

*Emotions Inside Out: The Nonconceptual Content of Emotions**

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Abstract

Most of those who hold that emotions involve appraisals also accept that the content of emotions is nonconceptual. The main motivation for nonconceptualism regarding emotions is that it accounts for the difference between emotions and evaluative judgements. This paper argues that if one assumes a broadly Fregean account of concepts, there are good reasons to accept that emotions have nonconceptual contents. All the main arguments for nonconceptualism regarding sensory perception easily transpose to the case of emotions. The paper ends by responding to two important objections: firstly, that nonconceptualism rules out the possibility that emotions justify evaluative judgements and secondly, that nonconceptualism cannot account for the fact that some emotions have conceptually articulated cognitive bases.

Introduction

Consider the disgust you feel at the sight of rotten mushrooms, the fear of an upcoming storm, or the joy at meeting a friend. As illustrated by these examples, emotions are generally taken to have intentional objects, in the sense that they are about mushrooms, storms, meeting friends, etc. Emotions are also often considered to have representational contents. More precisely, the thought is that emotions involve appraisals of their intentional objects as good or bad in certain specific ways. Your disgust involves the evaluation of the rotten mushrooms as disgusting, your fear involves the evaluation of the storm as fearsome, and your joy involves the evaluation of meeting your friend as delightful.

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Most of those who hold that emotions have evaluative representational content also accept that the content of at least some emotions is nonconceptual.¹ The main motivation for this thesis is to account for the distinctive way emotions represent evaluative states of affairs, so as to mark the difference between emotions and evaluative judgements (or beliefs), i.e., states that are taken to involve conceptually articulated contents and so require that one possesses the concepts at stake. It is common to think that the claim that emotions have nonconceptual contents is equivalent to the thesis that emotions constitute a kind of affective perceptual experience.² However, these two theses are independent, since you may accept that emotions involve nonconceptual content while denying that they consist in perceptual experiences, for instance because you hold that emotions depend on cognitive bases whereas standard perceptual experiences do not depend on cognitive bases. Alternatively, you may believe that perception involves concepts and thus deny that emotions involve nonconceptual contents while maintaining that they are perceptual experiences. In this chapter, I will remain neutral with respect to the question whether emotions consist in affective perceptual experiences.³

Is it true that emotions have contents that are nonconceptual? To assess the plausibility of this thesis, which I will call “emotional nonconceptualism”, it is important to get clear on how to understand what is at stake. As I will explain in section 1), I will assume a broadly Fregean framework, according to which concepts are inferentially relevant constituents of contents. Section 2) turns to the arguments in favor of emotional nonconceptualism and argues that all the main arguments in favor of nonconceptualism about sensory perception easily transpose to the case of emotions.⁴ Section 3) considers two objections to emotional nonconceptualism: firstly, that nonconceptualism rules out the possibility that emotions justify evaluative judgements and secondly, that nonconceptualism cannot account for the fact that some emotions have conceptually articulated cognitive bases.

¹ See Deigh (1994), Charland (1996), Tappolet (1995, 2000, 2016), Johnston (2001), Gunther (2003), D’Arms and Jacobson (2003), Prinz (2004, 2006), Tye (2006, 2008), Wringe (2015), and Mitchell (2018).

² Supporters of the perceptual theory of emotions include Meinong (1917/1977), Prinz (2004, 2006), Döring (2003, 2007), Tye (2006, 2008), Pelser (2014), Poellner (2016), Milona (2016), Cowan (2016), and Mitchell (2017).

³ But see Tappolet (2016).

⁴ The first and the second section partly draw on Tappolet (2016).

The upshot of the discussion is that there is good reason to think that emotions are *sui generis* nonconceptual representations of evaluative features.

Before I start, let me make clear that what I am discussing here are emotional episodes, i.e. so-called “occurrent emotions”, such as the disgust, fear or joy you felt at a particular time towards a particular intentional object. Occurrent emotions contrast with emotional dispositions, i.e. dispositions to emotional episodes, such as the fear of dogs I had when I was a child. For the sake of simplicity, I will use the term “emotions” to refer to occurrent emotions. Moreover, I will focus on so-called “basic emotions”, such as fear, anger, happiness, sadness, surprise and disgust, leaving it open whether the conclusions also apply to what are sometimes called “higher cognitive emotions”, such as indignation or pride, which are often taken to involve normative judgements.⁵

1) The Fregean framework

What are nonconceptual contents? The distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual contents aims at capturing the intuitive difference between perceptual experiences and judgements (or beliefs, assumptions, suppositions, etc. – for the sake of simplicity, I will drop this qualification).⁶ The thought is that perceptual experiences are like iconic representations, such as photographs, while judgements are like discursive representations, such as sentences.

Consider your visual experience of a turquoise lake and your judgement that the same lake is turquoise. The visual experience and the judgement are both about the same lake and the same property. In that sense, they have the same referential content, which can be expressed in terms of accuracy or truth-conditions. The visual experience of the lake is accurate just when your judgement is true, that is, when the lake is indeed turquoise. However, if you think of how you apprehend what is being represented, it is clear that the visual experience and the judgement represent that state of affairs in quite different ways.

