

Anger felt towards a bin-licking dog.

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Peter Goldie has characterised emotions as feelings that are directed at objects. I will briefly set out some reasons to take this concept of feeling-towards seriously when thinking about emotions. I will claim that it is useful in developing an account of how emotions get to have representational contents. The main body of the paper will then defend this way of deploying feeling-towards against a central objection. If Goldie is right that emotions are inherently felt towards their objects, then just undergoing an emotion ought to tell us what it is about. The objection claims that our emotional lives are opaque to us such that we might be wrong about this, so “feeling-towards” cannot play the role in establishing emotional representation I claim for it. My response will be to try to vindicate the underlying intuition about opacity without giving up the claim that we can know the objects of our emotions just by undergoing them. I will end by warning against taking this idea too far.

1: Feeling towards

In this section I will give some reason to take the idea of feeling-towards very seriously. The basic idea is that emotions are feelings with a felt bodily component, but they are felt towards their objects. Their directedness is part of their phenomenology, so a change in how an emotion is directed entails a change in how it feels to undergo it (Goldie 2002, p19).

Goldie’s characterisation is attractive to a number of thinkers (Döring 2007) (Tappolet 2005). It offers a path towards the reconciliation of two of the different faces of the emotions that are

not easily united into a single picture. Emotions seem to be both felt bodily events and intentional states. Anger can be characterised in terms of a set of felt bodily changes (elevated heart rate, agitation etc) but anger is also directed *at* something, or about something. An emotion is not like a twinge caused by something, it is intentional in that it is directed at something in the way that a belief or a desire is. Achieving a happy unification of these two sides of emotions drives a lot of theorising in the emotions literature. Traditional feelings theories (James 1884) which identify emotions with felt bodily changes fell out of favour because they failed to account for the directedness of emotions at all (Solomon 1980). The cognitive theories that replaced them ((Solomon 2002) claim that emotions are judgements, but were always under pressure to better accommodate the bodily element. Various intermediate positions have been offered that try to get the best of both worlds, but they frequently run into trouble getting the two aspects to sit together in the right sorts of ways. Jesse Prinz has recently revived interest in feelings theories by providing an account of how bodily feelings get to be intentional (Prinz 2004), but his position has come under fire for failing to give the intentional side of emotions the right sort of availability to the rest of our thinking (Whiting 2012, p104). Such a failure puts his picture in danger of undermining the justificatory roles we attribute to emotion.

This dilemma has contributed to the current popularity of perceptual theories of the emotions. Perceptual theorists claim that emotions are like perceptions in that they are presentational states that stand in the same sorts of justificatory relations to beliefs and actions that perceptions can (Döring 2010). This promises the desired reconciliation since perceptions are unified states that are both felt and intentional. So to the extent that emotions are like perceptions, they can have these two dimensions. The perceptual analogy is contentious, but there does seem to be something *approaching* a consensus that emotions are sui-generis states with their own representational contents.

The problem is that any theory claiming this owes us an account of how emotions get to be representational. I think Goldie's notion of feeling-towards can be a useful tool for providing

an argument that emotions have representational content. If emotions are feelings that are aimed at things, then this can anchor one dimension of emotional representation. It anchors their directedness at the objects the emotions are about - what has come to be called their proper objects. If I am afraid of Miso the cat, then Miso is the proper object of the fear. Being afraid of Miso feels different to being afraid of some other cat. If the proper object of the emotion is given by its phenomenology, experiencing the emotion is sufficient to know what it is about. The emotion is permeable to our self-consciousness. This achieves half of the story about emotional representation. Once we have established that emotions are directed at objects all that remains is establishing that they are evaluative vis-à-vis those objects. This is a project I pursue elsewhere.

So far I've offered some reasons to take the idea of feeling towards seriously – the promised reconciliation of two the faces of our emotions and as a resource for theorising about emotional representation. In Section Two I will examine some reasons we to doubt that the notion of feeling towards can play this second role.

