

Including Emotions in Systemic Therapy

Paolo Bertrando, MD, PhD

Director, Systemic-Dialogical School, Bergamo, Italy



Why

How

Who

What

Why emotions?



“[The therapist] *should not ask how somebody is feeling* about something, but just collect facts and opinions.”

Jay Haley, 1963



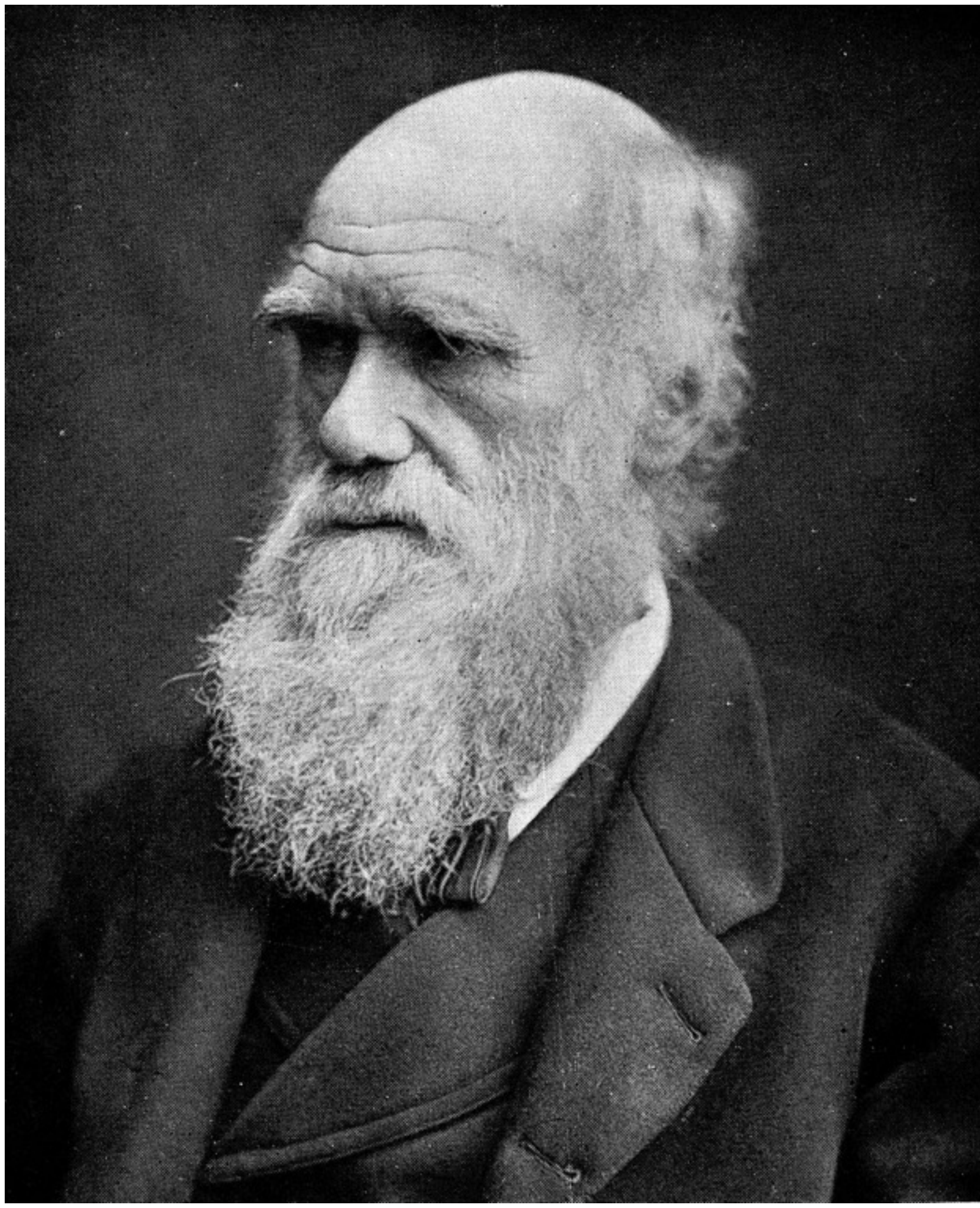


We have at the present time two scientific languages for the discussion of affect... The first ... describing the psychology of an individual. The second ... describing the **relationships between individuals.**

Gregory Bateson, 1960

The young and the old of widely different races, **both with man and animals**, express the same state of mind by the same movements.

Charles Darwin, 1872





This is Descartes' error: the **abyssal separation** between body and mind [...] Specifically: the separation of the most refined operations of mind from the structure and operation of a biological organism.

Antonio Damasio, 1994

To think about emotions purely as fireworks in the brain is, in the words of the writer Siri Hustvedt, “rather like saying that Vermeer’s *Girl Pouring Milk* is a canvas with paint on it”.

Tiffany Watt Smith, 2015





Without feelings, [...] we would be without pathos, *apathetic*. ... Without emotion, nothing makes any difference, we are indifferent.

Sally Planalp, 1999



The heart has its
reasons, which the
reason does not at
all perceive.

Blaise Pascal

Pascal, a Frenchman, ... no doubt thought of the reasons of the heart as a body of *logic and computation* as precise and complex as the reasons of consciousness.

Gregory Bateson, 1969





Emotions are appraisals of **value judgements**, which ascribe to things and persons outside the person's own control great importance of the person's own flourishing.

Martha Nussbaum, 2001



“Emotions ... communicate to ourselves, configuring mental resources and making ready for certain kinds of action. They can **communicate** also **to others**, causing changes in the modes of our interactions, from cooperation to withdrawal, to conflict, to deference”.

Keith Oatley, 1996

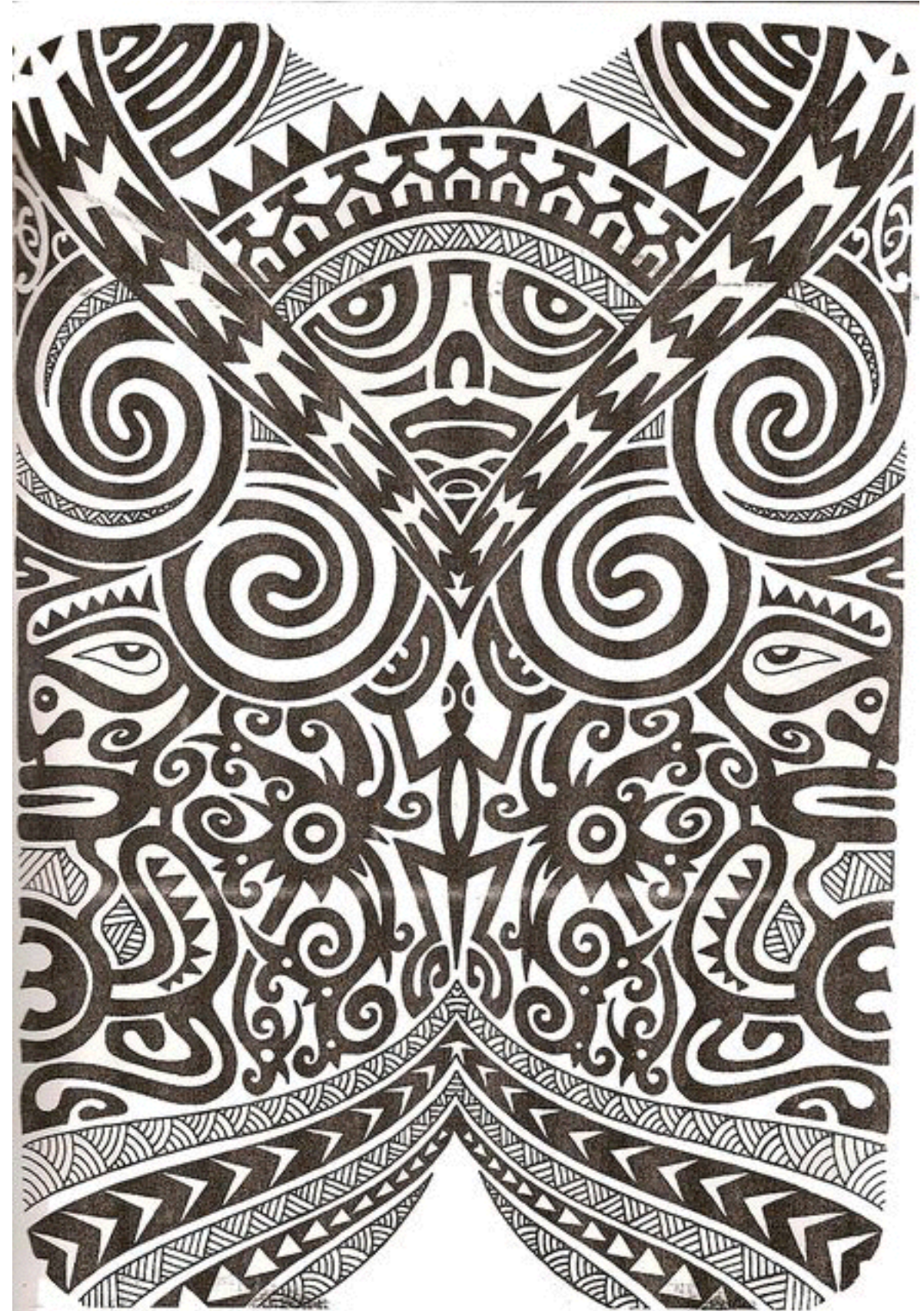


Emotions are not private. Passions are neither in the body nor the mind of the passionate subject. [...] Emotions are **common endeavours**, in which many people participate.