⁵ See Ekman (1972) as well as Scarantino and Griffiths (2011).

⁶ See Evans (1982); Peacocke (1992); Crane (1992); Tye (1995); Bermúdez (1998); Heck (2000).

To account for the perspective of the thinker, the content of a judgement has to be specified in terms of the concepts that the subject possesses. By contrast, because someone who sees a turquoise lake need not possess the concept of this color, there is no such requirement in ascribing contents to visual experiences. More generally, in the case of perceptual experiences, the ascription of content is not constrained by the conceptual abilities of the subject.

Obviously, what this distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual content consists in depends largely on what concepts are taken to be. Let me make clear that the concepts at issue are not psychological entities, but semantic entities. Concepts are constituents of contents, understood as broadly Fregean senses. It is an essential feature of judgements that they can figure in reasoning and form complex inferential networks. To account for the inferential relations between judgements, it is necessary to postulate constituents of content.⁷ For instance, to explain the inference from the judgement that this cat is black and the judgement that this crow is black to the judgement that at least two animals are black, it appears necessary to assume that the contents of the beliefs are structured, and that all three involve *black* as a constituent. On this account, concepts are elements of content that (along with logical connectors, etc.) account for the inferential power of judgements, and more generally of mental states that are involved in reasoning. Given this, concepts can be defined as *inferentially relevant constituents* of content, to use Tim Crane's apt phrase.⁸

The claim that concepts are inferentially relevant constituents explains why conceptual thoughts are taken to satisfy Gareth Evans' Generality Constraint. As Evans claims:

(W)e cannot avoid thinking of a thought about an individual object *x*, to the effect that it is *F*, as the exercise of two separable capacities; one being the capacity to think of *x*, which could be equally exercised in thoughts about *x* to the effect that it is *G* or *H*; and the other being a

⁷ See Crane (1992). As Crane notes, this suggestion goes back to Frege.

⁸ See Crane (1992), as well as Evans (1982).

conception of what it is to be F, which could be equally exercised in thoughts about other individuals, to the effect that they are F. (Evans 1982: 75)⁹

The Generality Constraint is a condition on what counts as a cognitive state that involve conceptual contents: the requirement that such states are systematic, where systematicity amounts to the capacity to recombine all the constituents of the content of one's cognitive states in any combination that is semantically acceptable, so as to form other cognitive states.¹⁰

By contrast with the semantic notion of content, the notion of concept possession is a psychological one. Possessing a concept is a psychological ability, which is often described in terms of the ability to use the concept in one's thinking.¹¹ Because of this contrast between a semantic and a psychological notion some have argued that one should distinguish two notions of nonconceptuality, one that bears on states, and one that bears on contents.¹² According to the "state view", perceptual experience and judgements have the same type of content, whether these are conceptual or nonconceptual. The difference between perceptual experience and judgement lies at the level of psychology: to be in a state of the second kind, you need to possess the concepts required to specify its content, while to have perceptual experiences, you do not have to possess these concepts. The "content view", by contrast, holds that the difference lies at the level of content: the content of judgement is conceptual while the content of perceptual experience is nonconceptual.

Because many arguments for the thesis that perceptual experiences are, in some sense or other, nonconceptual concern psychological abilities, one might conclude that the debate

⁹ Also see Peacocke (1992) and Heck (2000), *inter alia*.

¹⁰ See Beck (2012).

¹¹ See Peacocke (1992). Deigh (1994) contrasts being sensible of something, i.e., being able to detect it and to discriminate between those things that have it and those that have it not, with having the concept of it, which he spells out in terms of the capacity to predicate it of some object, thus locating it in a system of propositional thought.

¹² See Heck (2000) and Byrne (2005).

should focus on the state view, leaving the nature of content aside.¹³ However, there is reason to resist the distinction between the state view and the content view. In fact, on the reasonable assumption that the notion of content at stake in this debate is one that is perspectival, in the sense that attributions of content have to reflect how the subjects in question apprehend the world, the state view collapses into the content view.¹⁴ This is because how we apprehend the world depends on our cognitive abilities, and hence on the concepts we possess. Thus, if you fail to possess the concept of turquoise, your visual perception of the lake cannot have the concept of turquoise as part of its content. There is no space here to discuss this argument, but in this chapter, I shall be assuming that the distinction between the state view and the content view is one without a difference.

The contrast between states that have conceptual contents and ones that have nonconceptual contents concerns their semantics, not their syntax. However, there are good reasons to believe that the syntactic structure of mental representations matches the nature of their contents. States that have nonconceptual contents would consist in analogue representations, i.e., representations, which by contrast to digital ones, involves elements that co-vary with what is represented, in that the representation involves a magnitude, such as neural firing rates, that is isomorphic to the magnitude that is represented. The reason why this thesis is plausible is that the best explanations of why some mental states fail to satisfy the Generality Constraint, and thus can be thought to involve nonconceptual contents, is that they consist in analogue representations.¹⁵

As a result, there is a nice alignment of the three distinctions at stake: conceptual *versus* nonconceptual contents, conceptual *versus* nonconceptual states, and digital *versus* analogue representations. States with nonconceptual contents are such that one who experiences such states need not possess the concepts required to specify the contents in question, and such states consist in analogue representations. According to emotional nonconceptualism, emotions and perceptual experiences are on a par in having all three

¹³ In Tappolet (2016), I remained neutral on this question and suggested that those who favor the distinction between the state view and the content view are welcome to read the claim that emotions are nonconceptual as a state view.