2. Potential problems.

The idea that the feeling of the emotion directs us towards the proper object of the emotion has some initial phenomenological plausibility. But it also has a spooky feel about it. In other areas of philosophy the idea that intentional features of mental states can be read off their phenomenology has been largely abandoned. The idea of a phenomenologically available resemblance between ideas and things was last considered plausible in the early days of empiricism (Locke 1961, essay 2 Chapter VIII). Externalist considerations have ruled out the idea of reading the content of thoughts about natural kinds off the subjectively available features of those thoughts (Burge 1986). Finally, Kripke has influentially pushed Wittgenstein's dismissal of the idea of a feeling playing a role fixing its reference in any

domain (Kripke 1982, pp 41-2). These are all instances of a general turn against the Cartesian view that the mind reveals its intrinsic nature to introspection. This turn seems to count against Goldie's view.

Even more worrying, using the idea of feeling-towards as part of an account of emotional intentionality might just seem to beg the question. Consider what we would think if an explanation of perceptual representation made an analogous claim about the sensations involved in perception. Perception seems like our best candidate for establishing first intentionality – for going from the non-intentional (like a retinal image) to the intentional (like a perception or perceptual judgement) (Burge 2010). If we are building a theory of first intentionality - a theory about how we become acquainted with the world in the first place - then we cannot help ourselves to the idea of intentionality to describe the felt component of the perception. This would be building the *explanandum* into the *explananda*, since intentionality is what our theory of perception needs to explain. There is a vicious circularity here.

Yet neither the spookiness nor the problem of circularity rules the claim out once it is properly understood. The latter issue, which stresses that we could not make a similar claim about perception, just highlights a difference between emotions and perceptions. Perceptions establish first intentionality on their own, whereas emotions do not. Perceptions get their input from organs and transducers; they put us in touch with objects by some combination of perceptual processing and conceptualization. Emotions, on the other hand, get their inputs from what have been called their cognitive bases – from other elements of the psychic economy that inform the emotions and make them possible (Whiting 2012) (Deonna and Teroni 2012). To be afraid of a shark I must have already been put in touch with one (real or imagined). I must see one, or think I see one, or imagine one. The proper object is given to me independently of, and antecedent to, the emotional experience, and so the feeling involved in the emotion can be a feeling about the shark because the feeling depends on having a shark given to me.

I suggest that whereas the perceptual system *achieves* its directedness, the proper objects of emotions are given by parts of the agent's psychic economy that make the emotion possible. Emotional directedness is a form of second intentionality – a directedness at an intentional object that has been made available via some act of first intentionality.

The spookiness objection is not fatal to the prospect of using phenomenology to establish directedness for reasons that are connected to this difference between emotions and perceptions. That objection would be on-point if the claim being made was about the connection between emotions and worldly objects. Instead the claim is that the *intentional* object of the state can be read off the phenomenology. However we think of intentional objects¹ (and there is a lot of controversy here (Crane 2007)), a big part of what they are meant to do is insulate the content of the states they are used to talk about from empirical happenstance. So my beliefs about the present king of France have an intentional object, even though there is no present king of France. Likewise when I imagine a shark, I can be afraid of it, even when there is no such shark. So whatever an intentional object is, it is something that is supplied to the emotion, by its cognitive bases, irrespective of whether or not it exists and irrespective of its underlying nature. This means that the worries connected with externalism do not get a grip here.

I have just discussed two problems with the idea of thinking of emotions as feeling-towards and evaded them by showing how a modest understanding of emotional intentionality avoids bringing us into conflict with the problem raised. In Section Three I will discuss another problem for the idea of feeling-towards, but there I will forgo modesty and stick to a strong claim about emotional intentionality.

¹ There is even controversy about whether or not we ought to be talking about intentional objects as opposed to just talking about representational content. By doing the former I don't mean to take a stand here. This is the standard way of framing the question in the emotions literature. The arguments I use here, and the claims I make can be rephrased to do away with intentional object talk.

3. Emotional opacity and bin-licking dogs

I claim that an emotion's feeling component is directed towards an object given to it by one of its cognitive bases. This affects the quality of the feeling. The feeling is felt towards its object and this directedness is phenomenally accessible. This means we cannot be wrong about the directedness of our emotions. But, according to an objection I want to consider, we know that our emotions can be opaque to us, so my account must be wrong.