Paul Dumouchel, 1999

Catherine Lutz

In the Ifaluk island she was stunned, because she felt challenged in her “implicit American ethnotheory of the person and emotion.”



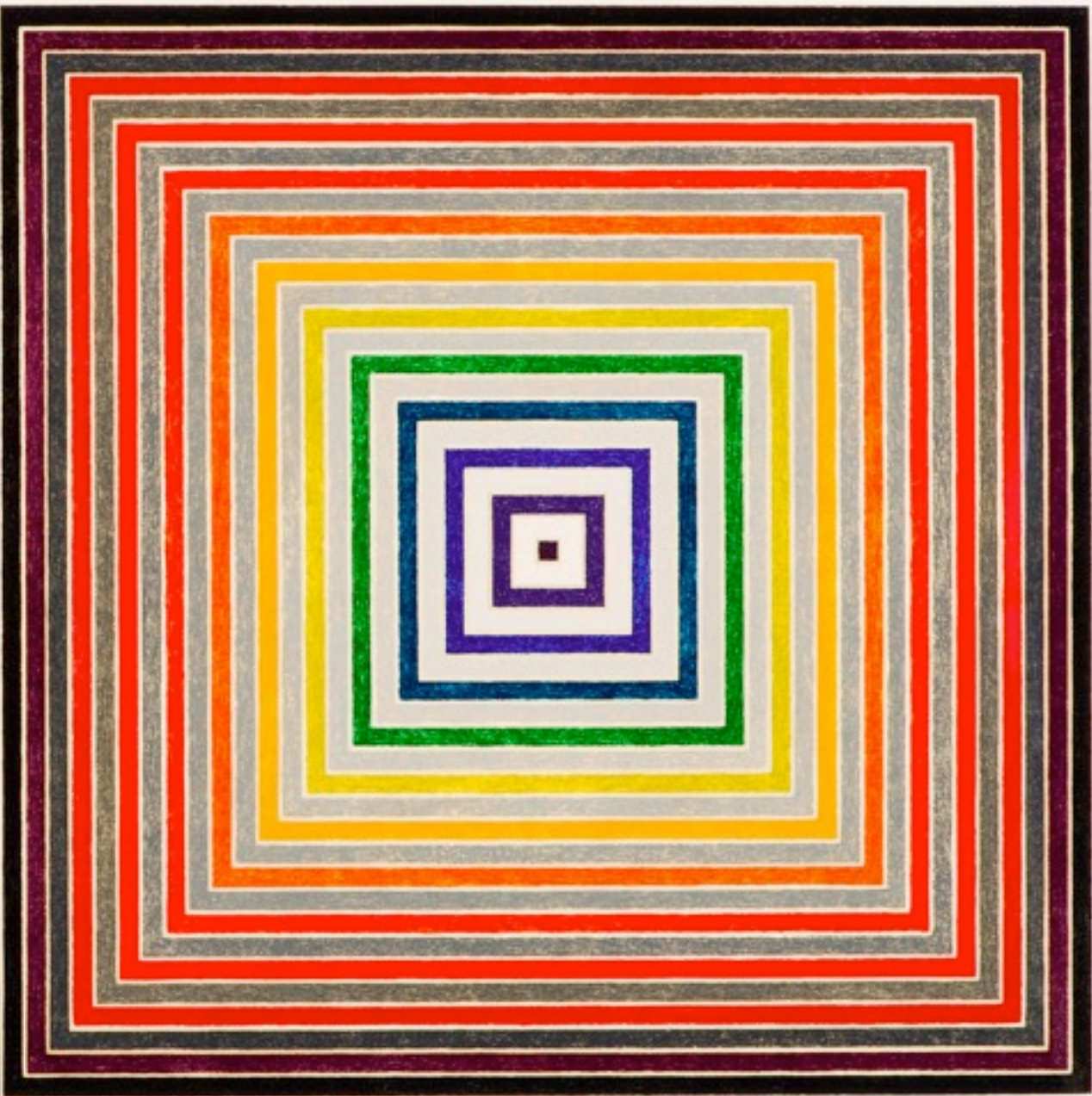
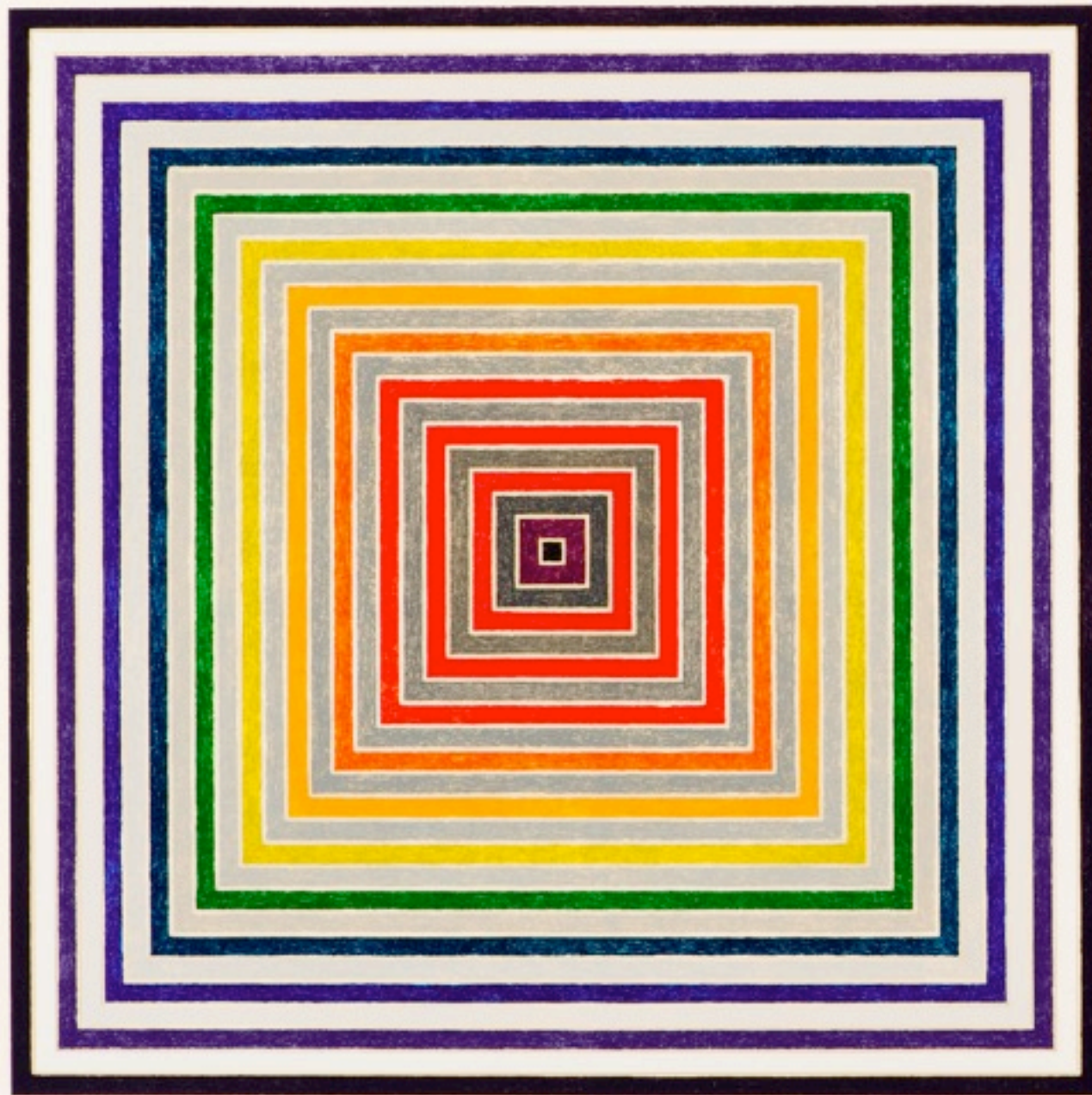


If [...] emotion is seen as **woven in complex ways** into cultural meaning systems and social interaction, [...] then the problem becomes one of translating between two different cultural views and enactments of what is good and proper.

Catherine Lutz, 1988

What is an emotion?

- An animal characteristic
- A neural process
- A spontaneous event
- An irrational fact
- A signal to the self
- An instinctual discharge
- A private experience
- A deeply human trait
- A psychological phenomenon
- A planned strategy
- An rational appraisal
- A signal to the others
- A cultural grammar
- A public exchange



Emotions are
inherently twofold



- We always **live** in emotions: no act in our lives happens without an emotional colour.
- We can see human systems as interlocking relational **processes**, where emotions play a key role.

