

**Do Emotions Represent?**  
Hichem Naar  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Duisburg-Essen

**Abstract** In this paper, I argue against a prominent view in recent philosophy of emotion which I call ‘representationalism’. On this view, emotions constitute an independent way of representing certain aspects of the world. A major motivation for the view is that emotions have intentionality. Given that emotions are directed at things in the world, they must represent these things as being a certain way. I argue that this implication does not hold, given that it is possible to find entities which are intentional without being representational. Some actions, I argue, are directed towards objects without representing them as being a certain way. Given the apparent possibility that, like these actions, emotions are intentional without being representational, the representationalist must give us positive reasons for her view. I consider some of them and show them to be insufficient to establish representationalism over an alternative non-representationalist account. According to this account, the relation between emotions and other mental states and to the facts they are responsive to is exactly analogous to the relation some actions entertain with the mental states on which they are based and to the facts they are responsive to.

Representationalism in the philosophy of emotion is the thesis that emotions are, perhaps among other things, representational states. In having an emotion, one represents an object or situation as being a certain way.<sup>1</sup> Representationalism should be distinguished from the view that emotions require representations, or that they presuppose representations, or that they in some loose sense ‘involve’ representations. The thesis claims that an emotion ‘says’ something about the world that is not, or at least need not be, ‘said’ by whatever other mental states is presupposed by, or typically accompanies, it. In other words, an emotion constitutes an *independent* way of representing certain aspects of the world.

After many years of neglect, representationalism has been enjoying some popularity in the past three decades. The view is accepted not only by ‘old-school’ cognitivists or judgmentalists, according to whom emotions are judgments (Nussbaum, 2001, Solomon, 1988), but also more recently by many theorists who take emotions to be representations distinct from judgment. Emotions have been taken to be perceptual experiences (de Sousa, 1988, Elgin, 2008, Döring, 2003, Tappolet, 2016),<sup>2</sup> ‘quasi-judgments’ (Greenspan, 1988), or *sui generis* ‘evaluative feelings’ (Helm, 2001). Representationalism has also been pursued by advocates of the so-called

---

<sup>1</sup> I choose not to use the label ‘cognitivism’, given its association with the ‘cognitive theory’ of emotions which went out of favor in recent years. For a classic critique of this view, see Deigh (1994).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Roberts may subscribe to some sort of perceptual theory as well, given his recurrent analogy between emotions and ordinary perception (see Roberts, 2003). If he is not, his view would presumably fall under the *sui generis* account.

representationalist theory of consciousness according to which the phenomenal features of our mental states are determined by, or can be reduced to, their representational features (Tye, 2008, Mendelovici, 2013).<sup>3</sup>

The fact that emotions are intentional or have ‘directedness’ is often taken as the central pre-theoretical motivation for representationalism. It is usually noticed, indeed, that emotions are always about some thing or other: Mary is angry *with* Joe, Miriam is joyful *about* Peter’s visit, Bob is sad *about* Lily’s death. The intentionality of emotions, moreover, often acts as a constraint on any adequate theory of emotions such that the fact that a theory has the consequence that emotions lack objects<sup>4</sup> is taken to be a good enough reason to reject the theory. Representationalism, by contrast, clearly satisfies this constraint, as it is not possible for a mental state to be representational without being intentional.

In addition to accommodating the intentionality of emotions, representationalism promises to account for their connection to justification and normativity. If emotions are representations, then there might be conditions under which one’s emotions are justified and conditions under which they might justify the formation of further mental states, including beliefs.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, if emotions are perceptual states, they might in turn play an epistemological role similar to that of ordinary perception by giving us access to whatever feature they are thought to represent – an attractive consequence of the view.

As I said, intentionality is usually thought to motivate representationalism. However, I will argue that the mere fact that emotions are in some sense directed – the mere fact that they have intentional objects – is not enough to establish representationalism over an alternative view on which emotions have intentional objects but no representational *content* of the independent sort the representationalist is after. This will be clear once we have clarified the distinction between intentionality and representation, something I do in Section 2. The representationalist, therefore, must provide positive arguments for her view. I consider three possible arguments for the view in

---

<sup>3</sup> Since this view (also called ‘intentionalism’) is often also called ‘representationalism’, I’ll call it ‘reductive representationalism’ to avoid any confusion. Reductive representationalism is simply a version of what I call ‘representationalism’. I will discuss reductive representationalism in Section 3 when discussing arguments for representationalism.

<sup>4</sup> Or lack objects of the right sort, as on the view that claims that all emotions are in fact about our body (James, 1884).

<sup>5</sup> The perceptualist has problems with accommodating the former kind of justification, given that it is unclear that perceptual states can be justified (though see Tappolet, 2016, 39-40), but has no problem with the latter kind of justification, given that perceptual states are typically thought to justify certain beliefs.

Section 3, and show them to be insufficient to establish representationalism. I end, in Section 4, with a brief conclusion.

## 1. Representationalism

Before looking at potential motivations and arguments for representationalism, we need to get clear on representationalism itself – in particular, on the sort of *content* the representationalist should attribute to emotions. What are the properties that fear, anger, guilt, admiration, etc. may attribute to their intentional objects? It turns out that an answer to this question is not as straightforward as one might have thought.

How is the content of an emotion to be specified, according to representationalism? What is the property that fear, admiration, sadness, etc. represent their objects as instantiating? Presumably, the relevant property will be different depending on the type of emotion at issue. To see why, suppose emotions such as fear, admiration, and sadness are judgments. If this is true, all emotions will be understood as judgments that X is F, for an object X and a property F. A problem arises, however, once we remind ourselves that emotions come in *types*. Sadness is a different emotion from anger, and anger is a different emotion from admiration. How can we distinguish between emotion types if they are all judgments? An answer to this question is that emotion types have different intentional objects. But this is implausible: surely, an emotion such as fear can be directed at countless objects of many different types (an animal, a person, the weather, a financial crisis, etc.) and emotions of different types can be directed at the same object (my fear of the General and your admiration for her). Clearly, for an advocate of representationalism, the right way to individuate emotion types is to specify the properties that emotions are thought to represent: for each type of emotion, there is a specific kind of property that the emotion of that type attributes to its object.<sup>6</sup> The challenge is to identify plausible candidate properties for each emotion type. In the following, I discuss two broad categories of answers.

