and gut reaction than with explicit or implicit rules' (994).

With this in mind, I suggest that Rietveld's analysis of directed discontent can be extended to other forms of skilled practice, in which affective appraisal is directed not so much at the product of an activity (e.g. an architect's drawing) as at how the performer's skilful movements unfold in relation to the context. This extension allows us to account for performance-based practices such as dance, judo, or swimming, where what is at stake is not an external object, but the ongoing refinement of one's actions. Klaasen, Rietveld, and Topal (2010) have already broadened the notion to include forms of everyday expertise, such as social interactions and 'engaged reflection' (exemplified in the activity of choosing the right word when writing). In these cases, as in craftsmanship, 'the individual's experience of an object/person in context motivates a reaction of appreciation and improvement' (57).

In performance-based practices, as in craftsmanship, the acquisition of expertise involves countless hours of effortful practice, repetition and refinement of challenging sequences, numerous failures and successes, and constant feedback from other experts. Through this process, agents develop an increasingly rich sensorimotor repertoire attuned to the established patterns of their domain. Yet unlike in craftsmanship, where directed discontent typically concerns the evolving features of an external product, in performance-based practices it is directed at the fine-grained dynamics of the expert's own movements and their attunement to the situation. In this way, directed discontent, as an affective appraisal intrinsic to expert performance, can guide moment-to-moment adjustments without requiring agents to disengage from their ongoing activity.

In addition, I suggest that directed discontent may also be experienced when expert performers deviate not only from the socioculturally established norms of their practice, but also from the distinctive personal styles they have developed through extended engagement with their domain. This is so because, in mastering a skill, individuals develop particular repertoires of habits that, while constrained by the normativity proper to the practice, also depend on their unique trajectories of bodily interaction with the world (Di Paolo, Buhrmann, and Barandiaran 2017). Accordingly, certain movements will feel more comfortable or natural to a given agent than others, depending on the habitual patterns that constitute their style.

Moreover, while directed discontent is intrinsic to expert performance, I propose that this experience can be traced back to earlier stages of learning through Wittgenstein's (1966) notion of directed discomfort. According to Rietveld's interpretation, whereas the experience of discontent involves an appreciation of specific aspects of the object that call for improvement – along with a felt tendency to engage with relevant affordances to correct the object – the experience of discomfort is 'more like a raw, undifferentiated rejection of the object'. An example of directed discomfort, Rietveld suggests, might include the feeling that an object 'just does not seem right', as well as more extreme reactions such as 'destroying the object and starting again from scratch, or going home and leaving it all behind' (2008, 980).

Extending this notion to the affective appraisal of one's own performance – which may or may not involve produced objects – I propose that directed discomfort can be

characterised as a vague feeling that something is not quite right in the execution of a skill, without the agent having an intuition about what is wrong or how to correct it. While such vague feelings may also arise in expert performance, I suggest that directed discomfort is best understood as an affective precursor, typical of early stages of learning, to the more refined experience of directed discontent ingrained in expert performance.[2] This experience of discomfort already expresses a concern for the correctness of one's performance, which Rietveld (2008) takes to be a central condition for individual behaviour to become bound to the normativity of a sociocultural practice.

However, it is also important to note that recurring experiences of directed discomfort may lead novices to frustration and, in some cases, to abandoning the practice altogether during the early stages of learning. This observation has important pedagogical implications: it suggests that a crucial aspect of instruction involves helping practitioners tolerate such negative experiences by designing learning environments that are challenging enough to foster progression, but not so far beyond the learner's current skill level as to induce withdrawal. This balance is emphasised by Lynda Mainwaring and Donna Krasnow (2010, 17) in the context of dance instruction, where they claim that teachers should avoid both classes that are 'too slow' or the goals 'too easy', which can bore and demotivate students, and classes that are 'too pressured or the goals too difficult', which may generate frustration and anxiety. As we will see in Section 3, such recurring feelings of failure can also impact students' self-esteem, further deteriorating their performance.

