

EMOTIONAL CONTENT, COGNITIVE PRECONDITION AND PHENOMENOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

In his recent article “The Phenomenology and Intentionality of Emotions”, York Gunther offers views concerning the relations among feeling, emotional content, and attitude. Taken separately, most of these views, or the intuitions behind them, have considerable force. I contend, however, that the overarching argument does not go through: the correspondence between attitude and feeling on the one hand, and the intimacy of feeling and content on the other, do not secure that attitude and content connect in a similar way.

Key words: emotion, phenomenology, intentionality, content

Emotions are philosophically unruly phenomena: they resist neat categorization and fail to observe certain common philosophical distinctions. It has been long observed by philosophers that emotions are neither simply mental states nor simply bodily states, but something of both. It has been argued that emotions do not simply have either a world-to-mind or a mind-to-world direction of fit: they have both (Helm 2001, p. 6). On York Gunther’s analysis, emotions are mental states that, unlike many others, do not heed the force/content distinction: in the case of emotions, force and content cannot be separated (pp. 51-53). Without intending to deny the truth of this proposition, I claim that it cannot be arrived at on the basis of the double correspondence between attitude (which Gunther also calls ‘force’) and feeling, and between feeling and emotional content, as submitted by Gunther.

1. *Emotional content*

The first correspondence can be stated like this: each emotion or ‘attitude’ goes together with—but is not reducible to—a characteristic quale, by which the emotion can be identified. For instance, the attitude of jealousy is associated with a specific unpleasant feeling in each of its instances. In my view, this is plausible. There is no ‘unfelt’ emotion, and there is no instance of an emotion that goes together with a feeling which normally belongs to another emotion. Indeed, it can be argued that the presence of the characteristic qualitative feel is the *only* necessary condition of having a particular emotion (Elster 1999, pp. 247ff.). As I believe Gunther’s position is well supported here, I will not examine the related claims, proceeding instead to the relationship between feeling and content; but first, I will look at Gunther’s account of emotional content.

In Gunther’s understanding, the content of an emotion is linguistically best approximated by a ‘that’ clause: we can be happy or distressed *that* Mary arrived today, *that* Paul is eating, *that* John won the race (Gunther 2003b, pp. 48–49). Yet emotions are not propositional attitudes for Gunther. Whereas in the case of propositional attitudes force (attitude) and content (proposition) are separable, in the case of emotions they are not. Further, emotional content is finer of grain than our conceptual-linguistic apparatus can capture (Gunther 2003b, p. 50). Although the phrase is not used in the argument under discussion, Gunther’s position elsewhere is that emotional content is *non-conceptual* (Gunther 2003).

The hope that *p* and the sadness that *p* do not have the same *content*. Rather, what these two emotions share is their *cognitive precondition*; according to Gunther, it is this shared cognitive precondition that gives us the mistaken impression that the contents of the two emotions are identical (Gunther 2003b, p. 49). Many different emotions can have the same cognitive precondition. Also, many different emotions can have the same intentional object (e.g., the event that Mary arrived today), presented in the content of each emotion in a different way. What individuates an emotion, on Gunther’s account, is its content, imbued, as we will see, with phenomenology.

Whereas the content of an emotion is always particular, the cognitive precondition has a proposition, an abstract entity, as its content. Yet, however different the two are, there is a close relationship between them that justifies referring to the emotion by a phrase that contains *p*, the propositional content of the cognitive precondition. As the issue of non-conceptual content is only implicit in the argument presently discussed, I will merely indicate a possible problem here: it is not obvious how mental states with contents that are not conceptually individuated can have preconditions with conceptual content. Even if we grant that there can be rational relations between states of the two (conceptual and non-conceptual) types based on the case of perception (the paradigm case in discussions of this theme), that does not win the case for emotions as well. For in the case of perception, non-conceptual content grounds conceptual content, not the other way round. This issue cannot be explored here. What is relevant from my per-

spective is that emotional content, although non-conceptual, appears to have what we could label a 'quasi-propositional' form: it is *that Mary arrived today* that is presented in a particular way in the content of the emotion the cognitive precondition of which is the belief that Mary arrived today.

What of emotions that appear to be directed at particular objects? Jonathan is disgusted by the blood on the street; Kelly loves her mother; Patricia is afraid of spiders. This category cannot be overlooked by any treatment of emotional content: it is the category some of our most fundamental emotions fall into and it has special philosophical interest precisely from the angle of intentionality.