### *Option #1: descriptive properties*

One possibility is that emotions attribute descriptive properties. In experiencing fear towards a dog, on this option, I represent the dog as, among other things, having sharp teeth and as barking

---

<sup>6</sup> I used the view that emotions are judgments as example only because of its simplicity, and not because I take it seriously. Most theorists have come to reject this view as *too* simple to be true. See Deigh (1994); see also Deonna & Teroni (2012, Ch.5).

loudly – and more generally properties of the dog that intuitively make fearing him appropriate, fitting, or correct. This claim, however, is implausible, as it is clear in this case that what enable me to get in touch with the dog’s sharp teeth and loud barking are mental states *other* than my fear – my visual experience of the sharp teeth and my auditory experience of the loud barking. This point, it seems, generalizes: for any instance of emotion, it seems that all the descriptive information acquired by the subject is furnished by mental states other than the emotion itself, such as descriptive beliefs, perceptual experiences, and imaginings.

Despite their relative independence with such descriptive mental states, emotions entertain nonetheless an important relationship with them. Arguably, the occurrence of an emotion depends on the presence of some mental representations. And plausibly, such mental representations will include certain descriptive mental states. In order to feel joy about the good news, I must have in fact *heard* the good news in the first place, I must *believe* that the person who told it to me is telling the truth, and so on and so forth. We might say, in this case, that the joy is *based* on these further mental states. Following Deonna and Teroni (2012), we can call the descriptive mental states on which an emotion is based the emotion’s ‘cognitive bases’.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Option #2: evaluative/normative properties*

If emotions are representational states (of the independent sort we are after), therefore, they should have a content that is different from the content of their cognitive bases. Fear, for instance, should not be seen as a representation of descriptive features of the situation to which the subject responds. The consensus is rather that, if emotions are representations, they are representations of *evaluative* or *normative* properties. On such a view, in experiencing fear, one represents the fear’s intentional object as instantiating an evaluative or normative property (or cluster of properties)<sup>8</sup> of sorts. The task, then, is to find at least an evaluative/normative property that plausibly could correspond to each emotion type.

Two main options can be found in the literature: (i) evaluative/normative features that are not defined in terms of emotion concepts; (ii) evaluative/normative features that are defined in terms

---

<sup>7</sup> For reason of space, I put aside the Jamesian view on which emotions represent properties of the body, for the usual reason that it fails to do justice to the fact that emotions are typically directed towards things outside us (for discussion, see Deonna & Teroni, 2012, 65-66).

<sup>8</sup> An emotion may be a compound of several evaluative representations (Solomon, 1988).

of emotion concepts. Class-(i) features may include being dangerous/threatening for fear (where being dangerous implies being bad for one), constituting a loss for sadness, doing something wrong or bad to one for anger, being a piece of good news for joy, etc. Notice that an adequate account of what it *is* to be dangerous, a piece of good news, or loss need not mention emotions. Of course, emotions might be appropriate responses to such features. But this does not imply that the very definition of these features will mention emotions. At least it is not obvious that it will. Still, it seems rather easy to link each type of emotion to a property, or set of properties, of type (i). Contrast class-(i) features with class-(ii) features: being fearsome/scary, being disgusting, being admirable, being lovable, being sad, being offensive, etc. Obviously, the elucidation of these features will make reference to emotions: for an object to be fearsome or scary is for it to entertain a certain relation to fear itself. And for any type of emotion that do not seem to be associated with a feature of this kind, we can posit a property the definition of which will necessarily appeal to the type of emotion at issue, prideworthiness for pride being an example.

Given that features of types (i) and (ii) have both been called ‘formal objects’,<sup>9</sup> I will avoid using the term here. Call class-(i) properties ‘evaluative properties’ and class-(ii) properties ‘emotion-proper properties’.<sup>10</sup> Both (i) and (ii) can be seen as being intuitively related to certain emotion types. For each type of emotion, there will then be at least two normative properties which are intuitively related to it (one evaluative, the other emotion-proper).

This suggests two versions of representationalism: one on which an emotion is a representation of an evaluative property, and one on which it is a representation of an emotion-proper property. I think both versions are subject to initial difficulties. Let me briefly discuss them.

Consider, first, the emotion-proper version of representationalism. It might seem odd that an emotion represents properties whose elucidation will invariably mention the type of emotion to which it belongs in such an obvious way. It claims that to feel fear about something is to represent that thing as fearsome, and that to feel admiration for someone is to represent that person as admirable. It claims, in other words, that each emotion type represents a property that explicitly relates to the emotion type itself. To be sure, the worry is not that, in order to undergo an emotion

---

<sup>9</sup> E.g., Deonna & Teroni (2012) for the former conception and Tappolet (2016) for the latter conception. For the notion of a formal object, see Kenny (1963). For discussion on formal objects, see Teroni (2007).