¹⁴ See Toribio (2008) and Bermúdez and Cahen (2015).

¹⁵ See Beck (2012), as well as Heck (2000).

characteristics. The appraisals involved in emotions, or at least in basic emotions, are not composed of concepts, and it is thus not necessary to possess the relevant evaluative concepts to experience emotions. For instance, it is not necessary to possess the concept of the fearsome to experience fear and thereby to represent something as fearsome, or to possess the concept of the disgusting in order to experience disgust and thereby to represent something as disgusting. Finally, the representations at stake are analogue. With this in mind, let us turn to the arguments.

2) The arguments for emotional nonconceptualism

As I see it, all but one of the main arguments for nonconceptualism regarding perception easily transpose to the case of emotions.

1.2) *Fineness of grain*

An influential but controversial argument for perceptual nonconceptualism is that the content of perceptual experiences is more fine-grained than the content of judgements or more generally the content of propositional attitudes.¹⁶ Consider color perception. We can visually discriminate a great many shades of color, but because we have a limited number of concepts to pick out colors, only some of the perceived differences can be picked up at the level of conceptual thought. Perceptual experience is thus not limited by our conceptual abilities, so that to specify the content of our experience, we need not limit ourselves to the concepts we possess: their content is nonconceptual.

In reply, some have argued that if one allows the use of indexical concepts, conceptualism has no difficulty accounting for the fineness of grain of perceptual experiences.¹⁷ So, even if we do not have a non-demonstrative concept to pick out a particular shade of red, the content of our visual experience could be captured in terms of the concept *that shade*. Indeed, this concept would constitute the content of the

¹⁶ See Evans (1982), as well as Peacocke (1992), *inter alia*.

¹⁷ See McDowell (1994) and Brewer (1999).

experience. This suggestion has mostly failed to convince. One problem lies in the ephemeral character of such indexical concepts: once we stop having the visual experience of the specific shade, it is not clear that we retain the indexical concept at stake, so as to be able to re-identify samples of the same specific shade. As a consequence, it is not clear that we can use such concepts in the judgements that are made on the basis of the experience.¹⁸ A second problem is that it is hard to believe that demonstrative concepts like *that shade* are explanatorily fundamental.¹⁹ If we are able to use indexical concepts of this kind, it seems it is because we first have a visual experience of a particular shade. How else could we know what the indexical concept refers to? Perceptual capacities appear to ground the capacity to use such indexical expressions.

In any case, the fineness of grain argument easily transposes to the case of emotions. Consider fear. Granted that the intensity of emotions correlates with evaluative degrees, it seems plausible that we can discriminate a great many different degrees of fearsomeness, ranging from the mildly fearsome to the utterly fearsome, many more than we can conceptually grasp.

In reply, it might be argued that we have more evaluative concepts than it might seem, for we distinguish some types of emotions on the basis of their intensity. Horror, for instance, seems to be nothing but intense fear, while being scared might be thought to be a milder kind of fear. Accordingly, we can use the concept of what makes horror appropriate (*horror-worthy* or *horrible*) as well as the concept of scariness in our thoughts. However, even if one grants that horror and being scared are simply kinds of fear that lie on the same continuum, it should be clear that this conceptual apparatus is nonetheless much poorer, compared to the discriminations that are possible at the level of emotional content.

1.2) *Concept acquisition*

¹⁸ See Dokic and Pacherie (2001), *inter alia*.

¹⁹ See Heck (2000), *inter alia*.

As we just saw, perceptual capacities appear to ground the capacity to use indexical expressions such as *that shade*. More generally, it is natural to think that it is on the basis of our sensory experience that we acquire sensory concepts, such as color concepts.²⁰ But if a concept like *red* is acquired on the basis of experiences of red objects, it follows that the content of such experiences cannot involve that concept. If the content of that experience involved the concept of red, then we would already have to possess that concept. As a result, one would have to assume that such observational concepts are not acquired, but innate, and this is not plausible.