Finally, drawing on an enactive approach to sensorimotor agency (Di Paolo, Buhrmann, and Barandiaran 2017; Ramírez-Vizcaya and Froese 2019), I suggest that the concern for one's performance conforming to a situated normativity becomes particularly salient when engaging in skills the agent deeply cares about, as these are central to her habitual identity. For sensorimotor agents, situations appear as relevant not merely in relation to their organic survival, but also in terms of maintaining the coherence of a self-organising network of habits that constitute their identities. Some clusters of habits form regional identities that the agent is particularly keen to preserve (Ramírez-Vizcaya 2025). As agents become attuned to the normativity proper to the practices constituting these regional identities, deviations from it may give rise to affective appraisals that reflect not only a breakdown in performance, but also a disruption in one's habitual self, even if the action remains functionally effective.

### 2.2. Positive affective appraisal as an indicator of success

According to Dreyfus (2002), affective experiences with a positive valence, such as elation and euphoria, already appear at the stage of competence in skill development: 'at this stage, things work out well, and the competent performer experiences a kind of elation unknown to the beginner' (370). These experiences indicate that a skill is being successfully enacted and help sustain motivation and engagement during the learning process. In this regard, they may form part of the emotional involvement that Dreyfus identifies as a condition for progressing from competence to expertise when he asserts that '[a]s the competent performer becomes more and more emotionally involved in his tasks, it becomes increasingly difficult to draw back and to adopt the detached rule-following stance of the beginner' (370).

Nevertheless, Dreyfus' position regarding positively valenced affective experiences in the case of experts is not that clear. In his well-known account of absorbed coping, experts are said to perform at their best when they respond 'directly to solicitations without attending to [their] activity or to the objects doing the soliciting' (2007, 374). If they pay attention to their performance while responding to solicitations, according to Dreyfus, they regress from expertise to competence. It is only when they are 'solving problems, learning a new skill, [or] receiving coaching' that they consciously monitor their movements (354). Otherwise, when 'everything is going exactly the way it should' (358), experts supposedly have no experience of themselves. There is only a silent lack of tension while they are mindlessly guided by solicitations. Furthermore, for this philosopher, 'when one is totally absorbed in one's activity, one ceases to be a subject' (373). In this regard, Dreyfus has been frequently (and I think rightly) criticised for excluding conscious experience altogether from expert skilful coping.

It thus seems that, for Dreyfus, an expert cannot affectively appraise her successful performance while fully absorbed in her embodied coping, at least not without such appraisal interfering with her performance. As Zahavi (2013, 321) critically puts it, Dreyfus 'claims that there is no place for experiential content in absorbed coping […], just as he also refers to the phenomenon of unconscious coping and likens Olympic swimmers, who are performing at their best, to sleepwalkers'. At most, Dreyfus would allow for a diminishment of uneasiness as the expert intuitively adjusts her response when facing a disturbance. Still, he does not seem to admit any conscious experience occurring during absorbed coping.

However, his description of absorbed coping as the peak of expert performance is not entirely consistent, as it sometimes seems to allow for some form of positively valenced affective experience. For instance, Dreyfus (2007, 373) claims that '[e]xperts *experience* periods of performance, variously called "flow", "in the groove", and "in the zone", when everything becomes easier, confidence rises, time slows down' [emphasis added]. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986, 40) also state that these 'rare moments' are 'accompanied by a feeling of euphoria'. Yet, Dreyfus (2007, 373) also describes periods of flow as those in which 'the mind, which usually monitors performance, is quieted'. But how could an expert feel euphoria, experience her performance becoming easier, her confidence rising, or time slowing down if she were not self-conscious? Moreover, it does not make much sense to speak of flow as an experience if no conscious subject experiences it. In this regard, I agree with Zahavi (2013, 326) that 'the level of absorbed coping involves a dimension of self-experience – at least in so far as that level is supposed to be experiential rather than simply a matter of nonconscious automaticity'.