Take an example: suppose I am applying for jobs while my scholarship is running out. My employment predicament is important to me, I have little control over it, yet I will be somewhat responsible for the outcome. The overall emotional episode I undergo is anxiety. It brings about negative affect, heightened arousal, direction of cognitive attention towards potential for failure, and so on. Now suppose that one morning, while I am making coffee, the only aspects of my emotional state that make their way into my awareness are heightened arousal and negative affect. In this case I may well notice my dog Barry licking the rubbish bin and yell at him. I take myself to be angry with him. But the real object of my emotion is the uncertainty of my job prospects, not Barry.

If this is right, then I have misidentified the object of my emotion. But given the way I am using Goldie's notion of feeling-towards, this should be impossible since just having the emotion should be enough to see what it is directed at.

I think that the intuition that this objection rests on is right, and picks out a really fundamental truth about emotions. We are sometimes wrong in really important ways about what is going on in our emotional lives. This is distinctive and important aspect of the emotions. By contrast, although we are subject to perceptual illusions, the inward-facing subjective features of perception are not similarly subject to misunderstanding. If I am hallucinating a dagger floating in space I cannot be wrong about the fact that it appears to me as though there is a dagger there. In the case of Barry the objection claims that I am getting something

wrong about subjective features of the experience, not just about whether the experience is putting me in touch with something objective.

My strategy in this section is to vindicate this intuition about emotional opacity without abandoning the claim that there *is* a felt difference between emotions directed at different objects. To do this, I want to suggest that the description given above is not the only way to understand such an event. I will gather some resources for the redescription by quickly looking at appraisals theories of the emotions, then abstract away an element of their account which should be uncontroversial even to those who do not accept an appraisals theory.

Appraisals theories of the emotions, which are currently dominant in the empirical literature, claim that the core theoretical job for a psychological theory of the emotions is to explain causal regularities between patterns of environmental features and patterns of affective components of our lives (Moors 2009). To explain this they posit some cognitive processing of affectively relevant features of our environment that precede emotional stimulation. This appraisal of the environment can be wholly sub-personal, quick, schema-based and so on, or explicit, slow and deliberative, or somewhere in-between (Scherer 2001). The different appraisals theories predict different mechanisms and patterns of causation that regulate aspects of our affective states given this appraisal of the situation. Take for example, fear of a shark. I am swimming and see a large grey shape circling around and towards me. At some level I am appraising the situation as one which is relevant to me, which might cause bodily harm and in which I have little control. Some causal mechanisms that we might eventually discover bring about a certain pattern of affective response. I experience a pattern of bodily changes, including elevated heart rate, agitation, etc, I also undergo cognitive changes – negative affect, intense focus of attention and so on.

According to appraisals theorists, the conscious aspect of an emotional episode – an occurrent emotion - is then a reflection in consciousness of several of the affective elements

an agent is undergoing (Scherer 2009). In any given emotional episode there will be a number of affective components that are not reflected in consciousness. Furthermore, the appraisal of the situation that determines the nature of the emotion will be largely absent from consciousness in most cases. This means that what is accessible to consciousness may be misleading about the overall nature of the emotional episode. The occurrent emotions we experience are the tip of the affective iceberg.

Prescinding from the details of the appraisals theories, it should be uncontroversial that any given occurrent emotion is part of a larger emotional episode. There are features of my affective life that are causally relevant to the occurrence of a given emotion which are not themselves part of that emotion. Moods uncontroversially influence which occurrent emotions we experience, and how we experience them (Ratcliffe 2010). These things may evade my notice, especially if I am feeling an intense emotion which (to use Michael Brady's nice phrase) "captures and consumes attention" (Brady 2013, p92).