<sup>10</sup> I borrow the expression ‘emotion-proper property’ from Goldie (2004).

of a certain type, one must possess the concept of the relevant emotion, for, as some representationalists have argued (e.g., Tappolet, 2016), emotions might be nonconceptual. Still, according to the latter, emotions will presumably represent themselves, even if non-conceptually. It might be easier to see the point by comparing with the color case. It might turn out that colors are dispositions to cause certain experiences in us. This, however, is something that is not revealed by our color experiences themselves. As far as they are concerned, color experiences could be about objective properties of the world. By contrast, if we were to claim that fear represents the fearsome, then we would have to accept that our experiences of fear reveal something about fear itself – the representation provided by emotions would be partly a representation of our own emotions themselves. Although this is not incoherent, this claim might strike one as implausible for the following reason: the phenomenology associated with emotion just does not seem to involve a reference to emotions themselves. This suggests that if emotions represent some evaluative/normative facts, these are going to be such as to appear as fairly independent of the emotions themselves, even if down the line necessarily connected with them (as colors might down the line be dispositions to certain experiences without this fact being reflected in the experiences themselves).<sup>11</sup>

Now, let's consider the evaluative property version of representationalism. Suppose that having accomplished some valuable feat is what admiration is in the business of representing. An elucidation of this property certainly would not obviously mention admiration itself. So this version of representationalism does not face the problem of the previous version. However, it faces the following worry. There is an intuitive connection between the performance of some valuable feat and admiration, a connection which needs to be spelled out. The representationalist spells it out in terms of representation: admiration represents the act as valuable in some way. Surely, this is a possible account, but is it the only plausible account? I don't think it is. An alternative account of the intuitive link in question is that the evaluative property constitutes a *reason*, of a special

---

<sup>11</sup> This point applies to accounts of emotion-proper properties according to which, e.g., to be fearsome is to *merit* fear (or to make fear *appropriate*). For a different argument against pairing a response-dependent account of emotion-proper properties with the view that emotions provide access to them, see Müller (2020). One might reply to my argument in the following way (thanks to Julien Deonna for pressing me on this): fearsomeness might be something, the way it appears might be something else. This is true, but by contrast with colors – which have an aspect which we can point to and which at least seems to go beyond our experiences of them – fearsomeness seems exhausted by its relation to fear. But assuming that emotions represent some normative property or other, they should represent something that at least makes it an open question whether it is reducible to some relation to emotions.

sort, for admiration, that is, a reason for admiration as the kind of response it is, where the reason is accessed by a further state of the agent.<sup>12</sup> Of course, the reason relation is in need of elucidation, but it is sufficient for now to point out that the relation in question is also found in the case of some *actions*. Having performed an act of kindness is a reason for thanking, being in a bad situation is a reason for helping, and having done something wrong is a reason for punishing. Emotions and these actions, on this alternative view, bear the same normative relation to the evaluative properties that seem intuitively related to them. And given that we are not tempted to construe the relevant actions as independent ways to represent the evaluative properties that justify them, we might wonder why we should hold this view about emotions if their relationship to evaluative properties is the same.

## 2. Intentionality and representation

Even if the intuitive link between emotions and the relevant evaluative features does not imply that the former represent the latter, we might think that the fact that emotions are *intentional* is a sufficient reason to take them to be representational. And given that descriptive features are plausibly not represented by emotions, we have strong reasons to take evaluative features to be the relevant represented features. Let's now discuss the connection between intentionality and representation.

Intentionality is often thought to be just the same thing as representation. One reason one might believe this is that, if a mental state is representational, it is intentional. Take belief. If I believe that it is sunny outside, there is *something* my belief is about, namely the weather. The same point applies to all representational states: if a state represents something, then it is clearly *about* that thing. Notice though that the opposite implication – that if a mental state is intentional, then it is representational – is not as obviously true. Indeed, this implication may be at least doubted if we look at how intentionality and mental representation are usually characterized informally. For something to have intentionality is to have directness, to be about something; in other words, it is to have an *intentional object*. If Frances loves Martha, Martha is said to be the intentional object of Frances' love. This is different from saying that Frances' love is a *representation* of Martha. Representation seems to go beyond the mere fact that a mental state has an intentional object. For

---

<sup>12</sup> This is a version of what Olivier Massin calls the 'reactive theory' (Massin, forthcoming). See Mulligan (2010) and Müller (2019) for defenses of this sort of view.

instance, as Frege's classic Morning Star/Evening Star case testify, two mental states can have the same intentional object but differ in what they 'say' about this object; two mental states, in other words, can be about the same thing but still differ in the *aspect* under which they represent the object (Crane, 2009, 455) – in this case, they have the same *intentional object* but a different *content*.<sup>13</sup> Crucially, it seems at least conceptually possible for two mental states to have the same intentional object but differ in that only one of them has content.<sup>14</sup>

So representation and intentionality are different notions: to establish that a mental state has intentionality, we need to find its intentional object, whereas to establish that it is representational, we need to find an object-property structure which could constitute its content – we need to find out what it 'says' about its intentional object.<sup>15</sup> So the question is whether there is a distinctive aspect under which an emotion represents its object – whether an emotion has a distinctive content (i.e., a content that does not come from other mental states) – something we have attempted to do in the previous section.

One might object, however, that showing that representation and intentionality are two different notions is not sufficient to show that they can come apart. Here's Tim Crane on this:

[T]here is a representation of an object, whether real or unreal, in every intentional state or act. For some intentional states, their reality can be what it is independently of the real existence of their objects. The state is of a certain kind (belief, hope, whatever) and it also incorporates a representation of its object. This representational aspect of the state is its content. (2009, 456)

One might think indeed that an emotion cannot be a *merely* intentional state, that is, a state that has an intentional object but no content. If you fear the dog, there is surely an aspect under which the dog is presented to you – as fearsome, dangerous, or whatever (including descriptive properties). Doesn't this imply that the dog is represented by your fear as having a certain feature?

---

<sup>13</sup> It is a further question whether some mental representations are nonconceptual (Crane, 1988, Evans, 1982). Here, I'll assume that this is a genuine possibility, as some representationalists take emotions to be nonconceptual (e.g., Tappolet, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Deigh (1994).

<sup>15</sup> I borrow the expression 'object-property structure' from Mendelovici, 2013.