Accordingly, we can say that there is something it is like to perform successfully (as opposed to unsuccessfully), and that this affective experience involves a minimal form of self-awareness. However, this experience need not be reflective or thematised; rather, it unfolds pre-reflectively in the midst of action. To better characterise this kind of affective appraisal, I draw on Michela Summa's (2020) phenomenological distinction between happiness and joy. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, Summa argues that they name two distinct 'emotional responses related to the sense of accomplishment' (416). Whereas happiness implies an evaluative stance that occurs after completing a process of accomplishment or while reflecting on one's life, joy – understood in the sense of rejoicing – is experienced during its unfolding: 'joy

accompanies the process through and through, whereas happiness seems to be more strictly tied to the moment of achievement of the process'. Joy, then, does not involve explicit reflection, but 'a direct emotional response to an event that is embedded in our-life concerns' (421).

I propose that this pre-reflective experience captures a distinctive form of affective appraisal that signals to the agent that her performance is unfolding successfully. Unlike affective evaluations that occur retrospectively, the experience of joy is constitutively tied to the ongoing dynamics of skilled action. Related affective experiences, such as euphoria or exhilaration, while agents are absorbed in their activities may similarly signal to them varying degrees of accomplishment.

Importantly, the affective normativity at play in skilled action is not limited to sensorimotor performance. Similar affective dynamics can be found in epistemic practices such as scientific inquiry, where one often experiences a felt sense that a line of reasoning 'makes sense' or is 'on the right track'. These so-called epistemic feelings can also be understood as affective appraisals that guide intellectual skills in analogous ways that feelings of discontent or joy guide physical skills. This parallel suggests that affectivity plays a pervasive role across domains of skilled agency.

Finally, I suggest that, whereas the feeling of directed discontent involves a movement towards improving one's grip on the situation, the experience of joy fosters an open and exploratory attitude, moving the agent to further engage with her current performance in a more creative way. As Summa (2020, 421) points out, joy has a 'centripetal character' in that it expresses 'an active movement toward the object' (418), thereby enhancing the agent's 'power to act' (420). This joyful experience also creates an atmosphere of trust, encouraging agents to venture into novel movements and interactions with the environment. However, precisely because of this openness, a joyful state may also lead to relaxation and slowing of performance when one perceives that further effort is no longer needed (Cappuccio et al. 2019).

Some of these ideas find support in a series of psychological studies on the relationship between mood and creativity. According to Matthijs Baas (2019, 259), 'happy moods', which are activating and positively valenced, are 'the most robust predictor of creativity of all mood states', presumably by enhancing cognitive flexibility. By signalling 'a satisfactory and safe state of affairs', these moods 'increase people's willingness to explore novel possibilities' (262). Interestingly, agry moods have likewise been found to enhance creativity, but only in the early stages of a task. They are thought to do so by fostering cognitive persistence, i.e. 'the extent to which the individual focuses attention and effort on the task at hand', since such moods 'are activating and additionally signal a problematic and insufficient state of affairs' (263). Although my analysis focuses on affective appraisals rather than moods, it is plausible that repeated experiences of joy during performance may give rise to more enduring joyful or cheerful moods, thus supporting exploratory and creative engagement. Conversely, experiences of directed discontent and discomfort may lead to negatively valenced activating moods such as anger, fostering a more focused and effortful attitude aimed at correction and improvement.

This interplay between affective appraisals and skilful action suggests that affectivity is not merely a byproduct of successful or unsuccessful performance, but a constitutive dimension of how agents sense their attunement with the norms of a practice, whether through feelings of discontent, discomfort, or joy. In the next section, I

examine how these affective appraisals of failure and success are embedded within a deeper existential orientation, i.e. self-esteem, that shapes how agents perceive their possibilities for action in a given performance context. I also consider how the sociocultural environment impacts this existential orientation through the phenomenon of stereotype threat.

## 3. Self-esteem and the affective background of skilled agency

Following Anna Bortolan's phenomenological account, self-esteem can be understood as a 'background affective orientation' or 'existential feeling' (2020, 358) that configures the way we find ourselves in the world and engage with it as a space of possibilities. On this view, self-esteem is constituted by affective appraisals of oneself regarding one's abilities, potentialities, and actual achievements, appraisals that give rise to a unitary sense 'of ourselves as being more or less worthy' (362).