A way to accommodate object-directed emotions would be to maintain that their content can be brought to a propositional form. In certain cases, it is not easy to see how this would go. Whereas anxiety about one's exam can be reformulated as anxiety that one will fail the exam, the love of one's mother cannot be reformulated in a similar fashion. We could try to identify propositional contents for object-directed emotions via the cognitive precondition, since in the preceding discussion the content of an emotion was granted to correspond roughly to the content of its cognitive precondition. Thus, we could proceed by asking what, if any, the cognitive precondition of an object-directed emotion is. If Kelly's love of her mother had a cognitive precondition, it would presumably be Kelly's *belief* that her mother is lovable. This will not do, however: she may think that her mother is utterly unlovable and still love her. It seems that one does not have to have any particular belief in order to love someone. (Relatedly, love is not one of the cognitively penetrable emotions. Learning the truth of any particular proposition about love's object does not necessarily make the emotion disappear, while grief over someone's death does disappear when we find the person to be alive.) However, should we suppose for the sake of the argument that Kelly's belief that her mother is lovable is the cognitive precondition of Kelly's loving her, the content of the antecedent belief cannot be the content of the emotion: it would be absurd to claim that the content of Kelly's love of her mother is *that her mother is lovable*.

What seems more plausible is that the content of object-directed emotions is the object itself presented in a certain way. How would this square with Gunther's account of the properties of emotional content? The individuation of emotions may appear to present a difficulty. We would want to say that Kelly's love of her mother today is the same emotion as Kelly's love of her mother tomorrow: love is thought to be a so-called 'long-term emotion'. Many other object-directed emotions seem to share this feature: jealousy of the man next door, contentment with one's life, worry about money. However, if contents are different modes of presentation of the object, and an emotion with a different content is a different emotion, Kelly's love of her mother would be a different emotion whenever her mother is presented in a different way. This is not a compelling objection, though, as one can either deny that long-term emotions are emotions in the relevant sense, and thus reject the problem, or embrace the idea that Kelly's love of her mother today is a different emotion from her love of her mother tomorrow.

2. Content and feeling

That the content of an emotion is intimately connected with qualitative feel is illustrated by the following example in Gunther's argument. We listen to the same joke three times over, told exactly the same way. The emotion under discussion will be the reaction to the joke, viz. the amusement that Frank fell down the stairs. On the first occasion, the listener "laughs uproariously", on the second she "experiences mitigated amusement", while on the third she "chuckles mildly", feeling only slightly amused. Gunther's claim is that through these steps, together with the change of feeling, the *content* of amusement changes as well, in ways that are too fine-grained to capture conceptually, "largely because emotional content is imbued with phenomenology".

The argument can be formulated in the following way. We are trying to explain the changes in the behavior of the listener (from uproarious laughter to slight smile): something has to have changed on the object-side, the subject-side, or both. The change on the subject-side is obvious: finding something hilarious and being slightly amused are associated with different phenomenologies. As to the object-side, the listener's amusement refers to the same *event* in each case; therefore it is "tempting to suppose" that the content of the amusement does not change (Gunther 2003b, p. 50). However, the content is not the same as the event that amuses the listeners: content is subject to the Viewpoint Constraint. Emotional content presents the event in a certain way; these ways are different in each case. When someone thinks that the content of the listener's amusement has remained the same, she is ignoring the Viewpoint Constraint.

I believe that the idea that emotional content changes together with the feeling is sound, but there are two further remarks I would like to make about the argument itself. First, as it stands, the argument is question-begging: the charge that by supposing that content does not change we ignore the Viewpoint Constraint has force only if we have already accepted that content is liable to change together with phenomenology. Second, 'viewpoint' cannot simply be meant in the Fregean sense in connection with non-conceptual content, as the passage introducing it suggests. The cognitive precondition, which does not change during the course of retelling the joke twice, is *also* subject to the Fregean Viewpoint Constraint. Suppose Frank's wife Dorothy also appeared in the joke and that Frank's name got lost on me, the listener: Frank is just Dorothy's husband. The emotion refers to the event that Frank fell down the stairs, whether Frank is Frank or Dorothy's husband for me. But if we are to apply the Fregean Viewpoint Constraint, as Gunther has us do, the antecedent belief will have to be ascribed *de dicto*: the cognitive precondition of my amusement will be the belief that *Dorothy's husband* fell down the stairs. Now the ascription of the belief that Dorothy's husband fell down the stairs, which is the same cognitive precondition in all three cases of amusement, *already* incorporates the listener's viewpoint in the Fregean sense. The 'emotional viewpoint', as it were, which is different in each of the three cases, has to be something over and above

the Fregean viewpoint. We do not get an indication of what such a further ‘viewpoint’ would be.

These issues notwithstanding, the intuition illustrated should be preserved: when I hope that you will come and am at the same time apprehensive about your coming, the contents of these two emotions differ just as the two feelings differ, even though the events at which the emotions are directed are the same.

3. *Is attitude an aspect of content?*

Having dealt with some specific issues, let me come to the overarching argument. On the one hand, attitude and feeling are attached to each other; on the other hand, feeling and content show a certain “intimacy”. The idea, schematically put, is this: if A and B correspond, and likewise do B and C, A and C also correspond. Furthermore, Gunther claims that a plausible explanation for the correspondence between A and B and B and C is that A is ‘an aspect of’ C: “emotional force is an aspect of emotional content” (Gunther 2003b, p. 52). We have granted both the connection between attitude and feeling, and that between feeling and content. Does this mean that the main argument goes through? I believe not, for the two arguments cannot be incorporated into a single argument that brings us to the conclusion Gunther intends us to reach.