I don't think so. I agree that the dog must somehow be represented *by you* as having certain features, but disagree that the part of you that does the representing must be your fear of him. It might be true that, in having an emotion, you thereby represent an object as having certain features. But remember that the thesis I am after goes beyond this dependence claim by claiming that the emotion *itself* is representational – it constitutes an independent way of representing certain aspects of the world, and therefore doesn't, so to speak, merely 'ride on the back' of other representational states.

So, I agree, for the sake of argument, with the following claim:

(E) If X feels fear towards O, then *some* mental state of X represents O as having a certain evaluative property (dangerous, threatening, etc.).<sup>16</sup>

This implication, clearly, is compatible with the denial of representationalism: all (E) says is that the presence of *some* representation is needed, not that the emotion *itself* furnishes that representation. The representationalist who takes intentionality to imply representation, instead, subscribes to the following general claim:

(R) If an entity F is directed towards O, then F represents O as having a certain property P (to be specified).

It might seem, however, that (R) is subject to clear counterexamples. Many mental states, including emotions themselves, seem to be directed at *objects* rather than structured entities such as propositions or facts. Oded loves Khadija, Henry is afraid of the spider, Archana hates Brussels sprouts. If these appearances are to be taken at face value, we should conclude that being intentional does not imply being representational. The question, however, is whether these appearances should indeed be taken at face value. For proponents of so-called 'propositionalism', it is possible to reduce apparent 'objectual' attitudes to propositional ones, whereas for proponents of so-called 'objectualism', these attitudes are irreducibly non-propositional, non-representational intentional states. The fate of representationalism, and its reliance on the claim that emotions are intentional, clearly depends on the outcome of this debate.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> For dissent with this claim, see Deonna & Teroni (2012), who would presumably claim that there is no need for an evaluative representation in the first place.

<sup>17</sup> For powerful criticisms of propositionalism, and a defense of objectualism, see Grzankowski (2012) and Montague (2007). If the argument of this paper is on the right track, it may be seen as a further defense of objectualism.

At this stage, it is important to appreciate the fact that the objectualist's strategy may be limited in the context of a discussion over the nature of mental states. Given that most intentional states are clearly also representational states, there might still be hope that an ingenious philosopher could find a propositionalist (or representationalist) account of apparent objectual attitudes that is not subject to the problems facing the other versions of the view. This move, furthermore, does seem conceivable since there is nothing deeply counterintuitive in the idea that an emotion such as fear is in fact a representation. In any case, I am unaware of anyone in the literature who rejects representationalism about emotions on the sole basis that the idea that an emotion is representational is counterintuitive.<sup>18</sup> If that is so, the representationalist could fairly confidently retort that we should not take the appearances about emotions (and other apparent objectual attitudes) at face value.

Instead of engaging in the debate over objectualism, my strategy will be to provide a case of something that is arguably intentional but *clearly* non-representational, that is of something that on reflection we would be happy to call 'intentional', but which we would be highly reluctant to call 'representational' (in the distinctive sense I have introduced). In other words, while the idea that it is intentional may seem natural, the idea that it is representational is deeply counterintuitive (in a way that the mere idea that an emotion is representational was not). If this is satisfactory, this at least should open up the possibility that emotions are like that too.

To this end, let me introduce a class of entities which are in some fairly straightforward sense intentional but non-representational: *object-directed actions*. There is a sense in which some actions are related to certain objects in the world. When Sally thanks Bob, Bob seems to be the object of her action: it is not Bill whom she thanks, or Brendon, but Bob. Similarly for helping and punishing: if I punish or help Tim, there is a sense in which my action is about him and not someone else. It is also plausible that my action depends on certain mental representations – presumably, this is what distinguishes it from mere bodily movements and what makes it have the intentional object it does have. But we wouldn't say that the action *itself* constitutes an independent way of

---

<sup>18</sup> For a possible exception, see Deonna & Teroni (2012).

representing the relevant aspects of one's situation. The action, indeed, may be a *response* to prior mental representations rather than a mental representation itself.<sup>19</sup>

If this is right, then we cannot move from the claim that emotions are intentional and somehow involve, or depend on, mental representations of their object to the claim that they themselves are representational states, that they 'say' something about their object *in addition to* whatever other representational states they are related to 'say' about it. The upshot, therefore, is that we should distinguish two theses with respect to the topic of the intentionality of emotions. On the one hand, the representationalist's thesis is that emotions are representational, that is, that they have an intentional object and represent it as being a certain way. On the other hand, we have a thesis that accepts that emotions are intentional but denies that they are representational – on this view, emotions have intentional objects but no representational content; they are *merely* intentional.<sup>20</sup> The crucial point is that the representationalist cannot rest content with the move from intentionality to representation, and owes us positive reasons to follow them.<sup>21</sup>

Let's take stock. So far, I have shown two things. First, as argued in this section, there is no easy move from the mere fact that emotions are intentional to the claim that they are representational, for the existence of object-directed actions reveals that something can be intentional without being representational.<sup>22</sup> Second, as seen in the previous section, the search for a plausible candidate content for each emotion type turns out to be a difficult task, each version being subject to its own problems. We have seen that the most plausible version of representationalism claims that emotions represent evaluative properties (as opposed to descriptive and emotion-proper properties), as it does not have the problems of other versions and provides an explanation of the intuitive link between emotions and the relevant evaluative properties. As I have argued, however, there is an alternative explanation of this link which is not, or least need not be, committed to

---

<sup>19</sup> Of course, bodily movements are physical phenomena which can be characterized non-intentionally. However, we should not see their status as *actions* as determined independently of the mental states of the agent. The same way some noises and marks may have meaning in virtue of mental states, some physical events – bodily movements – may have directedness in virtue of mental states. See Chisholm (1957) on the intentionality of some action attributions.