Now we can return to the case of Barry licking the bin and vindicate the idea that I am importantly wrong about my emotional situation, without denying that I am angry at Barry. The appraisal of my jobless situation is part of the causal history of my occurrent emotion, but it is not part of the occurrent emotion. Similarly, one feature of the emotional episode I am undergoing is a tendency to dwell on the possibility of my failure, but this is not conscious to me. Nevertheless, the anxious emotional episode is a precondition for my anger at Barry. Under normal circumstances I have the mental resources to see that though the licking is unpleasant, anger is not an appropriate response. So there are some important elements of my affective state that I am not focused on, but which are playing a role in bringing about my angry response. This does not force us to deny that I really do feel anger at Barry as a result of the episode.

Yet, in cases like my response to Barry, by simply describing ourselves as angry we display a lack of self-understanding. This has not yet been explained by my story. We do have the

ingredients to do so though. If asked why I yelled at Barry, answering that I was angry with him is at best a partial answer. Being reminded that I have been anxious for the last few days might improve my understanding of the situation, without it meaning that I was wrong that my feeling of anger was directed towards Barry. The anxious emotional episode may be a better explanation of my behaviour towards Barry than the occurrent anger. This is true even though elements of my emotional episode really did synchronise in the right sort of way for me to be angry, and these elements really were targeted at Barry in the right sort of way for the anger to be directed at him.

Explaining my response in terms of anxiety is better in at least two ways. It is an explanation that gives me a more agential understanding of what is going on. If I bare my teeth, rock back and forward and make convulsive noises this can't be easily explained in terms of beliefs and desires and means-ends calculations. The behaviour can look unintelligible unless it is described as laughter - an emotional response to something funny. Similarly in the case of Barry, attribution of anxiety explains the yelling in terms of things that really do matter to me - career prospects - rather than things that don't really matter to me - Barry licking the bin². In this way, focusing on my anger at Barry displays a lack of self-understanding even if we grant that I am right about feeling anger towards him.

The explanation in terms of anger also displays a second lack of understanding. Attributing emotions to oneself usually gains us a measure of regulative control over these emotions. Knowing that I am angry lets me know what sorts of things are relevant to the emotion, so it lets me examine whether the situation really does merit my response and whether I can change things to attenuate that response. Consider a person who is asked why they crossed the road. If they answer 'to get to the other side' they are probably telling the truth, but the information isn't as useful as an answer that mentions the goal that makes crossing the road worthwhile. As well as hiding the agentially explanatory element, their answer hides the

² In this way it captures a way in which the response is more proportional than it looks on the shallow explanation.

features that would be relevant to the regulation of their road crossing behaviour – since it doesn't mention the goal which could perhaps be moved so as to modify my road-crossing behaviour.

Supplying an agential understanding is likely to be the main goal any time we make a self-attribitional claim or judgement. When I yell at Barry, and explain this in terms of anger, I am doing a similar thing to the person explaining their road crossing. I don't present my actions in a light that does very much to make them intelligible as expressions of agency. As a result, by leaving out so much of the relevant causal history of the emotion I give a false impression of my options for emotional regulation. By citing my anger at him, it seems as though my emotions might be attenuated if he stops licking the bin, or if someone points out that he's not really doing any harm. But really, both of these things are treating peripheral symptoms, rather than dealing with my underlying anxiety. What needs to change for me to be less liable to similar emotional responses has nothing to do with Barry – I just need to be offered a job! In a case where there are different affective elements in play simultaneously (i.e. in most cases) there may be some true self-attributions that are less helpful than others in bringing out these two aspects of the situation. This vindicates the idea that our emotions may be importantly opaque to us, but without admitting that when an occurrent emotion is felt towards an object that we can be wrong about what its object is.

I have been assuming when we make self-attributions our goals are not merely theoretical – we do not just want to establish truths about ourselves. Yet even if our interest is only theoretical there are virtues the explanation in terms of anxiety has that the explanation in terms of anger lacks. It is more unifying in that the one explanation covers more incidents from the same morning. It also generates more counterfactually robust predictions – that I will be more likely to forget to put water in the coffee maker than I normally would. These together suggest that the better explanation is more likely to get at the theoretically interesting underlying causal structures.