A related idea is found in Jan Slaby's notion of 'affective self-construal', which he describes as a bodily sense of ability inseparable from action that is enacted even before one can reflect upon it and make it explicit through language. This feeling constitutes our bodily sense of 'I can' (or 'I can't'), i.e. 'our sense of what we can [or cannot] do, what we are capable [or incapable] of, and also what we can [or cannot] cope with or what we can [or cannot] "take" more generally' (2012, 152). According to Bortolan (2020, 362), this background sense of ability, which she refers to as 'self-efficacy',[3] is a core aspect of the structure of self-esteem, together with what she calls 'self-respect', i.e. a sense of our actual achievements.

On this account, self-esteem is not primarily an intellectual evaluation of one's self-concept – though it may give rise to reflection and feed back into our self-concept, while also being nurtured by it. Nor is it an episodic emotion or, more generally, a discrete mental state that only occasionally colours our experience and motivates specific actions or thoughts. Rather, as will be further clarified in the next sub-section (3.1.), it is best conceived as a non-localised, 'global form of [affective] self-experience' (Bortolan 2020, 360) that operates continuously in the background to varying degrees, radically shaping our emotions, thoughts, and practical engagements with the world. Understood in this way, self-esteem emerges as a crucial factor in the complex ecology of skilled agency. In what follows, I examine how self-esteem shapes our sense of agency, which plays a central role in the cognitive control involved in skilled action.

To further clarify how self-esteem shapes agency, the final sub-section (3.2.) examines the phenomenon of stereotype threat (Steele and Aronson 1995), in which negative stereotypes about a social group have a deleterious effect on the performance of its members, thereby confirming the stereotype in question. This phenomenon also helps us realise that self-esteem is largely shaped by our interpersonal engagements and by the narratives, ideals and norms that prevail in the societies we inhabit.

### *3.1. Self-esteem and agency*

Several authors have emphasised the important role of cognitive control in skilled performance, challenging the view that advanced skills are executed in a purely automatic fashion. In this context, Fridland argues that what makes an action skilled is precisely

the control exerted over its execution. According to her, such cognitive control is what 'accounts for an agent's ability to guide and modify her actions appropriately' (2014, 2732).

In a related line of thought, Wayne Christensen et al. (2015) further explore the role of cognitive control in skilled performance by examining how the sense of agency contributes to both strategic and proximal control in mountain bike riding. A key aspect of this is what they term the prospective sense of agency, i.e. the 'prospective awareness of potential control acts that can influence the performance state' (346). Although they do not develop this notion in detail, I propose that it can be understood as a pre-reflective awareness of the range of action possibilities available to an agent to respond effectively to the demands of the current situation. According to the authors, the prospective sense of agency improves with experience, so experts are able to foresee a broader repertoire of viable action possibilities than novices, which allows them to adjust their strategic and proximal control more flexibly, thereby enhancing performance.

However, as I will argue in the remainder of this section, what an agent experiences as her potential action possibilities in a particular situation (i.e. her prospective sense of agency) significantly depends on her level of self-esteem, as it profoundly shapes 'the range of possibilities for action and interaction that the world appears to harbour' (Bortolan 2020, 360).

Christensen et al. (2015, 347) hint at this idea when they assert that an agent's 'confidence will […] affectively tinge the more immediate sense of agency involved in specific actions'. According to them, confidence largely depends on the relationship between an agent's current performance state and what they call 'a performance envelope', which 'specifies the range of performance states that are possible or optimal' in a particular situation: an agent will feel in control when her 'current performance state is comfortably within the performance envelope, and insecure [when it is] near the edges'. The authors also note that confidence 'can also involve a more generalised sense that the individual's action capabilities will be adequate for the challenges that the task is likely to present' (347). As discussed earlier, this embodied sense of one's abilities and potentialities (self-efficacy), together with a sense of one's actual achievements (self-respect), forms a constitutive part of the complex structure of self-esteem (Bortolan 2020).