Much the same appears true of emotions and evaluative concepts. More specifically, it would seem difficult to deny that the evaluative concepts that wear their ties with emotions on their sleeves, such as *fearsome*, *disgusting*, and *admirable*, are learned on the basis of the emotions we feel. In whichever way the details of this story are filled out, it is plausible that the fact that we have such concepts is intimately related to our emotional capacities. On a plausible picture, we acquire such evaluative concepts on the basis of our various emotional responses towards the things in our environment, learning that in some conditions, the responses fail to track anything that is objective or at least intersubjectively recognizable.²¹

1.3) Analogue, unit-free content

A further important consideration in favor of nonconceptualism regarding perceptual experiences is that they have analogue content, i.e., a content that changes continuously depending on the variations in what is perceived. Simplifying Christopher Peacocke's definition, one can say that the content of a state is analogue if and only if there is a dimension of variation in some perceptible magnitude such that for each pair of points on that dimension, there can be a corresponding difference in the content.²² Consider color experiences. The content of such experiences is analogue because there is a match

²⁰ See Roskies (2008), *inter alia*.

²¹ See Wiggins (1987).

²² See Peacocke (1992), as well as Beck (2012).

between the variation in color experiences and variations in colors. Such content is nonconceptual, because the range of possible contents is not limited by the number of color concepts that we have.

Interestingly, emotions share this feature with sensory experience. There is a dimension of variation in the object of emotions that corresponds to a dimension of variation at the level of emotions. Emotions vary with respect to their intensity, and these variations are plausibly taken to correspond to the degrees of the corresponding evaluative properties that are represented in the content of the emotion. To paraphrase C. D. Broad (1971/1954: 293), intense fear might be appropriate with respect to a furious bull, but not with respect to a mildly irritated cow. One might wonder what emotional intensity consists in. Even though there is some controversy surrounding this issue, it is likely that in general the intensity of emotions involves phenomenological salience, physiological arousal as well as, at least in standard cases, motivational force, with more intense fear, such as the fear felt at the sight of a bull running towards you, being characterized by a stronger pang, a higher arousal, and a stronger motivation, compared to a milder fear.²³ In any case, the point concerning the correlation between emotional intensity and evaluative degrees holds independently of the precise account of emotional intensity. As we shall see, there is yet another reason to accept that emotions have analogue contents.

A related characteristic of perceptual experiences that has been taken to suggest that perceptual content is nonconceptual is that such content is unit-free.²⁴ When you look out of your window and see a tree, you represent that tree as being at a specific distance from you. But this distance is not represented as being measured in terms of meters or feet. In the same way, your fear represents the furious bull as being fearsome to a certain degree – more fearsome than a mild cow, less fearsome than a dozen furious bulls – but that degree is not measured in terms of some kind of unit. Indeed, even if we have a good idea of what utils and utilities are, it seems difficult to imagine what measurable “fearsomies”, “disgusties”, etc. would be like and it is clear that we do not experience such emotion as

²³ As I argue in Tappolet (2016), there are reasons to think emotions need not come with motivations.

²⁴ See Peacocke (1992).

involving specific quantities of fearsomeness or disgustingness. The resulting rankings would thus be ordinal. We could of course place fearsome or disgusting things on arbitrarily graded scales, but as will be made clear shortly such scales would fail to match the discriminations we are able to make *via* our emotions.

1.4) Non-human animal and infant cognition

It is commonly agreed that a great many non-human animals, as well as human infants, have perceptual experiences that are very much like the experiences of human adults, a fact that is often taken as the premise of an argument for nonconceptualism regarding perceptual experiences.²⁵ The thought is that because non-human animals and human infants lack conceptual abilities, one must conclude that the perceptual experiences that we share with non-human animals and infants are nonconceptual. Similar considerations are familiar in the philosophy of emotions, where the fact that non-human animals and infants share at least some of our emotions has been marshalled against judgementalist accounts of emotions.²⁶

Now, the evidence for the lack of conceptual abilities is often taken to consist in the absence of linguistic abilities. The problem, however, is that the more we learn about non-human animal cognition, the less it is obvious that they lack complex cognitive abilities.²⁷ The difficult question is whether the cognitions that are expressed in such complex cognitive abilities involve concepts.

Nonetheless, whether some non-human animals have conceptual abilities or not, it is plausible that at least some non-human cognitions involve analogue representations characterized by nonconceptual content.²⁸ As Jacob Beck argues, this is so because these

²⁵ See Peacocke (2001), as well as Evans (1982) and Bermúdez (1998).

²⁶ See Morreal (1993), Deigh (1994) and Charland (1996).

²⁷ Honeybees perform complex dances involving different figures and speed to indicate the distance and location of a food source to other members of the hive (Von Frisch 1967). Chickadees have calls that are syntactically structured, involving four basic elements, which come in an invariable sequence, even if not all elements need to be present and each element can be repeated several times (Otter 2007). For a general overview on animal cognition, see Bermúdez (2003) and Andrews (2012).