<sup>20</sup> One might think that the argument of the text in fact shows that emotions do not in fact have intentional objects (Whiting, 2011). I don't see why, in order for a mental state to be about X, X must be represented by *it*. But even if this is true, the analogy still holds between emotions and object-directed actions. Whatever feature object-directed actions have that explains our temptation to say that they are intentional, emotions may well have it too.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Ballard (2021).

<sup>22</sup> Of course, it does not mean that it entertains no relation to any mental representation. As we have seen, actions clearly do.

representationalism. The representationalist, therefore, must give us positive reasons to prefer her view over this alternative. In the next section, I will consider some of them. I will argue that none of them succeeds in establishing representationalism over the alternative where emotions are analogous to object-directed actions in their relationship with the world.<sup>23</sup>

### 3. Arguments for representationalism

It is hard to find in the literature positive arguments for representationalism about emotions. In the representationalist camp, indeed, the impression is that emotions *must* be representations, given that they are intentional,<sup>24</sup> and so the task is to spell out their content – a move I have argued should not be made without argument. In this section, I will consider three arguments which one might give in favor of representationalism. I will argue that they all fail to establish representationalism over the alternative where emotions are analogous to object-directed actions in their relationship with the world.

#### *Argument from parsimony*

A simple reason for thinking of emotions as mental representations is that doing so may allow us to reduce them to some other type of mental state. If emotions are mental representations, then they might be judgments, perceptual experiences, or any other kind of state which has a representational content. If we reject representationalism, therefore, we block any prospect of reducing emotions to some other familiar mental state, ending up with a less parsimonious theory than we would otherwise have ended up with.

I agree that non-representationalism is less parsimonious than some forms of representationalism on which emotions are reducible to some familiar kind of mental state. This, however, should count as a blow against it – and a reason to accept representationalism – only if such a reduction has a significant chance of success, which I think is not true. This is not just because I reject

---

<sup>23</sup> The strategy so far has been to show that representationalism is not obviously better than the non-representationalist alternative that I have outlined, especially in light of the fact that intentionality and representation seem to be distinct – though importantly related – notions. Deonna and Teroni (e.g., 2012, 2015) have provided a sophisticated argument for the conclusion that emotions do not represent value, to which I am sympathetic. They would not subscribe to the non-representationalist alternative I motivated, however, as they deny that evaluative facts are normative reasons for emotions. For further discussion, see Massin (forthcoming).

<sup>24</sup> And maybe because they have a phenomenal character, and reducing it to representation would be our way to saving physicalism, as many reductive representationalists think. An alternative motivation for pursuing representationalism is that it could form the basis of an epistemology of value. If what I say in the following is on the right track, however, we shouldn't be too confident that emotions could play the relevant epistemological role.

representationalism, and thereby any specific representational proposal; it's mainly because, *even for a representationalist*, such a reduction is unlikely to happen. Many attempts at reduction have been made – emotion to judgment, emotion to perception, etc. But it quickly came to be clear that no such neat reduction could occur and that, either we were to adopt a somehow revisionist account of emotions or we were to qualify our initial proposal in such a way that emotions virtually came to constitute their own category of mental state. Emotions are no longer considered as judgments, perceptions, etc. plain and simple, but as a *special, sui generis* kind of judgment, perception, etc., which presumably means that, although emotions are similar to judgments, perceptions, etc. in some respects, they also differ from them enough not to be reducible to them.<sup>25</sup>

An alternative argument from parsimony runs as follows: we need a kind of mental state to play the epistemological role of giving us an access to value. Many mental states are out of the question; vision, audition, and the other senses cannot give us that. And we don't want to posit an extra sense which would play the role. Our choice is thereby very limited. Given that there is an intimate link between emotions and certain evaluative properties, a natural move would be to assign that role to emotions themselves. And this would also be a parsimonious move, given that we would not need to posit an extra kind of mental state to play the relevant role. My response is two-fold. First, if my argument is sound, representationalism is false. If that's the case, then emotions simply cannot play the relevant epistemological role, and we may have to introduce an extra kind of mental state (at least if we do not wish to endorse some form of skepticism). Second, I think that, even if emotions are ruled out, we are not out of options. Various alternative proposals of how we might access value have been proposed in the literature.<sup>26</sup> I don't see why these views should be considered less parsimonious than the representationalist's.

#### *Argument from introspection*

In attempting to establish representationalism, perhaps we should instead start from the way emotions *feel* and see whether attending to it might reveal their representational nature. One reason one might give for representationalism is that, when we carefully attend to our emotions, we

---

<sup>25</sup> For instance, attempting to counter some of the difficulties facing his cognitive theory, Solomon resorts to the claim that emotions are 'judgments of the body' (2003, 191). In a similar vein, given the disanalogies between emotions and ordinary perceptions, Tappolet (2016, 30) is happy to call emotions 'quasi-perceptions'. For discussion of the *sui generis* strategy in the philosophy of emotion, see Benbaji (2013).

<sup>26</sup> For instance, see Huemer, 2005, for the claim that our access to value is done via ordinary intuition, and Oddie, 2005, for the claim that it is done via desire.

thereby attend to the evaluative features of their intentional objects. The same way, in attempting to attend to our visual experiences, we end up attending to the visual features these experiences represent (Harman, 1990), it may be the case that, in attempting to attend to our emotions, we will end up attending to the evaluative features these emotions represent. If emotions are ‘transparent’ in this way, this might indeed be a reason to accept representationalism.

But are emotions transparent? It seems to me that, when I attempt to attend to an emotion I experience, I do not, and certainly need not, attend to any evaluative feature in the world, and I may not even attend to the intentional object of my emotion.<sup>27</sup> The representationalist might respond that I have misdescribed my experience. Isn’t it the case that, when one is afraid of something, one’s attention will inevitably be directed at that thing? I think, however, that such a response confuses the idea that it is possible to attend to one’s experience without regard to its representational properties with the idea that, in having an emotion, one *tends to* focus one’s attention on the object of the emotion. The latter idea, indeed, is compatible with the denial of transparency; in fact, it is compatible with the denial of representationalism. It may be the case that a central function of emotion is to direct our attention to significant aspects of our situation (Brady, 2013); nothing regarding representationalism follows from this.

