Emotional Feelings and Intentionalism

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I

Emotions are Janus-faced: their focus may switch from how a person is feeling deep inside her, to the busy world of actions, words, or gestures whose perception currently affects her. The intimate relation between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ seems to call for a redrawing of the traditional distinction within mental states between those that can look out to the world, and those that are, supposedly, irredeemably blind.

The phenomenology of emotional experience – an account of what it is (like) for a subject to experience an emotion – invites the question of whether an account of emotional feeling could justify the claim that emotions are states in which the world is presented to the subject. That claim has been prominent in recent theories of emotion, and its importance is hard to overstate. If true, the claim that emotions are akin to perceptual states would fit nicely, and, thus, lend support to the view that emotions reveal to us a world of comforting, frightening, loveable, or unbearable persons, events and states of affairs. If emotions are indeed perceptions, and if at least some of those perceptions are not illusory, then what they attend to is real. The focus of emotion is those aspects of reality that have significance, import, a positive or negative value for us. The conclusion that could be drawn from this approach is that the world we encounter is enchanted or meaningful, or, more prosaically, that prudential, moral or aesthetic values are real.

The philosophical problem of the reality of values is as significant as it is difficult to resolve, but it is not main concern of this paper. What I shall try to achieve here is a better understanding of what is involved in the claim that emotions can be fruitfully thought of as perceptual states. My route is marked by two signposts. The first claims that ‘emotions involve feelings’, and the second that ‘emotions are intentional states.’ It might be thought that the former sign aims to keep out any ‘cognitivist’ intruders, while the latter hopes to exclude ‘feeling-based’ theorists of emotion. But that is far
from the truth. Cognitivists about emotion need not deny that feelings may form an important aspect of emotional phenomena; their cognitivism centres on the fact that it is not through feeling but through cognition, perception, or evaluative judgement, that the nature of emotion becomes intelligible. Feeling theorists, on the other hand, may aspire to think of emotions in a way that matches perfectly feeling with intentionality. All in all, admitting the presence of emotional feelings should be part of the beginning, not the conclusion, of an inquiry into emotional intentionality.

II

What is the motivation for introducing intentionality in the analysis of emotion? A line of reasoning, that we can quickly put aside, runs as follows: all mental states are intentional; emotions are mental states; therefore, emotions are intentional. The inference is valid, but in the absence of independent grounding for the major premise, it does not deliver the intended result. We might as easily reverse the plot by arguing that: emotions are not intentional; emotions are mental states; therefore, not all mental states are intentional. Philosophical tradition might have created a tendency to think in favour of the claim that ‘intentionality is the mark of the mental’ but this thought might turn out to be a prejudice, if we lack the reasons for asserting that a central case of mental phenomena, such as emotions, are intentional.

Fortunately, such reasons might not be hard to come by. Ordinary language furnishes us with several examples: we can be angry with our neighbour, delighted by the news, worried about our friend’s health. Citing phrases like these is often the main, if not the only, evidence offered in support of the intentionality of emotions. However, it is not clear what these phrases show. In particular, it is not obvious whether they should be read as proving that intentionality characterises emotional experience, rather than states which are closely associated, though not identical to emotion itself. Attributing intentionality to emotions on the ground that they are caused by emotionally neutral, independently conceived beliefs, identifiable irrespective of their involvement to the emotional experience, would at most endow emotion only with intentionality by proxy. However, even if we establish that it is emotion itself that is directed towards intentional objects, we need to query which of the reflexive, autonomic, cognitive, or affective elements that make up an emotional experience accounts primarily for the intentionality of emotion. In order to provide a clear focus to this very general
problem, I propose that we zoom in its philosophically most intriguing aspect: are emotional feelings themselves intentional?

The standard way to answer this question has been in the negative. Feeling is often understood as a mental event whose nature is exhausted by its sometimes rich in nuances, and hard to describe phenomenal character; furthermore, it is often taken for granted that, however significant, the phenomenal character of an experience is neither toward, nor about, anything. It could be claimed, therefore, that as a type of feeling, emotional feelings are states that denote nothing beyond ‘how it is like’ for a subject to experience them, thus barring the possibility of emotional feelings having intentional objects.

III

We may try to challenge this negative view by calling upon the basic principle of philosophical intentionalism, according to which every aspect of our experience is to a larger or lesser extend representational of the way the world is. Each mental state is intentional because it is representational of its cause. The phenomenal properties of our experience are explainable in terms of the properties they represent. It is worth inquiring, therefore, whether the intentionalist approach can rebut the denial of emotional intentionality, by warranting the claim that emotional feelings are directed towards the actual or imaginative incarnations of the appealing and the appalling.

The intentionalist strategy may advance in three moves. First, we show how some basic cases of bodily feeling involve intentionality; secondly, we extend the basic cases so as to include emotional feelings; finally we establish that the intentionality of such feelings is presentative of the value properties of worldly objects.

The first move has been well worked out in the psychological literature, and so a brief reminder of its premises may suffice. A bodily feeling, such as pain, may represent a change, such as damage, stretch or disorder, in parts of one’s body; the feeling of pain is a type of perception directed toward a particular point or area located within the limits of our body. The intentionalist model leaves open the question of whether pain-as-felt is a mental event exhausted by its directedness toward a particular pain-as-an-object of sensation, or whether it is required to include an account of the unpleasantness of pain (its very painfulness) in making sense of the experience. A
discussion of this issue should be reserved for another occasion. I shall simply assert here that what makes a bodily feeling intentional is the fact that it is directed toward a bodily event at a particular space and time, whereas what makes it a pain is a complex matter including several aspects: its representation of a bodily region or surface as one of damage or disorder (representation of a fact under a normative heading), that the feeling is unpleasant (affective reality), or one we wish it stopped (motivational dimension).