²⁸ See Beck (2012), as well as Andrews (2012).

cognitions violate systematicity and hence fail the Generality Requirement. Experiments show that pigeons seem able to represent that 40 pecks are fewer than 50 pecks, and that 38 pecks are fewer than 47, but they fail to discriminate between 38 and 40 pecks, and thus are not able to represent that 38 pecks are fewer than 40. In fact, the pigeons' ability to discriminate numbers obeys Weber's law, according to which the ability to discriminate two magnitudes, such as numbers, durations or distances, is a function of their ratio. A positive Weber constant appears to be a universal feature of magnitude discriminations by non-human animals, and even in humans the representation of number obeys Weber's law when there is an estimation of the amount instead of an explicit measurement. Thus, pigeons are able to reliably discriminate numbers only if their ratio does not exceed 9:10. This failure of systematicity, which also characterizes other non-human animals' ability to represent numbers or other types of magnitudes, is incompatible with an interpretation of the pigeons' numerical representations as involving conceptual contents. Indeed, it is best explained in terms of representations that have an analogue format. Beck concludes that at least in human beings,

there are at least two fundamentally distinct kinds of cognitive states, marked by two distinct structures and hallmark properties: conceptual states, which have a language-like structure and are governed by the Generality Constraint; and analogue magnitude states, which have an analogue structure and are characterized by Weber's Law. (Beck 2012: 595)

Where does this leave us regarding emotions? Whether or not cognitions of some kind display systematicity is an empirical question. In spite of this, I believe that Beck's argument strongly suggests that emotions have nonconceptual contents. This is so because emotions represent magnitudes of a kind, namely evaluative properties. Given this, it is plausible that such representations violate systematicity.

Consider disgust. It is likely that both human and non-human animals are able to represent the two following pieces of information:

1. A as less disgusting than B.
2. C is less disgusting than D.

However, the ability to represent these two states of affairs seems perfectly possible even if the same subjects are unable to represent the following information:

3. C is less disgusting than A.

As in the case of the pigeons' number representations, what is likely to explain the inability to represent that C is less disgusting than A is that C and A are too close to each other in terms of disgustingness to be discriminated on the basis of analogue representations. To make this vivid, we can imagine that on a scale that goes up to 50 (represented, say, by overripe *Épouse*), the piece of cheese A is disgusting to a degree of 40, cheese B to a degree of 50, cheese C to a degree of 38, and cheese D to a degree of 47, and that our Weber constant is the same as pigeons', so that we cannot discriminate values that exceed a 9:10 ratio. Offered a choice between cheese C and cheese A, you would feel roughly the same disgust reaction, thereby confirming that the ranking expressed in 3., that C is less disgusting than A, cannot be represented emotionally.

One might object here that the representations at stake do not involve emotions, since they involve comparisons, and comparisons require conceptual abilities.²⁹ Disgust might represent something as disgusting, but surely there is no single emotion episode that represents something as less disgusting than something else. In reply, it can be stressed that even if emotional episodes carry only information about some value and its degree, it is not obvious that comparisons between two items in terms of their evaluative properties require conceptual abilities. On the contrary, it seems plausible that comparisons can be made within the emotional system. If you choose between two disgusting items, you might well feel less disgusted by one than by the other, where this feeling need not require a comparative judgement. Similarly, when you have to choose between skiing down two slopes, you may well base your choice on feeling more attracted by one of the slopes, independently of any judgement regarding the attractiveness of the slopes.

It would be nice to have empirical confirmation of these speculations.³⁰ In any case, it is plausible to think that at least emotions that we share with non-human animals, such as

²⁹ Thanks to Jacob Beck and Jonathan Mitchell for raising this issue.

³⁰ An important difficulty here is that evaluative properties do not correlate with measurable quantities.

fear, disgust and anger, consist in analogue representations, which involve analogue, nonconceptual contents.

1.4) Recalcitrance

Yet a further argument for the claim that sensory perceptual experiences have nonconceptual content is that perceptual experiences can conflict with judgements. Consider the famous Müller-Lyer illusion. You see the lines as having different lengths even if you judge that they are of the same length. Now, a plausible explanation of this illusion is that the two states involve different types of content. Your judgement involves the conceptual content that the lines are of the same length, while your visual experience represents that content nonconceptually. There is thus no contradiction in experiencing the lines as having different lengths while judging that they have the same length.

Many have underlined that emotions allow for a similar phenomenon.³¹ So-called “recalcitrant emotions” are emotions that conflict with our evaluative judgements, such as when we are afraid of a tiny spider that we believe to be innocuous and thus entirely non-fearsome. Indeed, recalcitrant emotions are a staple argument against so-called judgementalist accounts of emotions according to which emotions consist (at least partly) in evaluative judgements. Just as in the Müller-Lyer case one plausible explanation of such cases is that the conflicting states have different types of content: your fear nonconceptually represents the spider as fearsome, while the conflicting judgement conceptually represents the spider as not fearsome. In Justin D’Arms and Daniel Jacobson’s terms:

(R)ecalcitrance is the product of two distinct evaluative systems, one emotional and the other linguistic. Because these are discrete modes of evaluation, only one of which involves the deployment of conceptual capacities, it is possible for them to diverge systematically. (D’Arms and Jacobson 2003: 141)

³¹ See Rorty (1978), Greenspan (1988), Deigh (1994), and D’Arms and Jacobson (2003), *inter alia*.