As an existential feeling, self-esteem discloses not only oneself as more or less worthy, but also, as its counterpart, the world as a place of possibilities (or lack thereof). More precisely, according to Matthew Ratcliffe (2005, 53) – the philosopher who coined this notion – existential feelings are 'ways of finding oneself in a world that shape more specific experiences'. In this sense, for instance, feeling oneself as a failure or as lacking the abilities required to deal with challenging situations is not a self-enclosed mental state or a purely intellectual belief about oneself. Rather, it is a way of finding oneself in the world as an agent, and as such, it shapes one's practical engagements with it. It modulates, for example, an agent's sense of prospective agency: depending on the agent's level of self-esteem, more or fewer control acts in her repertoire will show up as potentially available to influence her performance state. It will also affect whether the performance envelope appears wider or narrower, thereby influencing her sense of prospective control and the strategy she is likely to adopt.

As Slaby (2012, 153) points out, '[a] person's felt relatedness to the world is nothing other than the fundamental sense of ability […]. This embodied, modifiable sense of "I

can" and "I cannot" shapes the way the world, others, and oneself are apprehended'. A sense of 'I can't', for instance, may disclose certain situations as too difficult for me to cope with, manifesting itself in emotions such as fear or embarrassment, which may foster a hesitant attitude towards trying new control acts, taking risks, creatively exploring new affordances, or setting more challenging goals.

In the case of mountain bike riding, which Christensen et al. (2015) focus on, a low level of self-esteem might manifest as hesitant and fearful riding. Adapting their case study to a different scenario, it may lead the biker to unclip and put a foot down when encountering particularly salient obstacles – obstacles that may appear as such precisely because of her low self-esteem. This 'felt relatedness to the world', using Slaby's (2012, 153) terms, will hinder the agent's potential to make substantial progress in her skill, further undermining her self-esteem.

Conversely, a sense of 'I can' is likely to disclose a difficult situation as challenging yet manageable, prompting emotions such as joy or excitement that draw the agent to explore new possibilities for action. This, in turn, may lead to an expansion of the agent's performance envelope and, consequently, to an enhanced prospective sense of control in that particular situation – potentially contributing to her self-esteem.

Cappuccio et al. (2019, 128–130) review some literature in sports psychology that supports these ideas. In particular, the 'theory of challenge and threat states in athletes' proposes that self-efficacy – one of the structural components of self-esteem (Bortolan 2020) – is crucial for appraising a situation as either a challenge or a threat. According to this theory, athletes with high self-efficacy perceive themselves as having the capability to cope with the demands of the situation, thus appraising it as a challenge, while 'those with low self-efficacy will appraise the event as a threat, for they are unsure whether they have the capability to meet those demands' (Cappuccio et al. 2019, 128–129). A challenge appraisal (but not a threat one) has been found to lead 'to increased blood flow and the efficient mobilization of energy, which can facilitate action and coping responses' (128). Moreover, according to the literature reviewed by these authors, athletes appraising a situation as a threat are more vulnerable to underperform and choking under pressure than those who appraise it as a challenge.

Finally, it is important to note that self-esteem can also bias the agent's affective appraisals of her ongoing performance. As discussed in Section 2, affective appraisals play a crucial role in skilled performance by signalling whether one's actions are appropriate or successful while they are being performed. However, existing accounts seem to implicitly assume that such appraisals are uniformly calibrated among experts, as if skill level alone determined their affective sensitivity to performance norms. This overlooks the extent to which an agent's self-esteem can skew these appraisals. For instance, an agent might feel she is falling short of the normative standards of her practice, even when her actions in fact conform to them. In this regard, affective appraisals of one's ongoing performance are not grounded solely in experience with the practice, but also in the agent's existential feeling of 'I can' or 'I cannot'.

Given the potential impact of self-esteem on performance, it is crucial to understand how it is constituted and modulated. In the remainder of this section, I briefly address how self-esteem is shaped by the social and cultural context in which agents are embedded, focusing on the phenomenon of stereotype threat.