- We can choose to focus on facts (alliances, coalitions, nonverbal actions), discourses (stories, wording, personal styles), or emotions...



- ... or the **interactions** between all of them.



A catalog of emotions

- Joy / enjoyment
- Interest / excitement
- Love / desire
- Compassion
- Surprise
- Pride
- Envy
- Jealousy
- Distress /anguish
- Anger / rage
- Shyness / shame
- Contempt / disgust
- Responsibility / guilt
- Fear / anxiety
- Sadness / grief
- Boredom



Dominant emotion

- An emotion that becomes prominent within an emotional system, organising it around itself.

Tacit emotion

- An emotion that becomes excluded from the horizon of the system, so that nobody is able to see or even feel it.



Working with/in
emotions



- First, the therapist is sensitive to the **emotional tone** of a situation or a session
- She pays attention to the mood that actors in the session display



(the emotional tone is a process that **involves the whole system**, and can have an extreme variety of presentations)



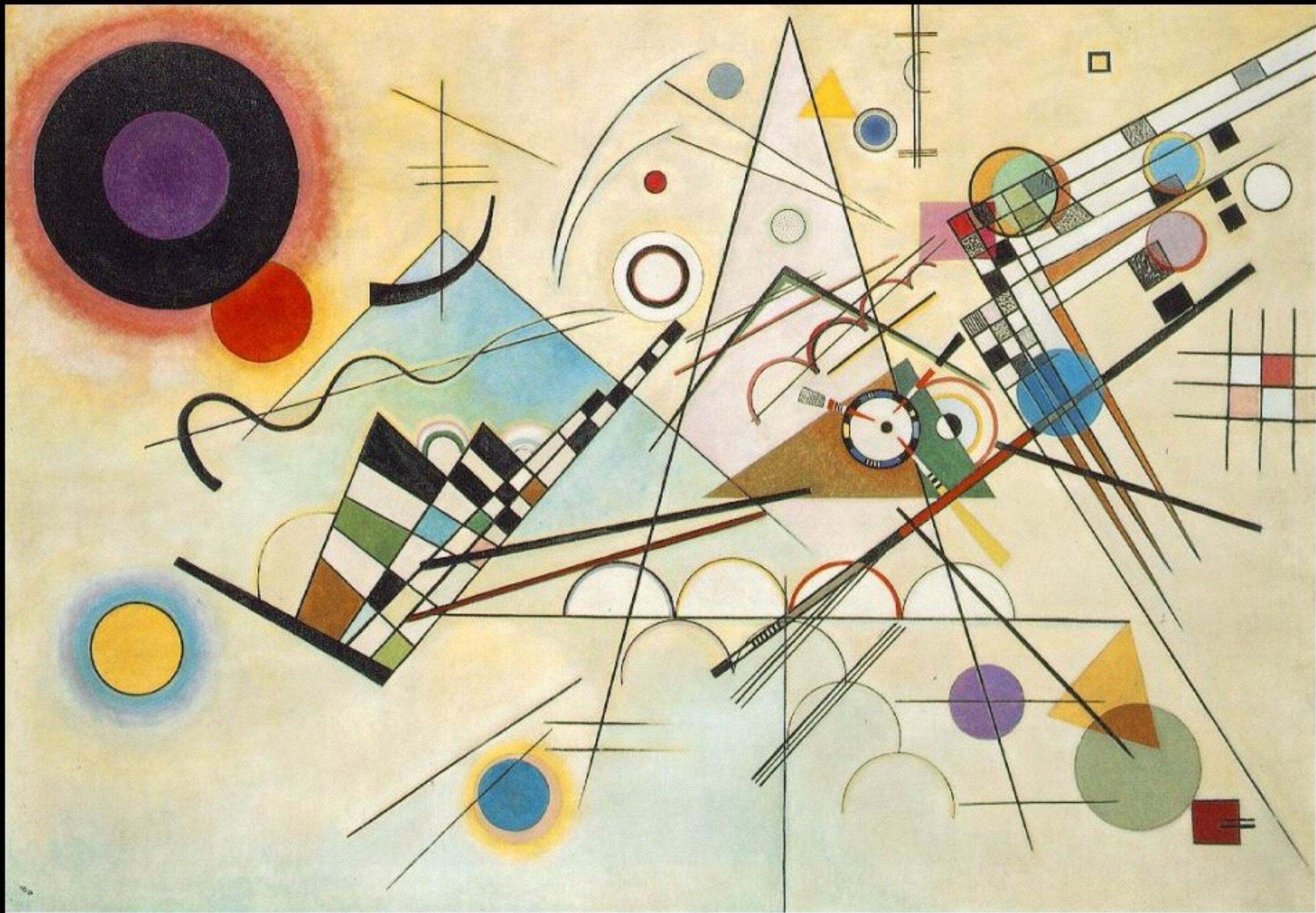
- The therapist tries to determine (hypothesise) the **dominant emotion(s)** in the session
- At the same time, she wonders about dominant emotions in the clients' **lives**



- She then tries to imagine the **tacit emotion**(s), the ones that are not apparent in the clients' emotional display
- These are (approximately) the ones the therapist would **probably feel** in the same situation



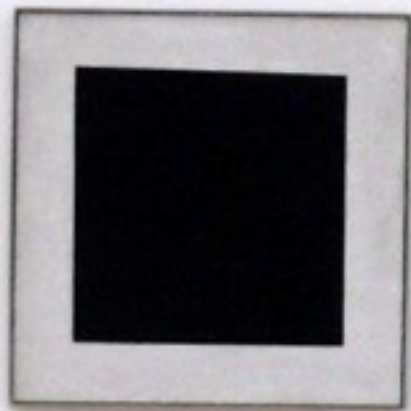
- She then seeks to **connect** emotions to facts (both in the there and now and in the then and there):
 - relationships
 - alliances
 - coalitions
 - life stories
 - etc.



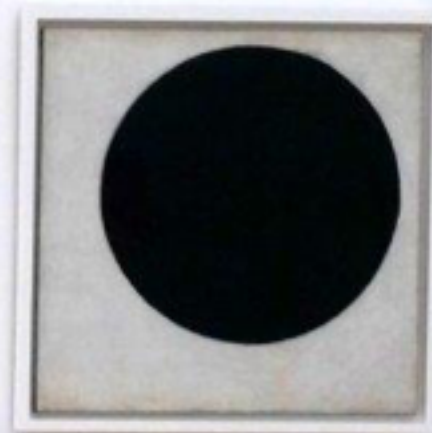
- By creating connections, the therapist hypothesise about emotions:
- **What she feel** is a hypothesis itself
- And she uses it to create other hypotheses which, in turn, **change** her understanding and feeling of what happens



LEONARD CALVERT, *Black Cross*, Johnson, Kline, 1967, 1968, 1969
Black Cross, 1967. Black Cross, 1968. Black Cross, 1969. Johnson, Kline, 1967.
Schwarzkreuz, 1967. Schwarzkreuz, 1968. Schwarzkreuz, 1969. Johnson, Kline, 1967.



LEONARD CALVERT, *Black Square*, Johnson, Kline, 1967, 1968, 1969
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LEONARD CALVERT, *Black Circle*, Johnson, Kline, 1967, 1968, 1969
Black Circle, 1967. Black Circle, 1968. Black Circle, 1969. Johnson, Kline, 1967.

- Emotion-related hypotheses are closer to immediate experience and less elaborate: they are **micro-hypotheses**
- They are proposed in dialogue with clients, who are **free** to accept and/or elaborate on the therapist's hypotheses