#### *Argument from phenomenology*

Although emotions may lack transparency, this does not imply that representationalism is false.<sup>28</sup> A related argument appeals to an emotion’s general phenomenology rather than its more specific introspectible aspects. While in the grip of an emotion, one’s overall impression of one’s situation changes; one’s situation simply *seems* very different. In feeling fear, one’s overall situation *looks* threatening. Moreover, the way one’s situation looks to one is not simply a matter of one literally *seeing*, or *hearing*, or *smelling* the world differently. Rather, one might think, it is a matter of having an extra layer of sensory content over and above the contents of these other mental states. Emotions might be what furnishes this further content.

---

<sup>27</sup> See Deonna & Teroni (2015).

<sup>28</sup> Perhaps it shows that *reductive* representationalism is false, although this is far from clear. It might indeed be the case that, while transparency establishes (or at least provides a strong reason for) reductive representationalism, lack of it does not refute it. It seems to me though that it should at least constitute a challenge to the view.

One way to reply to this argument is to explain away the intuition that, in having an emotion, one thereby represents certain evaluative aspects of the world in a way that can be revealed in one's overall experience. Perhaps, for instance, the world seems different to us given that, in having a certain emotion, our attention tends to focus on descriptive features of our situation which were not previously attended to. In experiencing fear towards the dog, I may indeed tend to focus more on his sharp teeth and subtle moves towards me than when I was not in the grip of the emotion.

I do not think this is what is going on here, however. I agree with the representationalist that, in having an emotion, one represents the intentional object of one's emotion as instantiating some evaluative feature. I also agree that this representation may show up in one's overall experience of the situation. Yet, I think that the claim that this representation is furnished by the emotion itself cannot be established by a simple appeal to phenomenology. It might indeed be the case that one's emotion is so bound up in experience with other mental states that it is practically impossible to pull them apart. This does not imply that we should identify emotions with any of these mental states. This can be illustrated by considering one's representations of descriptive properties, things we have seen cannot be identified with emotions. It might be difficult to separate one's perceptual experience of the dog's big teeth with one's fear, but this clearly does not show that one's fear represents the dog's big teeth.

Notice that a similar point can be made regarding the phenomenology of *action*. In acting in a certain way, one's overall experience may be such that it is difficult to introspectively pull apart the distinctive phenomenal character of one's act (the feeling of the limbs moving etc.) with the phenomenal character of one's other mental states. In particular, it might not be possible to pull apart one's evaluation of the situation from one's overall experience of the action.

At this stage, the representationalist might pursue a different line of attack. Granted, it is not the case that representationalism is the *only* plausible explanation, as the previous argument would have it. However, it may still be true that representationalism is the *best* explanation of the relevant phenomenon: the best explanation for why the world seems different (e.g., threatening) when in the grip of an emotion (e.g., fear) might be because the emotion itself represents the world as being a certain way (e.g., as threatening). In the rest of this section, we will look at a way this story could go. I will argue that, although promising, it should nonetheless be rejected.

The previous argument from phenomenology relied on evidence from experience to show that emotions themselves are evaluative representations. It was suggested that, in having an emotion, the world suddenly ‘looks’ different, evaluatively, to the subject. Call whatever change in overall experience is involved here the ‘evaluative look’.<sup>29</sup> The evaluative look has two important features. First, it is experiential. The suggestion was then that, given that emotions themselves feel a certain way, this sudden phenomenal difference can be explained by the fact that one is now undergoing an emotion. Appealing to the mere fact that emotions have phenomenal character is not sufficient to establish representationalism though, as it must also be the case that at least the phenomenal character of emotions that we appeal to can in turn be accounted for in representational terms.<sup>30</sup> For the second important feature of the relevant evaluative look is that it is representational: something in the world is now represented as having some evaluative property. For emotions to explain this change in evaluative look, therefore, we must link the representational content of the evaluative look to certain phenomenal aspects of the emotion which could plausibly be reduced to such content.

A natural way to carry out this project is to find in the phenomenology of emotions dimensions of variation which could correspond to the dimensions represented by the evaluative look. And two dimensions of variation stand out as particularly promising: *valence* and *intensity*. Some emotions feel good (positive valence) while others feel bad (negative valence). There is a debate to be had about how best to understand valence, but this should not prevent us from appreciating the following story. Values come in two types: positive and negative. The beauty of a painting is good, greed is bad. When things change in evaluative look along the positive/negative value dimension, there must be in our experience something that corresponds to the change. Valence clearly could play this role: in experiencing wonder, we may be representing the painting as good in some way, and this may be due to the fact that wonder *feels good*.

But emotions do not simply vary in valence; they also vary in intensity. I can be a little afraid of a spider, but I can also be terrified. I can be a little angry, moderately angry, and very angry towards a friend. Emotions may be appealed to in order to explain, not just the general species of value (good or bad) attributed by one’s evaluative look, but the *degree* of value that is attributed. Given

---

<sup>29</sup> It should be clear that the notion of look at play here is not to be understood in visual terms.

<sup>30</sup> It must be the case, that is, that at least some restricted form of reductive representationalism be true, one on which at least some phenomenal features of emotions are reduced to representational features.

that things can go from a little good to very good (and correspondingly for bad), and that this will plausibly transpire in one's evaluative look, we may spell out the relevant representation in terms of how intense the emotion feels.<sup>31</sup>

I find the resulting view attractive; in fact, I think that, if suitably fleshed out, it would constitute the best version of representationalism.<sup>32</sup> I think, however, that it should be rejected. In a nutshell, the account wrongly predicts that a change in an emotion's phenomenal character will imply a change in one's evaluative look. In particular, it wrongly predicts that a change in an emotion's *intensity* will imply a change in the degree of value attributed by the subject undergoing the emotion. To put it differently: according to representationalism, variation in intensity implies a representational difference, in particular a difference in evaluative look. But it does not: a change in an emotion's intensity does not imply a change in evaluative look. Therefore, representationalism is false.