The above approach gains much of its plausibility by the fact that it is in tune with the folk ways of thinking about pain. The spatial and temporal aspects that make bodily feeling amenable to intentionalist interpretation is aptly conveyed in the ways we communicate our experience in discourse. A friend may ask “where exactly does it hurt?” as a doctor may inquire “where do you feel the pain?”, but neither, we trust, would ask “where does it grieve?” or “where exactly do you feel the shame?” In short, the specificity of spatio-temporal references to body that make intentionalism about pain plausible, is precisely what seems to render it a non-starter in the case of emotional feeling.

IV

Intentionalists may bring emotional feeling into their theory through a different route. Emotional episodes are not disembodied: they almost invariably come with changes in heart-rate, skin temperature, body posture, tightening of muscles, and so on. Information processed at a neural, sensory, perceptual, or epistemic level, on the one hand, and the goal directedness of volitional or desiderative states, on the other, may set in train autonomic responses preparatory for action (of strike in case of anger, withdrawal in case of sadness, reparation in case of guilt, etc.). The feeling of fear, according to this view, is the intentional state of sensing changes in one’s body generated by the autonomic responses preparatory for fight-or-flight, caused by the, broadly construed, cognitive and conative states of the agent. The emotional feeling registers how one’s body is involved as a whole in a particular situation.

Intentionalism asserts that the intentional content of a feeling is what it represents; and what an emotional feeling represents is a bodily *gestalt*, a patterned web of physiological changes. This claim raises a dilemma about the relation between emotion and emotional feelings, neither horn of which is particularly attractive.
If emotions and emotional feelings have the same intentional object, then emotions are directed towards one’s bodily state: what I dread is not the murderer catching up with me, but my pulse rate and stomach muscles. This view sounds absurd at worst, and strongly revisionary at best: absurd, because it implies that we are amused, afraid, joyous or guilty about our body temperature, rather than about people, actions or events that make up our natural and social environment. At a minimum, this view demands that we understand ourselves and others as being capable only of emotions with just one type of objects, namely the physiological changes that constitute our bodily gestalt. Though not logically incoherent, such a revision would require an immense effort of mental manoeuvring, as it runs counter to both scientific and folk psychological thinking about emotions.

If emotional feelings and emotions have different objects, then we are owed an explanation of why such feelings should bear the emotional title at all. The intentionalist might venture an explanation by showing what it is about certain bodily feelings that makes us identify them as emotional. The answer may invoke a chain of representation: certain feelings represent bodily changes; bodily changes represent certain of the changes in the world that impinge on the body; therefore bodily feelings represent certain changes in the world. Some of those changes in the world relate to matters of concern to us, sources of frustration or satisfaction, actual or forthcoming threats, secured or withdrawn rewards. They are precisely the kind of events that constitute the object of human emotions. All in all, some of our bodily feelings are called emotional because they represent events in the world towards which emotions are directed.

This explanation seems to lead intentionalism into a conundrum. The intentionalist account is grounded on two assumptions. The first concerns the

1. That representational chain is possible due to the nature of representation as a relation of a state ‘standing in’ for something else. However, this contrasts sharply with the core feature of intentionality as a relation of directedness between a state and that towards which that state is. Take the simpler case of my perceiving dark clouds gathering in the sky. Clouds are caused by various chemical processes on water
surfaces of the earth, and, according to the theory under consideration, clouds are thus representing such processes. However, the intentional content of my perception is that of clouds in the sky, not of chemical activities of water on earth. It is simply false to equate intentionality with representationality when the former is understood as a relation between a mental event and its object, and the latter as causally determined relation of entities or events that could be interpreted (for all sorts of scientific or practical purposes) as conveying information about each other.

The connection between a’s being intentionally related to b, and b representing c
A’ intentionally to c
B representing c
B unrelated to A

Belief that it is Tuesday
Unbeknown to me, the milkman comes only on Tuesdays
Milkman coming today and my belief that it is Tuesday are unrelated.

How I identify that today is Tuesday is unrelated to milkman’s whereabouts.

Objection: how milkman represents Tuesday is up to the representational scheme – in this case not operating – but in the case of feeling, my bodily feeling and my (evaluative) belief are connected by me to make up the emotional feeling.

Hence the two relations might not coincide, as they might be formed between different relata.

2. conceptual analysis presupposes that it is possible to identify what is threatening or rewarding irrespective of how one feels: otherwise it would be circular or vacuous to claim that both feeling and emotion are about the same thing.

3. revisionism: not literal to claim that I feel angry with at someone, according to this story, to feel is to perceive changes in one’s body.
Any locution of the form A feels x (e.g., angry) with/about/towards B should be understood along the lines of (as meaning) A feels increased heart-rate, high blood pressure, etc. and he is also angry with B.

It would make much more sense to say that (Husserl).

Values back in.

we need some justification for seeing a feeling representing the body, as an integral part of a state directed towards the world.