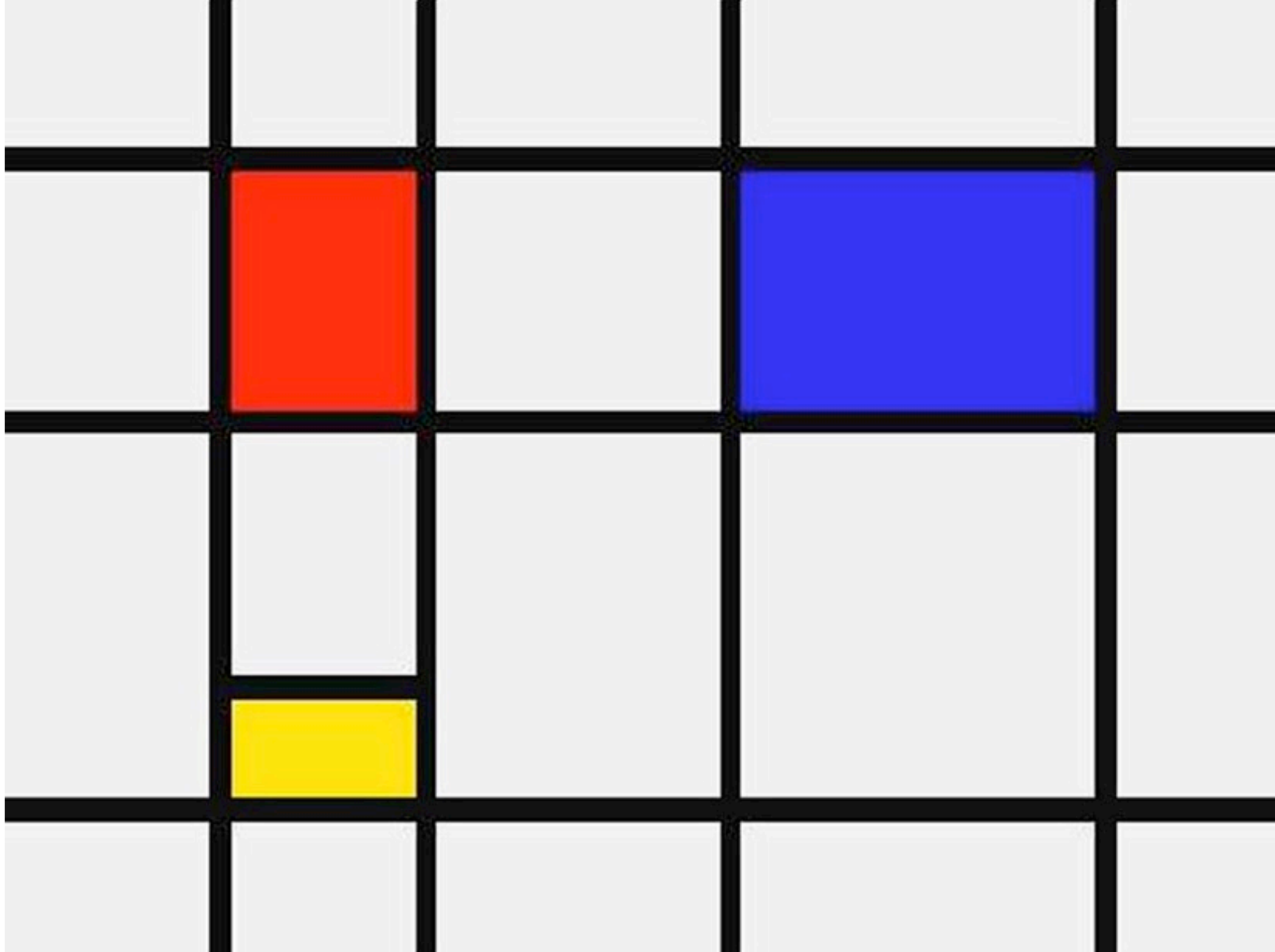


- The therapist puts emotions in **context**: any emotion in a (therapeutic) system is influenced and connected both to other emotions coming from outside, and to other elements in the environment: culture, social phenomena, interpersonal actions, etc.



- Through the whole process, the therapist **reflects on herself**: her feelings, her prejudices, her position
- The results of her reflections, in turn, inform her ways of working with/in the emotions she finds in the process
- She is constantly engaged both in an **inner and an outer dialogue** at the same time

- The result is (should be) some **change**: a change in patterns, a change in understanding and awareness, a change in actions
- And a change in the **emotional tone**, too
- Such change in the emotional tone is essential to therapeutic change

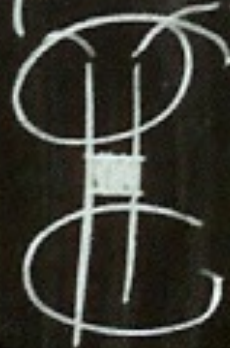


- Maybe changing the overall emotional pattern in a human system **is** therapeutic change

Finding one's place

- “Where am I?” The reflection on the therapist’s position in the (therapeutic and wider) systems is one of the key elements developed by the original Milan team.

Ashby:
Design for a Brain

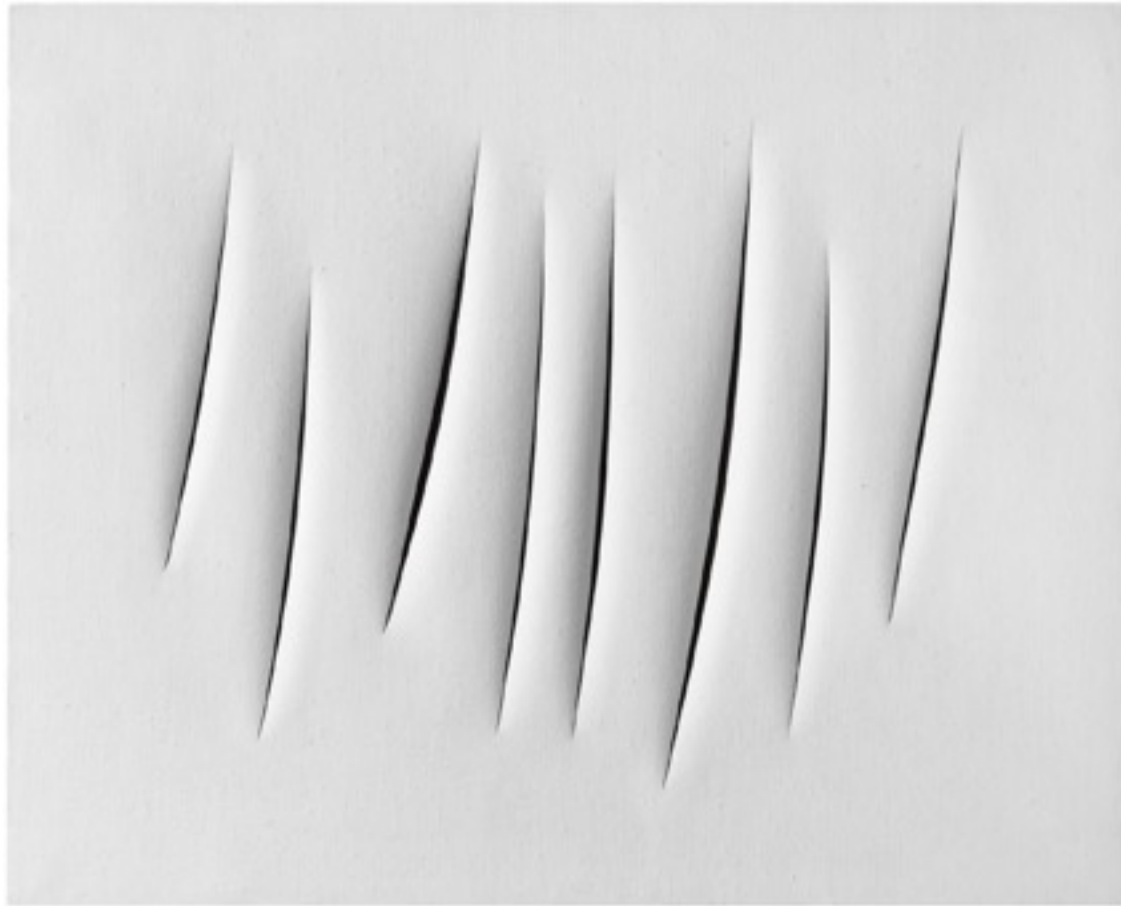


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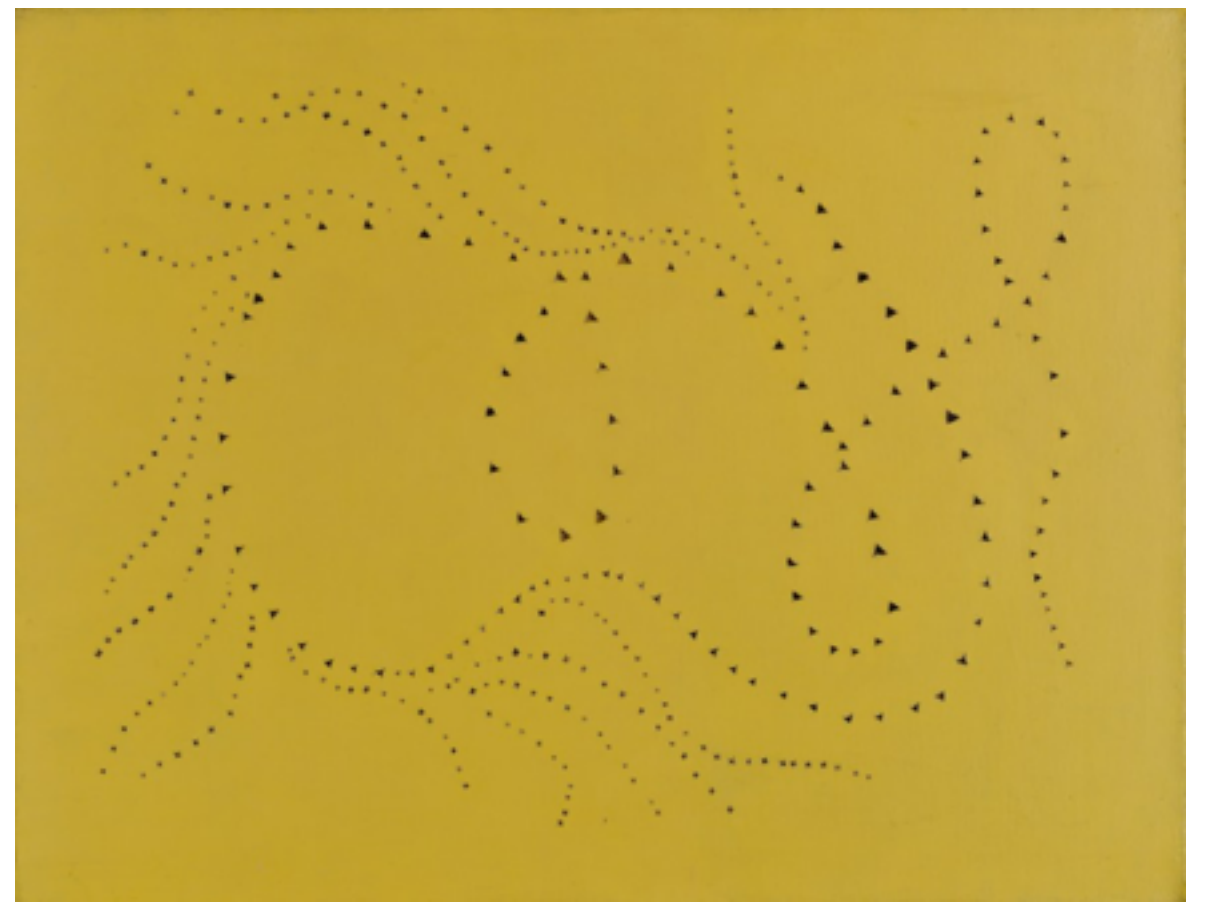