In this section I used some terminology borrowed from appraisals theory, but the critical thing was pointing out that the occurrent emotion is part of a bigger picture, which I might be getting wrong, and which might be more important. The terminology gave me a convenient way to say this, but the point is independent of any particular theory, and should be hard to reject. I can be right about the emotions I experience without this being as helpful as seeing how they fit into a broader affective picture. If we think of love as an emotional syndrome, then there might be cases where it is more useful to see an action as an expression of love, than as an expression of an occurrent emotion, even when it really is an expression of that emotion. Any theory that accounts for ways that our occurrent emotions are systematically related to what is important to us will involve higher-order affective state or episodes that play an emotion-organizing role (be they character, sentiments, moods, existential feelings, etc (Charland 2010, Ratcliffe 2010)). So any theory that adopts this explanatory burden will provide the resources for a similar sort of account.

In this section I considered the chief challenge directed at the feelings-towards account of emotional intentionality – given that we know emotions can be opaque to us, how could we know what they are directed at just by undergoing them? I argued that we can in fact know this, but that this is compatible with a profound ignorance about the very same emotion – how it fits into a broader affective story about ourselves. In the next section I warn against over-reaching here.

4. Opacity strikes back.

I have been arguing that we can read the proper object off the felt quality of emotional experience and that the sort of opacity to which emotions are subject does not undermine this. I don't think that this same thought holds for all aspects of emotional intentionality. The other dimension of emotional intentionality that is commonly distinguished from proper object directedness is formal object directedness. The formal object is that which determines

whether the emotion is appropriate. For example, the formal object of sorrow is loss – sorrow is appropriate when it is directed at something of great value that has been lost. If we could read this off of the phenomenology of the emotion, then the phenomenology would plausibly be enough on its own to establish that emotions are representational. I take it that some people in the literature, including Michelle Montague (Montague 2014), would endorse this claim.

But it seems far less plausible to me that the formal object can be read off the phenomenology of an emotion. There are live debates about what the formal object of particular emotions are (e.g. (Taylor 1980)). Is fear appropriate iff the feared object is dangerous, or iff the feared object is fearsome? Is anger appropriate iff its object is offensive or iff it is insulting? If we can read the formal object off the phenomenology, these debates shouldn't occur.

Likewise, if merely experiencing the emotion were meant to be enough to know what made the emotion appropriate, many of our people-making practices would make no sense. Part of our practice in educating young people is encouraging them to regulate their emotions in certain ways – teaching them to try to fear only the dangerous, admire only the worthy and so on. If merely undergoing the emotion were sufficient to know the appropriateness condition of the emotion, this would be redundant, or, at best, nagging. But it certainly seems to be part of teaching people to have virtuous emotional dispositions.

One explanation for this asymmetry between the two intentional objects harks back to §2: emotions do not establish contact with their proper objects, but they can establish contact with our evaluative stance towards the object. Part of the point of seeing emotions as an independent stream of representation is making sense of emotions being a dissenting voice (Döring 2010). I can judge one thing and yet have an emotional evaluation of the situation that conflicts with this judgement. Here it looks like the emotion itself is bringing something new into the psychic economy. The emotion establishes intentionality of its own. If we accept

all of this, which I think we should, we cannot also think that emotional phenomenology can establish the emotions' formal object on its own. Thinking that the phenomenology would be sufficient for this falls into the spookiness alluded to in §2.

This result should not be a surprise. The formal object effectively gives correctness conditions for the emotion. There is no reason that the correctness conditions for an intentional state should be available just by consciously undergoing the state. Whatever institutes these norms could easily elude the grasp of the person undergoing the emotion.

Conclusion

I have argued that an emotion's proper object can be read off its phenomenology because emotions are felt *towards* certain things. This claim faces an objection which says that emotions are opaque to us and that we can be seriously wrong about our emotional lives. I agree with the spirit of the claim – in fact I think it is profoundly right and picks out an important feature of our emotional lives. However, I think that the important part of the claim is better accommodated by seeing that what we are typically wrong about is not the occurrent emotion we are undergoing, but where that emotion fits into larger features of our emotional life. The thing we are getting wrong is not a peripheral feature of the emotion – it is a side of the emotion that connects it to our agency and makes a difference to how we could potentially regulate the emotion in question. When we are getting this wrong we are profoundly wrong about the emotion.

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