In Defense of the Content-Priority View of Emotion

Abstract

A prominent version of emotional cognitivism is the view that emotions are preceded by awareness of value. In a recent paper, Jonathan Mitchell (2019) has attacked this view (which he calls the content-priority view). As he argues, extant suggestions for the relevant type of pre-emotional evaluative awareness are all problematic. According to Mitchell, the content-priority view should be rejected unless these difficulties can be resolved. As he supposes, we can dispense with the view since its core motivations can be accommodated by competing views, too. I argue that Mitchell's case against the content-priority view is unconvincing. Mitchell ignores the principal motivation for the view. As I show, properly reconstructed, this motivation provides a strong case for the indispensability of the view to any adequate philosophical treatment of emotion. Moreover, Mitchell's survey of candidates for pre-emotional value awareness can be seen to rest on problematic phenomenological assumptions.

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1. Introduction

According to a classical version of emotional cognitivism, emotions are preceded by a form of value awareness.[1] For example, on this view, fear of an impending recession is preceded by awareness of this prospect as dangerous; anger towards someone by awareness of her as in some way provocative or offensive.

In a recent paper, Jonathan Mitchell (2019) has challenged this account, which he calls the 'content-priority view' (I will follow him in using this label). Mitchell takes issue with the view's commitment to a pre-emotional state with evaluative content.[2] According to him, the various candidates that have been proposed for this state are all problematic. Unless the

[1] Cf. e.g. Kenny (1963), Lyons (1980), de Sousa (1987), Mulligan (2010), [author ref. removed].
[2] Mitchell's criticism might be thought of as considerably elaborating an objection to this view raised previously by Deonna & Teroni (2012, 93ff.). Cf. also Teroni (2007, 407).

problems he raises can be overcome, Mitchell proposes, the view must be dismissed a serious competitor among theories of emotion. As he argues, the content-priority view is by no means mandatory since the main considerations in support of it can be accommodated by competing cognitivist accounts, too.

In this discussion, I argue that Mitchell's case against the view is unpersuasive. Most importantly, Mitchell misconstrues the principal motivation for the view. Properly reconstructed, this motivation provides a strong case for the indispensability of the view to any adequate philosophical account of emotion. That is, it shows the view to be entailed by any account that recognizes emotions as directed towards objects.

Moreover, Mitchell's critical survey of possible candidates for pre-emotional evaluative states rests on contestable premises. More specifically, his chief objection to what is often considered the most promising candidate depends on a questionable phenomenological constraint. I should stress, though, that, in contrast to Mitchell, I do not think that a successful case for the view must include a substantive account of pre-emotional evaluations. If the content-priority view alone can account for the intentionality of emotion, this should be reason enough to accept it.

In what follows, I develop these points. Before I do this, though, I shall explicate the view and note one respect in which Mitchell's own explication can seem misleading (section 1). I then consider Mitchell's discussion of the view's main motivation (section 2). Finally, I turn to his considerations on specific candidates for pre-emotional value awareness (section 3).

2. *The content-priority view and the evaluative content view*

According to proponents of the content-priority view, emotions are preceded by awareness of value. This construal of the temporal relation between emotion and value awareness is a consequence of a specific conception of the connection between emotion and value properties themselves: emotions are conceived as responses to value properties of their intentional object.

On the relevant use of 'response', for someone's emotion to be a response to *x* is for her emotion to be felt in light or on occasion of *x* or, equivalently, for *x* to be a reason for which she feels it.[3] Since reasons for which someone feels, thinks or acts some way (motivating reasons) are made psychologically available by mental states that are temporally prior to and distinct from the attitude or action they motivate, emotional responses to value are preceded by distinct states of value awareness. Compare: If Mary believes that it will rain for the reason that the sky is grey, the perception which makes this fact psychologically available as a reason for her belief is temporally prior to and distinct from this belief.

Since the evaluative properties to which, on this view, emotions respond feature in the intentional content of a state distinct from the emotion, the view can seem unorthodox. That is, it can seem to contrast with the popular view that emotions themselves have evaluative content.[4] According to Mitchell's (2019, 772) explication, it in fact involves the explicit denial of this view and thus qualifies as its rival.