- “How do I feel?” The basic question, both for therapist and client, necessary to formulate any hypothesis.

Positioning



Finding one's place



Finding one's place is related to the the complex relationship between feeling and positioning

It means to make oneself aware both of **one's own position in the system** and **the emotional state** connected to it

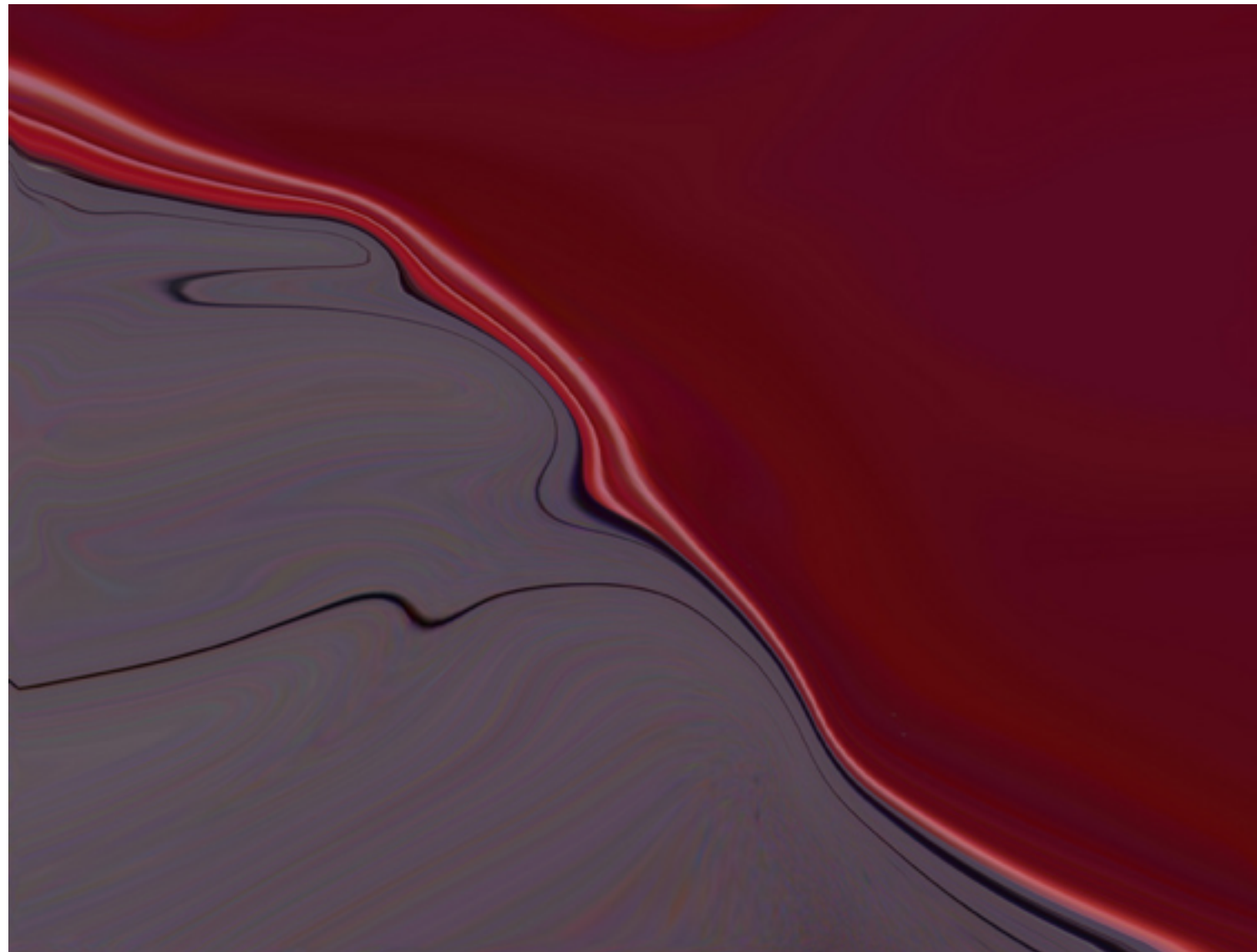




“Where we hope to land (and where we do land, though only for a fleeting moment, enough for tired wings to catch the wind anew) is a ‘there’ which **we thought of little** and knew of even less.”

Zygmunt Bauman, 2000

Finding one's place

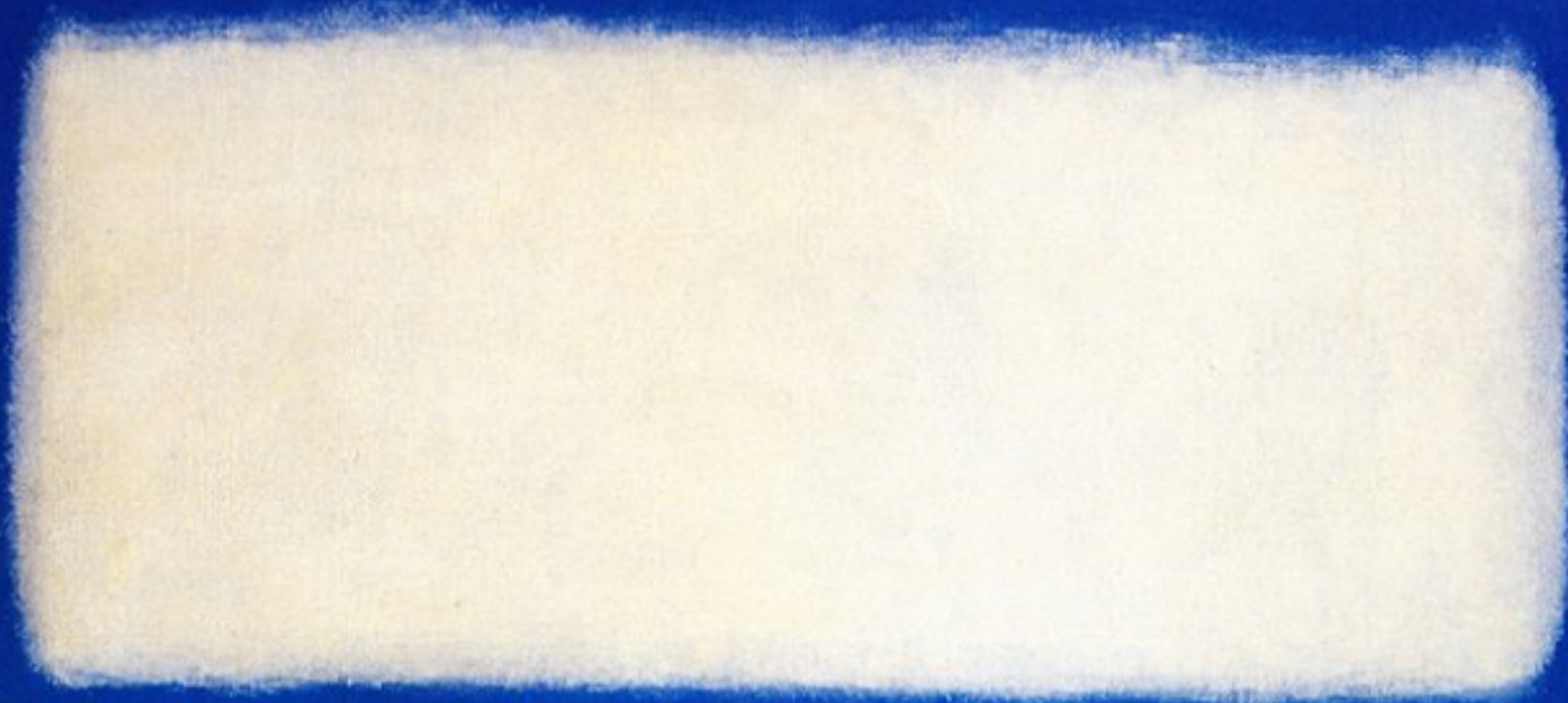


Within a **liquid society** (Bauman, 2000), where norms and values are unstable, the structural explanation of systems is no longer sufficient: it is therefore necessary to make reference to our emotional state

Finding one's place

- Where am I?
- How do I feel here?
- What is the position of the others?
- How do they make me feel?
- How can I act in order to feel better?