A worry with this line of thought is that, unlike perceptual illusions, it seems that recalcitrant emotions are irrational.³² In reply, it can be argued that the kind of irrationality at stake can be explained in terms of differences between perceptual experiences and emotions that do not entail a commitment to conceptualism. As I have argued elsewhere, the fact that emotions, but not sensory experiences, can be criticized as irrational is grounded in an important difference between emotions and sensory experiences: emotional dispositions, but not dispositions to have sensory experiences, are plastic and can thus be shaped by subjects. We can learn not to be afraid of spiders, whereas there is no way not to see the lines as being of different length.³³ This feature of emotions, however, is perfectly compatible with emotions having nonconceptual contents.

Let me end this catalogue with an argument that might have no equivalent in the case of emotions.

1.5) Representing the impossible

As Crane (1988) argues, cases of illusory perceptions, such as the Waterfall Illusion, suggest that we can have experiences representing impossible states of affairs. After having looked at a moving object, such as a waterfall, and looking at a stationary object, the latter appears to move in the other direction. But at the same time, it appears not to move, or so the subjects report. It would thus seem that we experience the object as simultaneously moving and not moving. Now, cases of perception with putative contradictory contents violate a plausible principle, which can be traced back to Frege, according to which two concepts, F and G, are different if it is possible for a subject to simultaneously be in state with the content that *a* is F and in a state with the content that *a* is not-G. Applied to perception, this principle would rule out perceptions with putative contradictory contents, for we would have to conclude that the two occurrences of the term “moving” do not correspond to the same concept. From this, Crane wants us to infer

³² See Helm (2001).

³³ See Tappolet (2016).

that the content of perception is nonconceptual. The Fregean constraint, he claims, is best kept for higher cognitive faculties, such as judgement, belief and thought.

Whatever the merit of this argument, it is not clear that it transposes to the case of emotions. The question is whether there are emotions representing impossible evaluative states of affairs. Consider fear. There seems to be no conceptual space for the idea that an emotion of fear can represent something as both fearsome and not fearsome. In general, emotion-types are individuated in terms of specific evaluative dimensions, the so-called “formal objects” of emotions, so that fear cannot be in the business of representing something different from fearsomeness.

An intriguing possibility is to appeal to ambivalent emotions.³⁴ For instance, we are often attracted by something while also being afraid of that same thing. Can ambivalent emotions be understood as involving representations of impossible states of affairs? If so, that would seem sufficient to run Crane’s argument, for the prohibition that follows from the Fregean constraint concerns not only states with putative contradictory contents, but simultaneous states having contradictory contents. Now, ambivalent emotions often do not represent impossible states of affairs. Instead, they often represent contrasting evaluative features, such as attractiveness and fearsomeness, which are quite compatible.³⁵ The question is whether we are sometimes genuinely ambivalent, in the sense that we feel contrary emotions. Can we feel happy about some state of affairs while being unhappy about that same state of affairs? If these emotions are genuinely ambivalent, they would involve simultaneous representations of something as good in a way and as bad in the same way, thus representing incompatible states of affairs.³⁶ Clearly, only one of these representations could be correct, and one could not, in all likelihood, be rational and feel both these emotions.

³⁴ Thanks to Eva Schmidt for suggesting this line of thought.

³⁵ See Tappolet (2005).

³⁶ See Greenspan (1980), as well as Calabi and Santambrogio (2018).

I am not sure that there are cases of genuinely ambivalent emotions, but intuitions diverge on this question.³⁷ In any case, one might wonder whether the possibility that there are no such cases threatens nonconceptualism. Given that cases like that of the waterfall illusions are at best rare and constitute just one of the many considerations in the debate, there is room to argue that this difference, if it is a difference, should not count against nonconceptualism about emotions. In all likelihood, impossible contents are a sufficient and not a necessary condition for nonconceptual contents.³⁸

In sum, all but the last argument for nonconceptualism regarding sensory experiences can easily be transposed to the case of emotions. It follows that the case for nonconceptualism regarding emotions is (almost) as strong as the one for nonconceptualism regarding sensory perceptions. Overall, we can conclude that there are ample reasons to accept nonconceptualism regarding the content of emotions.³⁹ Even so, some are likely to disagree with this conclusion.

3) Objections to emotional nonconceptualism

Emotions enter into important relations with states that have conceptual content, something which can be thought to threaten nonconceptualism regarding emotions. Let me start by considering epistemic relations.

³⁷ For the claim that such emotions are not possible, see Massin (2018). Empirical studies suggest that we can have mixed feelings, such as when one feels both sad and happy. See for instance Larsen, McGraw, and Cacioppo (2001). These studies do not address, however, whether one can feel conflicting emotions that concern the same object considered under the same aspect.

³⁸ Thanks to Fabrice Teroni for suggesting this point.

³⁹ In addition, as Michael Tye (2008) explains, empirical studies suggest that there are important connections between a primitive part of the brain called the amygdala and emotional experiences such as fear and anger. For instance, removal of the amygdala produces a total lack of anger or fear. Now, one important way that the amygdala processes information is via subcortical pathways, which are independent of the region of the brain that is responsible for conceptual thought, thus allowing for faster reactions. Furthermore, experiments with split brain patients also suggest that emotional experience depends on primitive, subcortical regions of the brain, which are not associated with conceptual thought. In such patients, the processing of a frightening scene of a fire by the right hemisphere only gives rise to verbal behavior monitored by the left hemisphere via the pathways of the brainstem. There might be different interpretations of these findings, but even so, they help bolstering the case for nonconceptualism about emotions.