### 3.2. Self-esteem and stereotype threat

The phenomenon of 'stereotype threat' (ST) was first investigated by psychologists Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson, who described it as a 'social-psychological predicament' (1995, 797) in which a negative stereotype about a group, made salient by a situational cue, generates concerns in the members of that group about 'confirming it as a self-characterization' (808). These concerns tend to act as a self-fulfilling prophecy, as stereotype threat has been found to unintentionally undermine the performance of stereotyped individuals in domains where the stereotype is relevant. Steele and Aronson studied the detrimental effects of negative stereotypes about the intellectual ability of African Americans on the performance of high-achieving undergraduates in a difficult verbal test. They found that making racial identity salient prior to the test impaired the performance of African American participants relative to that of White participants (capitalised to indicate a racial category).

Since these seminal experiments, ST has been extensively studied in social psychology, revealing 'how group stereotypes may shape the behavior of individuals in a way that endangers their performance and further reinforces the stereotype' (Pennington et al. 2015, 2). Deleterious effects of ST on performance have been observed among members of various stigmatised groups (e.g. women, older adults, ethnic minorities, and individuals with low socioeconomic status) across a range of domains (e.g. mathematics, golf putting, soccer, memory performance, negotiations, and driving), particularly in difficult tasks that challenge their abilities (Barber et al. 2020; Chalabaev et al. 2013; Pennington et al. 2015; Spencer, Logel, and Davies 2016).

Arguably, everyone is susceptible to ST, since everyone 'has at least one social identity that is targeted by a negative stereotype in some given situation' (Spencer, Logel, and Davies 2016, 417). However, the magnitude of ST's effect on performance has been found to depend on the extent to which individuals regard the stereotype-relevant domain as central to their personal identity or self-concept (Spencer, Logel, and Davies 2016). Building on this, I propose that recurrent exposure to ST can be expected to have a detrimental impact on self-esteem. Moreover, I suggest that at least part of ST's effect on performance may be mediated by its impact on self-esteem.

Let us consider the case of a female professional soccer player, Lisa, for whom that sport is a central part of her identity. Suppose that before a challenging game, Lisa is exposed to negative stereotypes about the lack of ability of women in soccer. In that case, considering the performance effects of ST, she is likely to underperform. According to the hypothesis advanced here, this performance deterioration may also impact her self-esteem. As she appraises her performance as unsuccessful, her self-respect will be diminished (Bortolan 2020). Recurring exposure to such stereotypes might also erode her self-efficacy (Bao et al. 2023; Kutuk et al. 2021; Spencer, Logel, and Davies 2016), thereby weakening her sense of 'I can'. As Merritt et al. (2019, 487) point out, the implicit negative biases about women 'serve to create an atmosphere in which the preconceived attitude that women and girls bring to their sport or activity is often already a sense of "I cannot"'.

Given the pervasiveness of negative stereotypes about women in sports, Lisa may be repeatedly exposed to the deleterious effects of ST, which can result in a recurrent diminishment of her self-respect and self-efficacy. These stereotypes manifest in several ways, such as in derogative comments such as 'you run like a girl' addressed to a male player

performing poorly in a soccer game she is attending, or in seemingly positive remarks like 'you play like a boy' or 'you play too good to be a girl' directed at her as a compliment. They are also present in systematic issues, such as pay disparities between female and male players, widespread beliefs that women's games are less entertaining to watch, and the notable gender imbalance in media coverage. As Lauren Freeman (2017, 648) notes, 'for members of marginalized groups, ST is a common, persistent experience with which they must grapple on a daily basis, often numerous times per day, whether they are aware of it or not'.

Moreover, because of the centrality of the soccer player regional identity to her global identity, these recurrent experiences of diminished self-respect and self-efficacy may lead Lisa to feel devalued as a person, further lowering her self-esteem. In this regard, the effects of stereotypes appear to go beyond the situational, short-term consequences typically studied in the ST literature. It is plausible that Lisa – and more generally, persons who strongly identify with the domain in which their group is stereotyped – may already arrive at the soccer game (or, for individuals belonging to other stereotyped social groups, at exams, competitions, academic conferences, job interviews, etc.) with a diminished self-esteem that makes her even more vulnerable to the effects of ST. In this regard, Freeman (2017, 647) argues that

> among the most serious harms of ST is that it can limit one's capacity to navigate the world free of anxiety and without being forced to constantly take stock of one's bodily existence as not just other, but as subordinate and inferior and […] this constitutes an enduring harm.