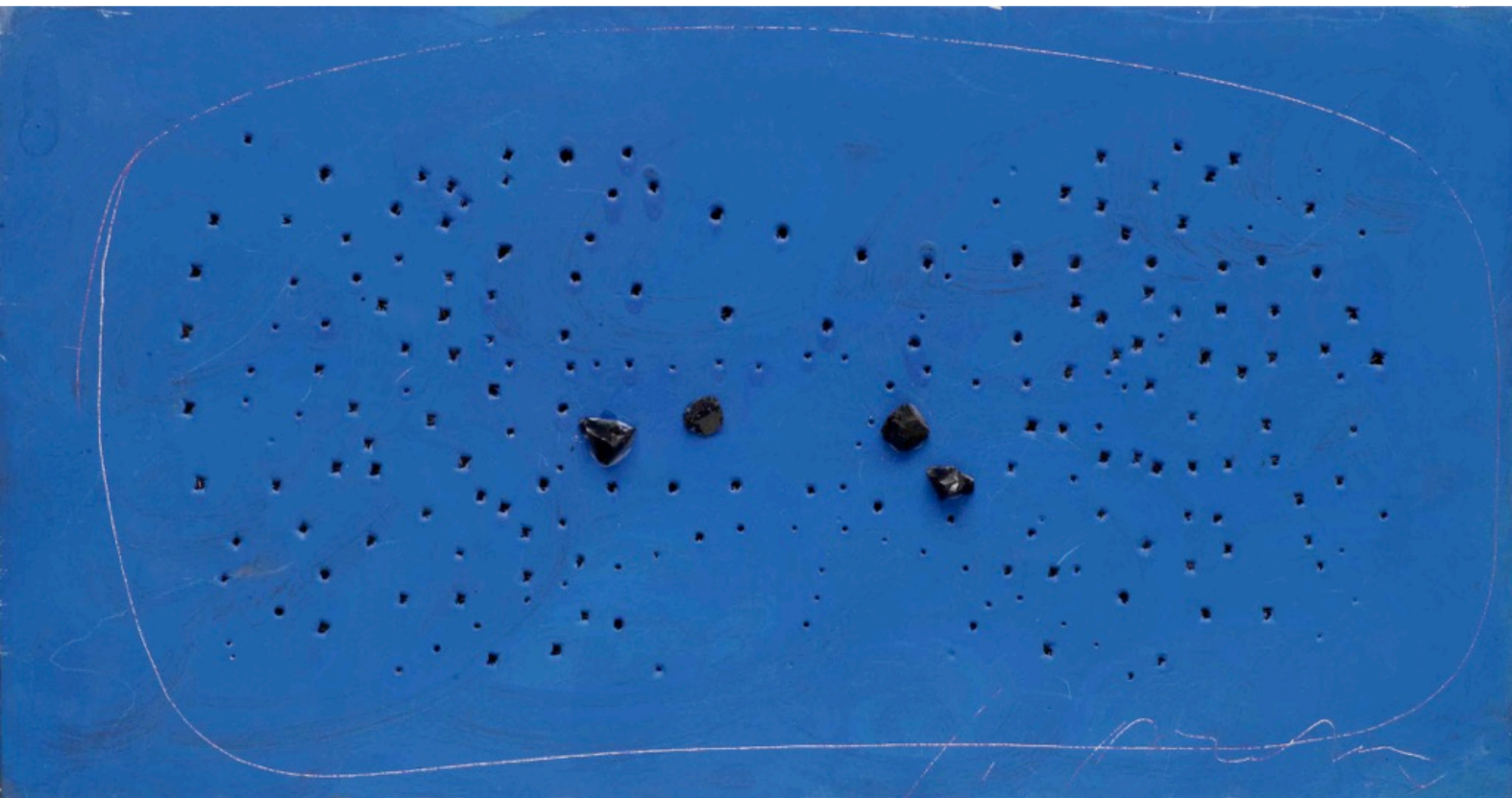
- The **sense** of our emotions is better understood if we get some notion of the different contexts we are embedded in.
- Finding one's place is a **universal** activity.
- The therapist aims at helping people to become aware of the **relational levels** in which they exist and operate.



1. MACRO-CONTEXTUAL LEVEL: How political / cultural events influence clients
2. GROUP LEVEL: How clients position themselves in groups in general (community, work, school, etc.)
3. INTIMATE LEVEL: How clients position themselves in relation to partners, parents, children, close friends, etc.
4. INTRA-RELATIONAL LEVEL: How the context influences everybody's inner dialogue



- When we enter a relationship, immediately an instantaneous network is activated, which connects different elements on different planes: **emotional, rational, interior, relational.**
- At the same time different positions are taken.
- The elements (**knots**) are all related to each other: when one is activated, others are simultaneously put to work.



- The therapeutic goal of finding one's place is:
- to reach an **integration** which entails some consistency between feeling and thinking, between the inner and the relational world
- to maintain a **dialogical perspective**, which may allow clients to develop a three-dimensional view of their lives.

An example: shame



“She does not reply. She would rather hide her face, and he knows why. Because of the disgrace. Because of the shame. ... Like a stain the story is spreading across the district. Not her story to spread but theirs: they are its owners.”

J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*



- The shame response is an act which **reduces** facial communication.
- By dropping his eyes, his eyelids, his head, and sometimes the whole upper body, the individual **calls an halt to looking** at another person, and to the other person's looking at him.
- The child early learns to **cover his face** with his hands, when he is shy in the presence of a stranger.

Silvan Tomkins, 1963

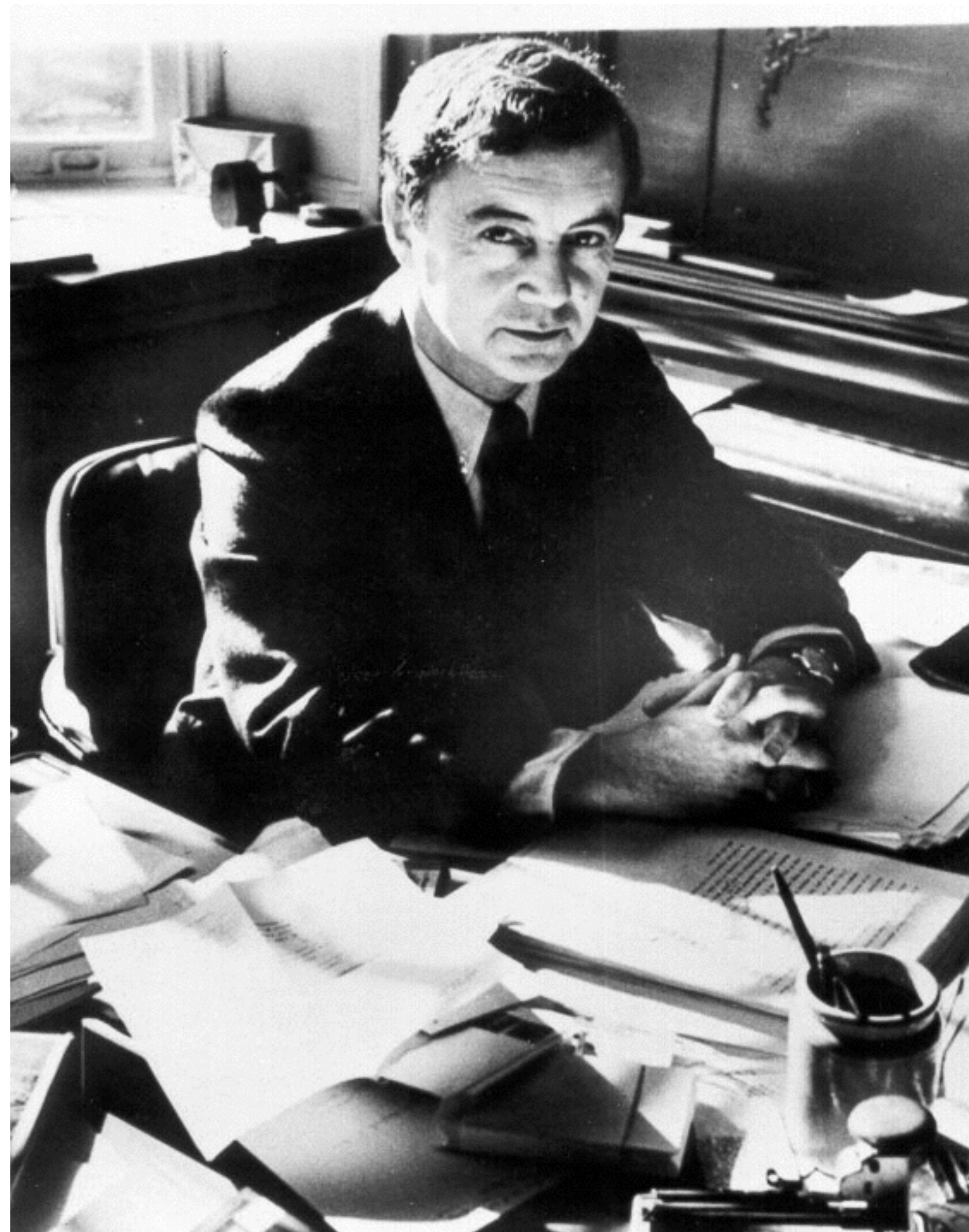


“It is not the conscience which raises a blush... It is not the sense of guilt, but the thought that **others think or know us** to be guilty which crimson the face”.