Emotions often trigger evaluative judgements, and they are often thought to confer at least *prima facie* justification to the evaluative judgements that they cause.⁴⁰ The fear you feel at an approaching storm, for instance, seems well-placed to justify the judgement that the storm is fearsome. The problem is that according to an attractive albeit controversial conception, justification relations consist in valid deductive relations. According to this inferential conception of justification, only states that have conceptual contents can provide epistemic reasons.⁴¹

As many have suggested regarding the justification of perceptual judgements, the obvious move here is simply to reject the inferential conception. The main alternative to the inferentialism is reliabilism, that is, the claim that justification depends on the reliability of the belief acquisition mechanism.⁴² One difficulty with using this solution in defense of emotional nonconceptualism is that emotions do not seem particularly reliable. Quite on the contrary, emotions are often accused of distorting our evaluative judgements, and it is easy to come up with examples of such distortions. We often fear quite innocuous things, such as spiders, and we also fail to fear things that are genuinely fearsome, such as climate change. At most, emotions are reliable in very specific contexts regarding a narrow range of objects, and this might seem insufficient to defend a reliabilist account of their justificatory force. In any case, the main difficulty is that a reliabilist account will fail to satisfy those who have internalist leanings, for what will justify your judgement might be something to which you have no access. What is a reason to judge that something is disgusting, say, might not amount to a reason you have for this judgement.

To see how one might argue for an alternative non-inferential account, let us look at an account of perceptual content recently proposed by Arnon Cahen (2017). What Cahen suggests is that the nonconceptual content of perceptual experiences is on a par with conceptual content in so far as it has to be spelled out in terms of its possession

⁴⁰ See Döring (2003), Deonna (2006), Pelser (2014) Milona (2016), and Mitchell (2017), *inter alia*.

⁴¹ See Cahen (2017). The main advocates of inferentialism are McDowell (1994) and Brewer (1999). By contrast, Heck (2000) and Peacocke (2004) argue that states without conceptual content can justify beliefs.

⁴² A radical solution would consist in denying that sensory perception can confer justification (Brady 2013). Given that the aim here is to discuss objections to emotional nonconceptualism, I will simply assume that emotions can confer *prima facie* justification to our evaluative judgements. On these issues, see Tappolet (2016) and Tappolet (2018).

conditions. Unlike conceptual contents, which need to be spelled out in terms of their inferential relations to other conceptual contents, the possession conditions of nonconceptual contents would have to be spelled out in terms of kinds of activities that are found primitively compelling, in the sense that we have a non-derivative reason for these activities.⁴³ Here is one of Cahen's examples:

(W)hen perceiving a mug as graspable, one is undergoing an experience the content of which is partially individuated by ones finding the grasping of the mug appropriate (or, simply, finding it primitively compelling. (Cahen 2017: 23)

Similarly, the content of color perceptions could be specified in terms of discriminative capacities, the experience as of something red being spelled out in terms of "one's finding primitively compelling certain red-appropriate engagements with objects so characterized" (Cahen 2017: 24).

Whatever its merit as an account of the content of sensory perception, Cahen's suggestion is particularly plausible when transposed to the case of emotions. The reason is that even if emotions are not all necessarily tied to specific types of motivations and actions – think of awe, joy or admiration – they nonetheless bear a close relationship to motivation and action. Indeed, in so far as they represent evaluative features of the world, and given the tight connection between evaluative features and practical reasons, with evaluative features being such as to ground practical reasons, the connection to action is particularly obvious. Consider again the case of fear. When experiencing fear at the sight of an approaching storm, your emotion represents the storm as fearsome. It is easy to spell out what this nonconceptual content amounts to, for it is obvious that you will find it primitively compelling to run away or more generally to do things you believe will put yourself out of danger. One virtue of this account is that this is a content that you can easily share with animals of all kinds even if the details will differ depending on what is

⁴³ Cahen takes the notion of being primitively compelling from Peacocke (1992), who uses it to explain the possession of concepts.

feasible for each individual – by contrast to a bird, you will not find it primitively compelling to fly away.⁴⁴

One difference between human and (at least most) non-human fear is that among the activities you will find primitively compelling after having acquired the relevant concepts are conceptually articulated thoughts. Given this, it is not difficult to see how emotions could justify evaluative judgements. At least part of the reply is that they do so simply because you find it primitively compelling to form such judgements on the basis of your emotions. What needs to be stressed is that this specific primitive compellingness is parasitic on the core content of that state, in the sense that the disposition to form evaluative judgements on the basis of emotions depends on the core content and is acquired on the basis of a learning process that depends on that core content.