It seems to me that this explication has to be treated with care, though. This is because proponents of the content-priority view recognize emotions as directed at their objects *under a specific evaluative aspect*.[5] As they suppose, to fear something is to fear it *as a danger*, to be angry with someone is to be angry with her *qua offensive*. According to an influential account of intentionality, this is precisely to accord evaluative content to emotions. For a state to have intentional content is, on this account, for it have an intentional object which is presented under a specific aspect.[6]

For Mitchell's explication to be intelligible as pointing to a genuine disagreement between cognitivists, it is therefore important to note that, for him, the attribution of evaluative content to emotion entails that emotions constitute awareness of their objects as having an

[3] On this use of 'response', [author ref. removed].
[4] On the dominant version of this view, emotions are perceptual experiences of value (e.g. Tappolet 2016).
[5] Cf. Kenny (1963, chapter 9), Lyons (1980, chapters 3 and 6), de Sousa (1987, chapter 5), [author ref. removed]. Mitchell is explicitly concerned with the view as advocated by these authors.
[6] For a prominent defense of this view, cf. Searle (1992).

evaluative property.[7] This understanding, too, recognizes emotional objects as presented under evaluative aspects. But in conceiving of emotions as forms of awareness of value, it is committed to a different conception of the relation between emotion and value awareness than the content-priority view. While, according to the latter, we are already aware of the value of an emotion's object prior to the emotion, the former takes this awareness to be supplied by the emotion itself.

One might deem this understanding of evaluative content somewhat restrictive since it precludes its attribution to states other than forms of value awareness. I shall here not quibble over Mitchell's use of the term, though, but instead focus on whether his attack on the content-priority view, as explicated here, is successful.

3. The intelligibility of emotion

The content-priority view is motivated by the thought that evaluative properties make emotions intelligible.[8] More specifically, its motivating thought is that something intelligibly qualifies as the intentional object of an emotion only under a specific evaluative aspect. Properly spelled out, this is taken to imply that emotions are responses to value.

In discussing the motivations of the content-priority view, Mitchell clearly pays heed to considerations on the intelligibility of emotion. He explicitly states that the view aims to account for the observation that emotions 'make sense' as responses to specific values.[9] However, Mitchell does not get the relevant notion of intelligibility into focus.

One problem is that Mitchell's phrasing of this observation is ambiguous. On one reading, to say that an emotion makes sense is to claim that it is appropriate or justified. On this reading, Mary's fear of a meandering dog makes sense as a response to the dog's dangerousness

[7] Cf. Mitchell (2019, 771, 773).
[8] While it has also been defended on phenomenological grounds, this is its main motivation. Cf. Kenny (1963, chapter 9), Lyons (1980, chapters 3 and 6), de Sousa (1987, chapter 5), [author ref. removed].
[9] Cf. Mitchell (2019, 774).

insofar as what she responds to is a reason for her to be afraid (a normative reason for fear). On a different reading, to say this is to affirm the very cogency of its ascription to someone. On this further reading, Mary's fear of the dog makes sense as a response to danger insofar we can coherently conceive of her as being afraid of it given that her fear is motivated by danger. Unfortunately, Mitchell does not recognize the content-priority view as concerned specifically with the latter notion of intelligibility. Yet, as proponents of the view have variously stressed, they are interested in basic conceptual constraints on the proper ascription of emotions. As they argue, we can coherently conceive of someone as having a certain emotion directed at *x* only if we presume that her emotion is directed at *x* in response to the (real or apparent) value of *x*.[10]

A further problem is that Mitchell takes it that intelligibility in the primarily relevant sense is first-personal: it is about what makes sense *for the subject of the emotion* to feel. First-person intelligibility is moreover qualified by Mitchell as 'experienced intelligibility', that is, a kind of intelligibility that is typically, though not always, conferred by emotional experiences themselves and does not rely on accompanying mental states.[11] This is misleading since proponents of the content-priority view are explicitly concerned with conceptual constraints on ascriptions of emotion. Their focus is thus on canonical ways of attributing emotions in thought and language rather than emotional experience. Also, as I read Mitchell, it is perfectly coherent to ascribe emotions to people that are not experientially intelligible to them.[12] Experiential intelligibility thus clearly differs from intelligibility in the sense of coherent conceivability. Note further that, since adherents of the content-priority view are proposing a view of emotion in general, there is also good reason why their focus is not on the specific class of experientially intelligible emotions.