Charles Darwin, 1872



objet
in-
destructible
1923-
1965



“There is **no interaction** in which participants do not take an appreciable chance of being slightly embarrassed or a slight chance of being deeply humiliated”.

Erving Goffman, 1959



Lee Knowlton 65

Contempt

(reciprocal)

Guilt

≈

Shame

Distress

+

Humiliation

Anger

Shyness

⋮

Embarrassment

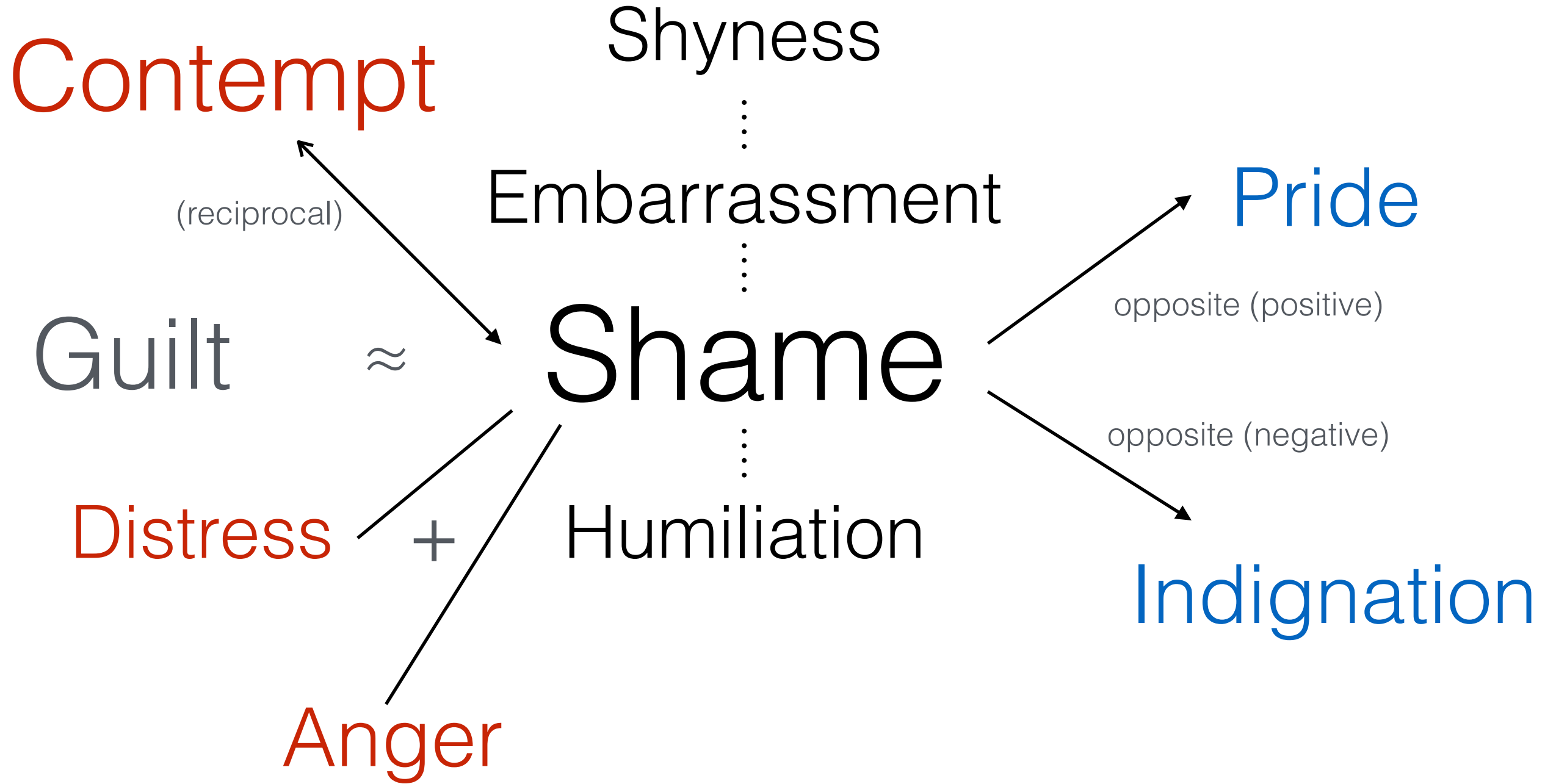
⋮

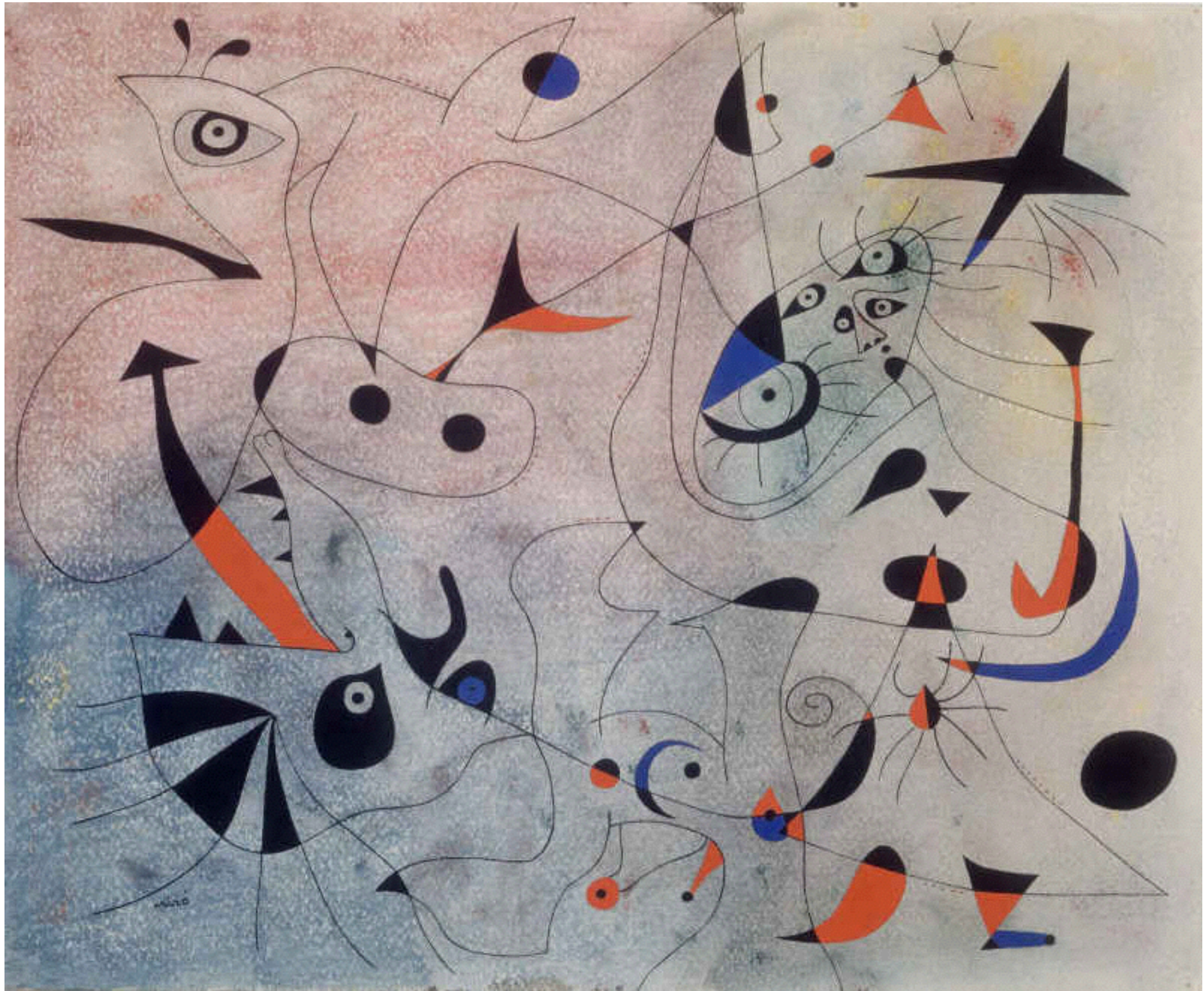
Pride

opposite (positive)

opposite (negative)