In the remainder of this section, I focus on the performance effect of ST to argue that conceiving self-esteem not only as a set of explicitly held beliefs about oneself (as it is typically measured in the ST literature), but rather as an existential feeling – 'always present [as] an ineliminable feature of our self-awareness' (Bortolan 2020, 360) – can help illuminate how self-esteem may mediate the relationship between ST and underperformance.

Following Peter Goldie, Bortolan (2020, 362) argues that self-esteem is a 'complex and temporally extended experience' whose structure comprises not only 'a background feeling of the self as [more or less] worthy, an experience to which both a sense of ability and a sense of actual achievement are integral', but also 'the responses through which the evaluation of one's worthiness is realised over time' (364). These responses may include thoughts, emotions, expressions, bodily changes, and actions that are congruent with one's self-esteem. Accordingly, several of the factors that have been identified as underlying the performance effect of ST can be described as components of this complex and dynamic structure of self-esteem.

To begin with, some studies have identified self-efficacy (Kutuk et al. 2021), performance expectations (Desrichard and Köpetz 2005), and the confidence in having sufficient resources to cope with the task (Barber et al. 2020) as mediating factors in the relationship between ST and poor performance among the members of stereotyped groups. As noted in the previous subsection, a sense of 'I can't' – in this case, triggered by situational exposure to stereotypes while engaging in difficult tasks that are relevant to an agent's identity – profoundly shapes how an agent experiences and interacts with the world. Returning to our previous example, a diminished sense of 'I can' may lead Lisa to perceive the soccer field during a crucial game as affording fewer opportunities for

successful passes or scoring goals, disclosing the match not as an enjoyable challenge but as a threat.

Other factors identified in the ST literature as mediators between ST and performance deficits, such as situational anxiety (Bosson, Haymovitz, and Pinel 2004; Chung et al. 2010; Gerstenberg, Imhoff, and Schmitt 2012; Osborne 2001) and intrusive thoughts related to the task (Cadinu et al. 2005), can also be understood as integral elements of the complex and temporally extended structure of self-esteem. As an existential feeling, self-esteem disposes 'us to feel emotions and entertain thoughts, which are congruent with it'. These emotions and thoughts 'can be characterised as […] responses through which the evaluation of one's worthiness is realised over time' (Bortolan 2020, 364). Furthermore, low self-esteem may also incline us to experience certain self-conscious emotions that, to my knowledge, have not yet been studied in the ST literature but may likewise contribute to underperformance by shaping how a person inhabits and navigates their environment.

For example, after being exposed to negative stereotypes about women in soccer, Lisa may be more prone to feel embarrassed during a particularly difficult game, as she doubts her ability to 'behave in a way adequate to the circumstances'. In experiencing this 'unwanted exposure' (Bortolan 2020, 365) to the gazes and potential judgements of spectators, Lisa will likely inhabit her body not as a unified whole fluidly directed towards the soccer field as a space of open possibilities, but rather as what Iris Marion Young, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, calls 'an inhibited intentionality, which simultaneously reaches toward a projected end with an "I can" and withholds its full bodily commitment to that end in a self-imposed "I cannot"'. While an 'uninhibited intentionality […] organizes and unifies the body's activities' towards the projected aim, an inhibited intentionality often involves hesitant and uncoordinated movements, as well as an experience of the world as a field of resistances rather than possibilities (1980, 146). Moreover, recurring experiences of embarrassment may give rise to a deeper, more pervasive feeling of shame that further undermines Lisa's self-esteem (Bortolan 2020), disclosing what she may come to perceive as 'a central flaw in [her] very being' (Zahavi 2020, 351).

## 4. Conclusions

In this paper, I examined the crucial role of affectivity in the development and execution of skilled action, a topic that has remained insufficiently addressed in the philosophical literature on skills. I argued that a phenomenologically informed enactivist framework is particularly well suited to illuminate this dimension, as it underscores the affective character of skilled bodies, the bodily nature of affective appraisals, and the fundamental role of the sociocultural environment in both acquiring and performing skilled actions.