We recognize the tingling of joy and the throbbing of anger because feeling *types* correspond to emotion *types*: “each emotional attitude (force) type is accompanied in experience by a distinctive feeling type” (Gunther 2003b, p. 8). We learn the characteristic way different kinds of emotions feel because different instances of jealousy, for instance, go together with the same kind of feeling. My-gratefulness-to-my-mother-at-this-moment does not create its own attitude type—even though it is possible that I will never feel just the same way, seeing my mother in exactly the same light, that is, the content and phenomenology of the emotion are unique. When we match attitudes with qualitative character, we match attitude *types* with feeling *types*.

The correspondence between feeling and content, however, is on the *token* level. When one is told the same joke three times, the qualitative feel and the content of amusement change each time. The emotion is only related to *that* particular joke, as told *for the second time*. If it were a different joke, or if it were told for a seventh time, the emotional reaction would be different again—somewhat different feeling, different content. But if this is so, the feeling cannot simply connect the attitude with the content, as feeling *types* connect to attitude *types* and feeling *tokens* connect to content *tokens*.

Why this asymmetry? There is no reason to think there should *not* be, for content and feeling do not belong together in the way attitude and feeling do. The latter is a constitutive relationship, while that of content and feeling is only a—much looser—correlation: when the one changes, the other changes as well. We should not want to turn this cor-

relation into a constitutive relationship, that is: we do not want to multiply emotions to match every change in content.

How could we attempt to resolve this difficulty? This can only be done, I believe, by destroying one or the other of the two pillars on which the overarching argument rests: the correspondence between attitude and feeling, or that between feeling and content.

One possibility would be to abolish the type-token distinction in the case of attitudes. Each individual feeling-content would belong to a different kind of emotion, that is, each emotion would be *sui generis*, or rather *sui ipsius*. This is a possible approach to *aesthetic* emotions: a particular aesthetic experience involves kinds of emotions that are tied to particular contents. As Ronald de Sousa puts the idea, “if the emotion didn’t have *this* object, it wouldn’t be *this* emotion”, or more vividly: “only that recording of the Archduke Trio can make me feel *just so*” (de Sousa 1987, p. 110). However, Gunther obviously does not want to make the claim (certainly not as applying to emotions in general) that contents secure their own attitude types, as it would undermine the initial argument that emotions are recurrent, accompanied by characteristic feelings by which we distinguish between different types. If there are innumerable *kinds* of emotions, each with its own qualitative feel, this obviously could not be so.

Alternatively, attitude, feeling and content could be brought to the same level by making content generic. However, talking about generic content would amount to failing to observe the Viewpoint Constraint, on the basis of which feeling and content were claimed to be connected in the first place. Moreover, we have no reason to think that feeling *types* and content *types* would show any correspondence. If there is such a thing as a content type, tokens of which are, e.g., particular contents associated with John winning the race, we have no reason to suppose that the feelings involved would have to be the same: someone can be happy, while another person sad, with the associated kinds of qualitative feel, that John won the race. Even if we could make sense of the idea of content types, feelings and contents would not correspond on the type level. This is because, as was mentioned above, unlike attitude and feeling, content and feeling are not related to each other in a constitutive way.

Gunther offers an analogy with colours that could seem to solve the problem of generality and particularity. An attitude with a certain content is like a certain shade-intensity combination in the case of colours. The colour, of which the emotions with different intensities are ‘shades’, is the attitude type (sadness is blue, love is red, and so on). In this manner, feeling would be particular, it would seem, but recognizably belong to some attitude type: navy blue and sky blue are both blue: “Thus, the various intensities, e.g., of sadness are akin to the various shades of blue. While all feelings of sadness are, thus, blue, a mild feeling of sadness is like a baby blue while an intense feeling of sadness is like a navy blue.” (Gunther 2003b, p. 48). Emotional content contributes a further shade of a colour to the original colour (attitude) with a particular intensity: “If we go further and compare emotional content (as it has been traditionally regarded) to

shades of white (e.g., that Mary arrived today is eggshell white, that John won the race is snow white, that Paul is eating is ivory), we can regard the intense sadness that Mary arrived today as a (phenomenological) mixture of navy blue and eggshell white, while a mild sadness that John won the race is a mixture of baby blue and snow white” (p. 48.). However, if we mix navy blue and eggshell white, the resulting color will still be on the *type* level: any number of sweaters can be manufactured of the very same color with a particular shade and intensity, whereas, by assumption, I cannot enjoy the same joke the same way for a second time. Talking about different intensities of feeling and shades of color in effect does not particularize feeling or color. Feeling with a certain intensity and a shade of color are still on the type level, not particularized by content.

Thus, attitude, in the schema presented by Gunther, cannot be an *aspect of* content. The two were supposed to be linked by feeling. Feeling, however, cannot be generic in one way (in relation to the attitude type) and particular in the other (in relation to the particular content). Feeling relates to attitude and content in two different ways: by a constitutive relationship and by mere correlation. The two cannot be merged.

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