Before justifying the thought that intensity variation is distinct from any variation in evaluative look, I should qualify the prediction that I attribute to the representationalist. The prediction need not be as strong as the claim that *any* variation in intensity will imply a change in one's evaluative look. It may be the case that the connection between an emotion's intensity and the corresponding evaluative look is coarse-grained enough to allow that some subtle changes in intensity won't imply a change the subject's evaluative look.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps, indeed, what might be needed is only a *gross* correspondence between the two. For instance, if the subject's evaluative look attributes a small degree of value to an object, her emotion towards that object will be in the 'small intensity range', and when her evaluative look attributes a large degree of value, her emotion will be in the 'high intensity range', whatever these ranges precisely amount to. The prediction, therefore, is that a *significant* change in an emotion's intensity (e.g., from the small intensity range to the high intensity range) will imply a change in evaluative look (e.g., from attribution of low value to attribution of high value).

---

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Montague (2014).

<sup>32</sup> An additional reason to find the view attractive is that it provides a non ad-hoc way of distinguishing between emotions and evaluative judgments with the same content, as it does not simply say that emotions are evaluative judgments plus a little bit of phenomenology. Against this 'add-on' strategy, see Goldie (2000, 40-41).

<sup>33</sup> Note that a thoroughgoing reductive representationalist cannot accept this possibility, given her project of reducing all phenomenal features to representational ones.

Paul was just insulted by his best friend Harry. He feels deeply hurt and angry. Now Harry looks very different to him; he looks *bad* in some way, in fact *very bad*.<sup>34</sup> And this seems to match the intensity of his initial anger. Upon being insulted, Paul got *very angry*. So far the representationalist has a story about the degree to which Paul sees Harry as bad: the intensity of Paul's anger represents the degree of Harry's badness. Now, if Paul is emotionally normal, he is probably not going to feel the same intensity of anger throughout the interaction. His anger is going to wax and wane. In fact, it might go back and forth from very strong to pretty mild. If representationalism is true, then Paul's evaluative look of Harry will change as a result of such large changes in intensity. I find this implausible, however. Throughout the interaction, the way Harry looks to Paul (i.e., very bad) may remain constant, and this regardless of the intensity of Paul's emotion. In fact, I contend, Paul's overall impression of Harry may continue after his anger is gone. If this is the case, representationalism should be rejected, as it claims that Paul's evaluative look should change as a result of such drastic changes in the emotion's intensity (and it should disappear once the emotion is gone).<sup>35</sup>

The representationalist might reject the intuition that, at some point in his interaction with Harry, Paul may become mildly angry but still see Harry as very bad in some way. They might do so either because they do not have the intuition in the first place or because they would like to bite the bullet and claim that a change in intensity does imply a change in evaluative look.<sup>36</sup> But there is a further reason to accept my take on the Paul-Harry case. In the ordinary sensory case – vision, for instance – an experience is typically associated with a disposition to form certain beliefs about the world. In seeing a red object, I am disposed to believe that I am facing something red, or, if I do not possess the concept RED, to believe that I am facing *that* (pointing to the object's color). In addition, any recognizable variation will typically lead to a change in one's dispositions to believe. If a red object suddenly turns blue, this will have an impact on what I am disposed to believe regarding the object. Of course, subtle variations in an object's properties will not necessarily lead to a change in one's dispositions to believe, as one may not notice the difference.

---

<sup>34</sup> We need not worry about the more specific way Harry looks bad to Paul here. For if an emotion does not represent anything as bad, *ipso facto* it does not present anything as bad in some more specific way.

<sup>35</sup> A similar argument against representationalism about *moods* can be found in Kind (2013).

<sup>36</sup> This is how I interpret Mendelovici's reply to Kind's argument against representationalism about moods (Mendelovici, 2013). For instance, one might claim that what remains constant is Harry's evaluative outlook and that his anger represents degrees of badness. Thanks to Julien Deonna for suggesting this possible response to the case.

Again, it is more plausible to claim that *gross* variations like in the example just given will lead to such a change, at least typically.

Now, one might wonder, do variations in emotional intensity typically lead to a change in one's disposition to form beliefs – in particular beliefs about the degree of goodness or badness (what the emotion's intensity is supposed to represent) – about the emotion's object? Surely, they *might*. But the claim is more robust than this: it posits a *systematic* link between gross changes in an emotion's intensity and changes in one's dispositions to form beliefs about the emotion's object. This claim, I think, is too strong to be plausible. In situations such as Paul and Harry's, our emotions undergo large changes in intensity – from mild, to strong, to moderate, to strong, to mild, and so on. It is far from clear though that such changes will have the sort of systematic impact on one's dispositions to believe we can find in the ordinary sensory case. The fact that one's disposition to form evaluative beliefs about the object of one's emotion can remain stable in the face of radical changes in emotional intensity is something that does not square well with the representationalist's story. Unless the representationalist has more to say about the difference between ordinary sensory experience and emotion, therefore, I think her view should be rejected.<sup>37</sup>

#### **4. Conclusion**

Representationalism about emotions is close to orthodoxy in contemporary philosophy of emotion. In this paper, I have cast doubt on this thesis in two main ways. First, I have argued that the initial motivations for the view – stemming from the connection between intentionality and representation – are not very strong. Second, I have argued that natural positive arguments for the view are inconclusive. Throughout the discussion, I have made use of an analogy between emotions and a certain class of actions – 'object-directed' actions. The structural similarities between the two classes of responses are striking and seem to call for a similar account, an account where emotions and the relevant actions are non-representational entities with intentional objects (represented by further states of the agent) whose properties justify these responses. If this is right, then the representationalist cannot rest content with providing yet a further argument for their view

---

<sup>37</sup> For an argument for the conclusion that emotions' phenomenology does not favor representationalism, see Deonna & Teroni (2015).