Indignation





Cultural norms

Social environment

Family

Systems interaction

Shame

Personal issues

↓
Humiliation

(tradition)

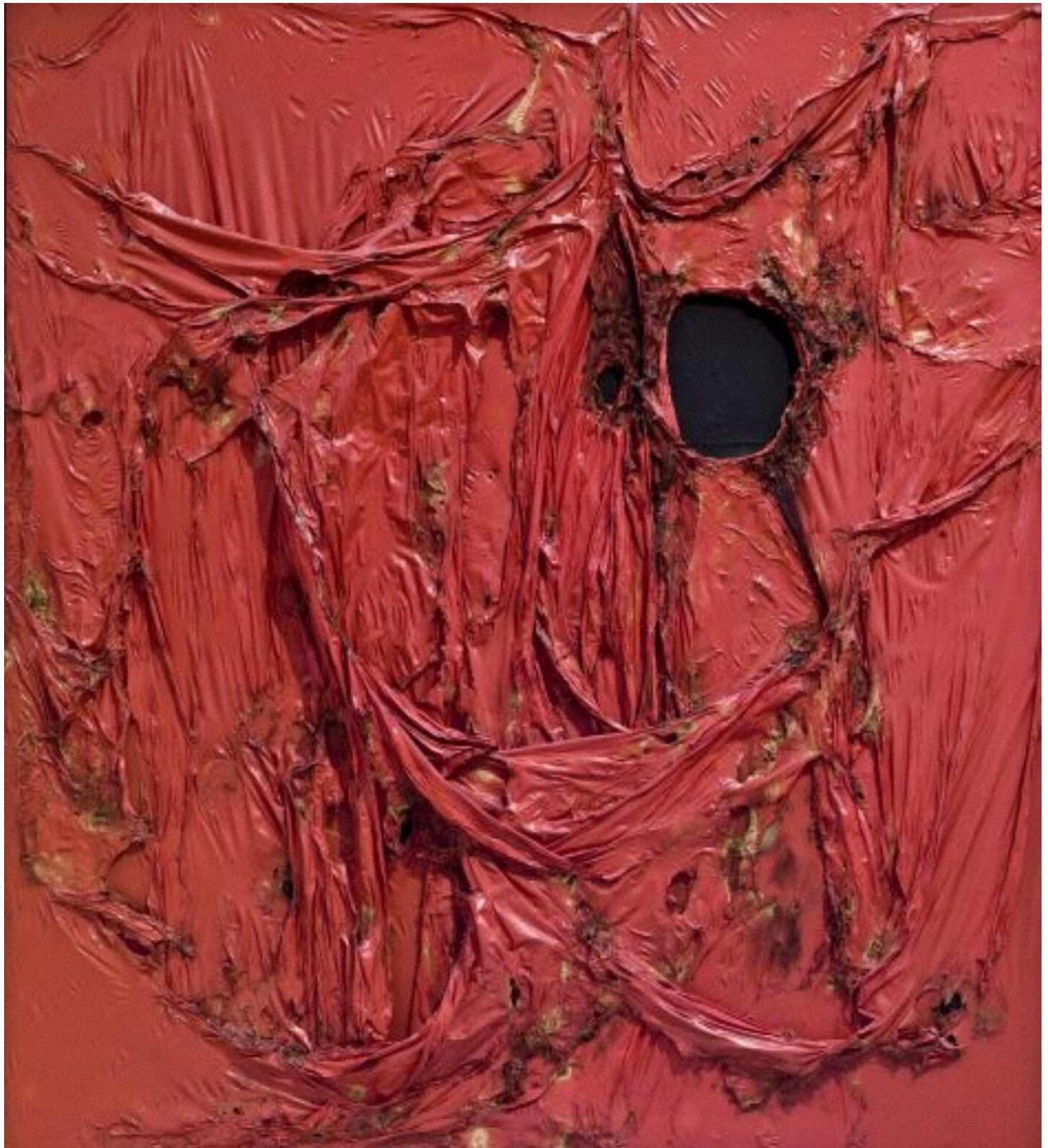
(new values)

Social role shame

Performance shame

↓
Shyness

Embarrassment



- ... if shame is **evoked but not acknowledged**, irrational aggression or withdrawal is generated by spirals of unacknowledged shame or shame and anger. (...)
- Being ashamed that one is ashamed leads to **withdrawal**, and can continue indefinitely. Being angry that one is ashamed, and is ashamed, and ashamed that one is angry, results in **irrational aggression**.

Thomas Scheff (1998)

Questions/hypotheses on the shame/contempt relationship

Contempt

Hypotheses on the continuum

Shyness

⋮

Embarrassment

⋮

Shame

⋮

Humiliation

Hypotheses on shame-inducing relationships

Pride

Hypotheses on the reversal of shame

Guilt

≈

Questions on guilt

Distress

+

Anger

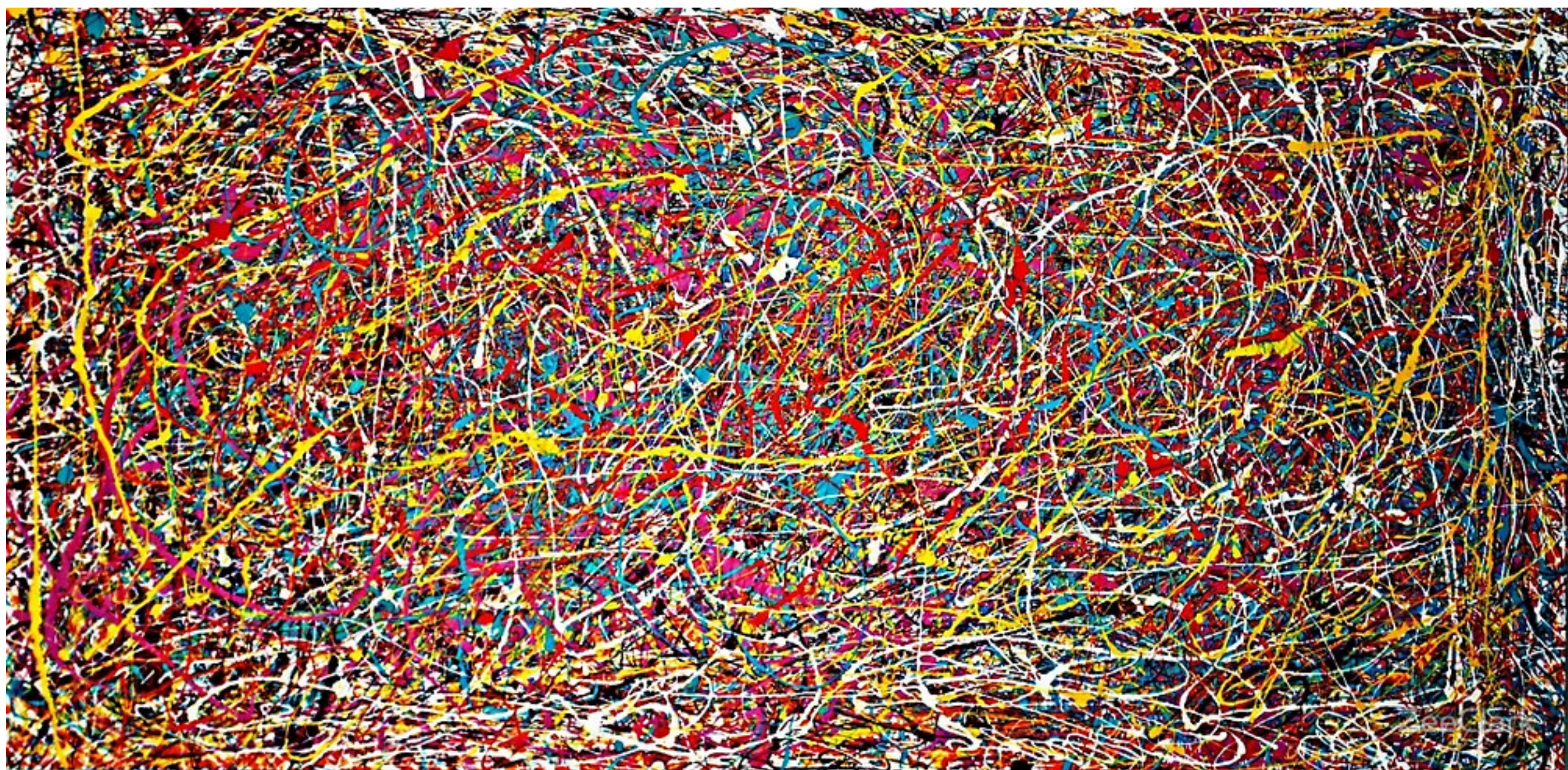
Indignation

Questions on shame for different people in the system

Questions on belief systems, culture, tradition, etc.

Hypotheses on family, intimate relationships, etc.

Hypotheses on other related emotions



Paolo Bertrando: pbertrando@gmail.com
www.scuoladialogica.it