Matthew Ratcliffe (2015)

*Experiences of depression: A study in phenomenology.* Oxford University Press.

To be ill, even with just a trivial illness, as much as with a mortal illness, means, above all, to experience things in a different way, to live in a different world (van den Berg, 1972, p. 45).

This quote illustrates the main message that Matthew Ratcliffe (2015) conveys in *Experiences of depression: A study in phenomenology.* Ratcliffe argues that most experiences of depression involve an existential change: an “all-enveloping shift in one’s sense of ‘belonging to a shared world’” (p. 15). He declares that this book is a philosophical exploration of the existential feelings of the experience of depression. What Ratcliffe calls existential feelings represent different ways of finding oneself in the world, an implicit, indirect or operative intentionality, which was actually first described by Husserl (Husserl as cited in Lee, 1998; Husserl, 2001; Thompson & Zahavi, 2007), later conceptualized as moods by Heidegger (1927/1996), and further developed by Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962). In his philosophical exploration, Ratcliffe integrates the fields of phenomenology, philosophy of mind, psychology and psychiatry. Applying the thought of phenomenologists such as Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, he also builds his arguments on personal descriptions of the experience of depression in literature and conducts his own qualitative research using a semi-structured internet questionnaire. With this book, Ratcliffe intends to reach a wide audience of philosophers, academic and clinical psychiatrists and psychologists.

Ratcliffe distinguishes between intentional and existential feelings, where intentional feelings are about something specific, whereas existential feelings lack such clear directedness, are deeper and have a more diffusely distributed presence across one’s field of experience, or world. Intentional hopelessness, for example, involves feeling hopelessness about something, while existential hopelessness rather involves the loss of the ability to hope. Another prominent example of this distinction in his book is ‘intentional’ as opposed to ‘existential’ guilt. Intentional guilt is to feel guilty about a particular action. Existential guilt, on the other hand, is to be guilty as if one is globally morally defective. Existential feelings are implicit and represent the background conditions of possibilities for specific and explicit object-directed emotions. Husserl (Lee, 1998) described that moods (or existential feelings) have the function of opening up, or illuminating the world and that they play an important role in the transcendental constitution.
Because of the clinical consequences of this differentiation, Ratcliffe is more than justified in criticizing the DSM diagnostic system for not differentiating between existential and intentional feelings such as guilt and hopelessness. Through his research, he also shows how these existential feelings may be interpreted and expressed through self-narratives that are past-oriented, self-destructive, and which in turn may reinforce or sustain these existential feelings.

As a clinical psychologist who often works with depressed persons, I find this book a valuable contribution, as it shows how phenomenology can be well employed to further our understanding of mental illness in general and depression in particular. Ratcliffe asserts that the “sense of reality in itself is a phenomenological achievement” (p. 19). Here he touches upon the essence of the phenomenological epoché by which he acknowledges the fact that our world is constituted (not created) by our embodied consciousness. The epistemological consequence of this phenomenological insight, which is central to the meaning of phenomenology but not explicitly stated by Ratcliffe, is that all we can know for certain is how the world is presented to us, i.e. presences (Giorgi, 2009). Ratcliffe explicates how a phenomenological stance is necessary in order to reveal what is essential in depression, namely our existential feelings, i.e. the different ways in which things may be encountered, that is, for example as bleak, ghostly, unapproachable, available to others—but not to me. Here he refers to the overall style of experience as existential feelings, and how changes in these existential feelings represent alterations in our receptivity to different kinds of possibilities. “Approaches that continue to presuppose the world will not succeed in interpreting these experiences, as they will misconstrue existential changes as changes in experience and/or thoughts that arise within a world” (Ratcliffe, 2015, p. 22).

Ratcliffe describes already in the introductory chapter the following broad themes that are almost always present in the experience of depression: feeling disconnected from the world and other people, a sense that depression is timeless, an experience of inability, and a general sense of the world as devoid of certain kinds of possibilities that are usually taken for granted. Again, Ratcliffe leans heavily on the phenomenological insights of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, among others, to show how we experience our body, time, world and others, and therefore how these categorical dimensions change in essential ways when we become depressed. He describes how a horizon of possibilities is inherent in our ordinary perception of the world and others, and how this horizon becomes limited in depression. Furthermore, this closing of existential possibilities represents alterations in our existential feelings. Some