This account of the justificatory power of emotions would need unpacking. In particular, the notion of primitive compellingness might seem mysterious. How can it be that finding something primitively compelling, which is the exercise of a psychological capacity, amounts to having a reason, i.e., to finding oneself normatively bound? And what about cases in which a subject seems to be mistaken about what reason she has? On the assumption that such questions have good answers, we would have to grant that the justificatory power of a nonconceptual state is parasitic on its core content. At this point, one might start to worry that this makes the life of the nonconceptualist much too easy. But then, we should remind ourselves that at least part of a good answer to why conceptual states have justificatory power consists in pointing to the possession conditions of the concepts at stake and explaining them in terms of the inferences which we find primitively compelling.⁴⁵

Another type of relation between emotions and conceptual states lies upstream. In general, emotions have what are often called “cognitive bases”. These cognitive bases can be nonconceptual, such as when you see or hear the storm approaching, but they can

⁴⁴ See Teroni (2016) for a congenial conception, according to which the grasp of the evaluative property at stake is her capacity to interact with objects in a discriminating fashion.

⁴⁵ See Peacocke (1992).

also be conceptual. You might hear the news on the radio and form the belief that a storm is approaching. Indeed, given the news, you might form the belief that the storm is dangerous. Either belief might be the cognitive basis of your fear. And both could at least partly justify your reaction. Does this not suggest that emotions, or at least some of them, must have conceptually articulated contents?⁴⁶

The most concessive reply to this question is to accept that some emotions have conceptual content. Fear based on the belief about dangers would be of that type, in the same way as indignation based on the judgement that a decision is unjust would have to be thought to involve conceptual content. As far as I can see, this reply fails to be convincing. One problem is that it makes it hard to see what is common between fears that are based on nonconceptual cognitive bases and conceptual fears. Another problem is that the arguments in favor of nonconceptualism would still apply to episodes of fear that are based on conceptual states. Think of the argument from fineness of grain as well as the ones concerning analogue, unit-free contents, for instance. Furthermore, it would seem that all types of fears allow for recalcitrance. You can form the belief that there will be a storm upon hearing the news, but since you judge that there is no danger involved, so that there is nothing to fear, the fear you experience on the basis of your belief that a storm is approaching constitutes a paradigmatic case of recalcitrance. Indeed, you might even form the belief that there is danger involved, but then persuade yourself otherwise, so that your fear will nonetheless be a case of recalcitrance.

In response, it might be suggested that emotions can have mixed contents, i.e. contents that are partially nonconceptual and partially conceptual.⁴⁷ I see at least two ways mixed contents could be thought of. One is to appeal to causal relations between states: a mixed content would belong to a causally related pair of mental states, one of which would have conceptual content while the other one would have nonconceptual content.⁴⁸ Another one consists in the claim that the same psychological state can have both conceptual and

⁴⁶ See Deonna and Teroni (2012), Lemaire (2018).

⁴⁷ Mixed contents are often mentioned in the literature on perception, but there is little discussion of what they amount to. See Peacocke (1992), however.

⁴⁸ See Tye (2008) for this suggestion regarding what he calls “secondary emotions”, which depend on evaluative beliefs.

nonconceptual content, in the same way as a sentence that is colored in red could convey its semantic content plus the content coded by its color. The difficulty for both these suggestions concerns the articulation of the two kinds of content. Do we have to assume that the causal relation between, or the co-instantiation of, the two contents amounts to a conjunction? And if so, are we not forced to accept that the two contents are conceptually articulated? Maybe there is a way around this difficulty. There might be relations that are like conjunctions but which hold between whole contents, whether or not they are conceptually articulated. Instead of pursuing this idea, let me consider another avenue.

The third reply consists in claiming that emotions have their own language. Whether or not they are caused or justified by conceptual states, emotions consist in *sui generis* analogue representations, which have purely nonconceptual contents of their own. This suggestion has the advantage of taking care not only of the cases in which emotions are based on beliefs or judgements, but also of the problems that arise from the fact that cognitive bases in general have their own modes of representation. So, instead of having to postulate representations that are partly visual and partly emotional, or partly auditory and partly emotional, partly linguistic and partly emotional, etc., there would be just one type of representations involved in emotions. Now, this is obviously an empirical hypothesis, so as a philosopher, I can only hope for the best.⁴⁹

Conclusion

I have argued that there are good reasons to accept that emotions have representational content that is nonconceptual, in the sense that they are not composed of inferentially relevant constituents of content. All but one of the arguments in favor of nonconceptualism regarding sensory perceptions can easily be transposed to the case of emotions, and neurological considerations bolster this conclusion. Moreover, the main objections can be dealt with if we assume that nonconceptual contents can be spelled out in terms of their possession conditions, and more precisely in terms of the activities that

⁴⁹ What might seem encouraging is that, according to a well-accepted theory, there are two pathways to the activation of the amygdala that correspond to fear – the low road, which depends on subcortical information, and the high road, which depends on cortical information. See Ledoux (1996).

are found primitively compelling, and if one accepts that the representations at stake are *sui generis* emotional representations. It is plausible that this account holds of emotions in general, including higher cognitive emotions, but the question whether this is really the case will have to be left for another occasion.

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