(or a coherent representationalist story about emotions); they must show why we should not go for that well-motivated alternative.<sup>38</sup>

## References

- Ballard, B.S. (2021). “Content and the Fittingness of Emotion”, *Philosophical Quarterly*, 71, 4
- Benbaji, H. (2013). “How is Recalcitrant Emotion Possible?”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 91, 3, 577-599
- Brady, M.S. (2011). “Emotions, Perceptions, and Reasons”, in Bagnoli, C. (ed.), *Morality and the Emotions*, Oxford University Press, 135-149
- Brady, M.S. (2013). *Emotional Insight: The Epistemic Role of Emotional Experience*. Oxford University Press
- Chisholm, R.M. (1957). *Perceiving: A Philosophical Study*. Cornell University Press
- Crane, T. (1988). “The Waterfall Illusion”, *Analysis*, 48, 142-147
- Crane, T. (2009). “Is Perception a Propositional Attitude?”, *Philosophical Quarterly*, 59, 236, 452-469
- Dancy, J. (2014). “Emotions as Unitary States”, in Roeser, S. & Todd, C. (eds.), *Emotion and Value*, Oxford University Press, 72-89
- Deigh, J. (1994). “Cognitivism in the Theory of Emotions”, *Ethics*, 104, 824-854
- Deonna, J.A. & Teroni, F. (2012). *The Emotions: A Philosophical Introduction*. New York: Routledge
- Deonna, J.A. & Teroni, F. (2015). “Emotions as Attitudes”, *dialectica*, 69, 3, 293-311
- Döring, S. 2003. “Explaining Action by Emotion”, *Philosophical Quarterly*, 53, 214-230
- Elgin, C. Z. (2008). “Emotion and Understanding”, in Brun, G., Doguoglu, U. & Kuenzle, D. (eds.), *Epistemology and Emotions*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 33–50
- Deigh, J. (1994). “Cognitivism in the Theory of Emotions”, *Ethics*, 104, 4, 824-854
- de Sousa, R. (1987). *The Rationality of Emotions*. MIT Press
- Evans, G. (1982). *The Varieties of Reference*. Oxford University Press
- Goldie, P. (2000). *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Goldie, P. (2004). “Emotion, Feeling, and Knowledge of the World”, Solomon, R.C. (ed.), *Thinking about Feeling: Contemporary Philosophers on Emotions*. Oxford University Press, pp. 91-106

---

<sup>38</sup> I am grateful to Paul Boswell, Jerry Cederblom, Jason D’Cruz, Julien Deonna, Alex Hyun, William Melanson, Andrew Newman, Moritz Müller, Michele Palmira, Mauro Rossi, Neil Sinhababu, Christine Tappolet, and Fabrice Teroni for discussion on previous versions of this paper.

- Greenspan, P. (1988). *Emotions and Reasons*. Routledge
- Grzankowski, A. (2012). “Not All Attitudes Are Propositional”, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 3, 374-391
- Harman, G. (1990). “The Intrinsic Quality of Experience”, *Philosophical Perspectives*, 4, 31–52
- Helm, B. (2001). *Emotional Reason: Deliberation, Motivation, and the Nature of Value*. Cambridge University Press
- Huemer, M. (2005). *Ethical Intuitionism*. Palgrave Macmillan
- James, W. (1884). What is an Emotion?, *Mind*, 19, 188–204
- Kenny, A. (1963). *Action, Emotion and Will*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Kind, A. (2013), “The Case Against Representationalism About Moods,” in Kriegel, U. (ed.), *Current Controversies in the Philosophy of Mind*, Routledge, 113-134
- Massin, O. (forthcoming). The Reactive Theory of Emotions”, *European Journal of Philosophy*
- Mendelovici, A. (2013). “Pure Intentionalism about Moods and Emotions”, in Kriegel, U. (ed.), *Current Controversies in the Philosophy of Mind*, Routledge, 135-157
- Montague, M. (2007). “Against Propositionalism”, *Noûs*, 41, 3, 503-518
- Montague, M. (2014). “Evaluative Phenomenology”, in Roeser, S. & Todd, C. (eds.), *Emotion and Value*, Oxford University Press, pp. 32-51
- Müller, J.M. (2019). *The World-Directedness of Emotional Feeling: On Affect and Intentionality*. Palgrave Macmillan
- Müller, J.M. (2020). “Response-Dependent Normative Properties and the Epistemic Account of Emotion”, *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 54, 355-364
- Mulligan, K. (2010). “Emotions and Values”, in Goldie, P. (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Emotion*, Oxford University Press, 475-500
- Nussbaum, M. (2001). *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Oddie, G. (2005). *Value, Reality, and Desire*. Oxford University Press
- Solomon, R.C. (1988). “On Emotions as Judgments”, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 25, 183-191
- Solomon, R.C. (2003). *Not Passion's Slave: Emotions and Choice*. Oxford University Press
- Roberts, R.C. (2003). *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology*. Cambridge University Press
- Tappolet, T. (2016). *Emotions, Value, and Agency*. Oxford University Press
- Teroni, F. (2007). “Emotions and Formal Objects”, *dialectica*, 61, 3, 395-415

Tye, M. (2008). "The Experience of Emotion: An Intentionalist Theory", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 62, 25-50

Whiting, D. (2011). "The Feeling Theory of Emotion and the Object-Directed Emotions", *European Journal of Philosophy*, 19, 2, 281-303