I explored two of the myriad roles that affectivity may play within the complex ecologies of skills. First, I focused on how affective appraisals function as indicators of normativity in skilled performance, providing practitioners with an immediate, bodily sense of how well or poorly they are adhering to both the sociocultural norms of their practice and their personal style. On the one hand, experiences of directed discontent and discomfort signal deviations from these norms, prompting adjustments and improvements. However, repeated experiences of directed discomfort might end up discouraging

novices from continuing to pursue the skill. Conversely, positive affective appraisals such as joy indicate successful engagement and often foster further exploration and creativity. I emphasised that both kinds of affective experience are not merely add-ons but integral to the practice of skills that agents care about.

Then, I discussed the pivotal role of self-esteem, understood as an existential feeling with a complex and temporally extended structure, in skilled performance. I emphasised that self-esteem is neither an intellectual self-evaluation – though it may nurture from and give rise to it through subsequent reflection – nor an episodic emotion, but rather a constant background orientation, a way of finding oneself in the world that profoundly shapes one's emotions, thoughts, and actions. In this regard, I argued that the sense of 'I can' or 'I cannot' at the core of self-esteem radically affects the agent's prospective sense of agency that contributes to the strategic control of skilled actions. I also explored how self-esteem is modulated through interpersonal interactions and sociocultural norms, by analysing the performance effect of stereotype threat, i.e. the negative impact that societal stereotypes exert on the performance of members of stigmatised groups, often reinforcing the very stereotype in question. I contended that, over time, repeated exposure to such stereotypes could erode self-esteem, further undermining performance.

Collectively, these insights reinforce the central claim of this paper: affectivity is not a peripheral add-on but a constitutive dimension of skills. Understanding the influence of affectivity is thus vital for a fuller understanding of both individual agency and the effects of broader sociocultural dynamics in skilled performance.

## Notes

1. Affectivity is broadly understood here as encompassing different phenomena, such as emotion episodes, moods, existential feelings, and affective traits.
2. This proposal differs from Klaasen et al.'s (2010) suggestion that valence, as understood by Varela and Depraz (2005), is a precursor to directed discontent. While I understand directed discomfort as a precursor to directed discontent along the learning process, they refer to valence as the very first moment at which situated normativity becomes perceptible in the microdynamics of experience. Still, valence is also present in directed discomfort, as it 'is an integral aspect of the first constitutive moments of any experience' (Klaasen, Rietveld, and Topal 2010, 63).
3. As acknowledged by Bortolan, the notion of self-efficacy originates in Bandura's (1977) work on behaviour change, within a representationalist framework that may not be compatible with the enactivist perspective I adopt here. Nevertheless, I retain the term because it captures a crucial aspect of the lived experience of agency that shapes skilled performance.

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Miguel A. Sepúlveda-Pedro, Jorge Luis Hernández Ochoa, and Adrián Espinosa Barrios for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I am also grateful to SUAFEM and to the project Indagaciones sobre la confianza. Controversias, cruces e intersecciones teóricas y prácticas. SECIHTI-IH-2025-G-153 [project title with italics] for their support. This work benefited greatly from feedback received during its presentation at several academic events: the *Jornadas Posdoctorales* (IIF and Humanities Coordination, UNAM), the workshop *Filosofía de los afectos, explorando la motivación de los estados mentales* (CINCCO-UAEM), and the seminars *Cuerpo[s], ambiente[s] y cognición[es]* (ENAH), *Filosofía de la Ciencia* (IFICC), and *Confianza* (RIFE).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by UNAM, Programa de Becas Posdoctorales en la UNAM, Becaria del Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas asesorada por la doctora Olga Elizabeth Hansberg Torres; and by Sistema Nacional de Investigadoras e Investigadores (SNII), Secretaría de Ciencia, Humanidades, Tecnología e Innovación (SECIHTI).

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## Declarations: generative artificial intelligence (AI)

The author used OpenAI's ChatGPT (version GPT-4, July 2025) for minor language improvement on the final version of the manuscript. The tool was employed to refine grammar, syntax, and clarity in the English phrasing, without generating or altering the substantive content or arguments of the paper. All intellectual contributions remain the sole responsibility of the author.

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