[10] Cf. Kenny (1963, chapter 9), Lyons (1980, chapter 3), de Sousa (1987, chapter 5), [author ref. removed]. Mitchell (2019, 774, n. 6) touches on the relevant understanding of intelligibility. Yet he does not engage with it anywhere in the paper.
[11] Cf. Mitchell (2019, 792).
[12] Cf. ibid.

The main problem with this failure to delineate the appropriate notion of intelligibility is that Mitchell ignores why the content-priority view has been considered indispensable to an adequate account of emotion. That is, Mitchell seems to be unaware of the main argument in its favour. To show this, let me consider Mitchell's take on the claim that the content-priority view alone can adequately account for the intelligibility of emotion.

To assess whether this claim is warranted, Mitchell considers a common form of reason explanation discussed by Mulligan (2010, 485f.). Consider, for example:

Mary is afraid of the dog because it is dangerous

Tom is angry with his mother because she offended him

Mulligan proposes that such explanations provide strong grounds for thinking that value awareness is, as he (ibid., 486) puts it, "outside of" emotion. In response, Mitchell makes no effort to reconstruct Mulligan's reasoning, but gives the proposal short shrift. As he comments, "such third-person reports are surely not decisive with respect to philosophical theories, or indeed how we frame the intelligibility of the relevant emotional episode *as experienced*." (2019, 792)

Now, in line with my above remarks, Mitchell's complaint is unjustified inasmuch as he criticizes Mulligan's considerations as failing to speak to the experienced intelligibility of emotion. This is not Mulligan's concern, which is with constraints on the explicit ascription of emotions. And insofar as Mulligan is defending a view of emotion in general, it makes sense that he chooses a different focus.

It is also not clear why we should agree with Mitchell that such explanations are not decisive with respect to theories of emotion in the first place. While he considers this to be obvious, I think it requires explanation. After all, the content-priority view is a theory that explicitly assigns an explanatory role to values. According to this view, emotions are responses to evaluative properties and, as such, explained by motivating reasons provided by them. One should thus think that the view stands and falls with whether it is borne out by the way we do

explain emotions. Looking more closely at the above form of explanation, we can see that it in fact confirms the view. To say that Mary is afraid of the dog because it is dangerous is to say that she is afraid of it for the reason that it is dangerous. Since motivating reasons are made available by states prior to and distinct from the motivated response, her emotion is preceded by a distinct state of value awareness.

As far as I can see, the best way to understand Mitchell's skepticism about the dialectical import of such explanations is to think of him as calling attention to the fact that they are by no means mandatory. Note that we also often cite non-evaluative features as reasons for emotion:

Mary is afraid of the dog because it is aggressive and has sharp teeth

Tom is angry with his mother because she said that Tom has gained weight

Hence, it can seem that, as far as common explanation goes, we are not committed to regarding emotions as responses to value.[13]

However, while this may seem a discerning objection, it actually rests on a misunderstanding. It misses that reason explanations in terms of value contribute to the very coherence of emotion ascriptions. That is, since Mitchell does not get the relevant notion of emotional intelligibility into focus, he fails to appreciate that, far from being optional, such explanations constrain our very grasp of emotions qua directed. Yet, to ignore this is in fact to ignore the main consideration in favour of the view and, accordingly, what makes the view seem mandatory.[14]

[13] Cf. also Teroni (2007, 411), Deonna & Teroni (2012, 96ff.).

[14] One might perhaps read Mitchell's dialectical complaint also as targeting the very import of considerations on this type of intelligibility: even if the content-priority view articulates a conceptual requirement on emotion qua directed, we are not therefore committed to it. Note, though, that if this is what Mitchell is after, he is opposing what has largely been methodological consensus in the cognitivist literature and beyond. In this case, he clearly needs to do more than assert that this methodological commitment is surely mistaken. Also, what tells against this reading is that Mitchell himself accepts several conceptual constraints on mental ascription as integral to philosophical accounts of the corresponding phenomena. Thus, he takes Evans' Generality Constraint to be integral to an adequate account of evaluative judgment (2019, p. 781). The Generality Constraint is a conceptual requirement on judgments qua states with conceptual content (cf. Evans 1982, 75). Moreover, Mitchell seems to accept that adequate accounts of emotions conceive of them as having cognitive bases (2019, 791). This claim, too, articulates a conceptual constraint on emotion qua directed (see below).

To make this consideration explicit and show what Mitchell ignores, we must look more closely at the idea that emotions are directed. It is in fact uncontroversial among cognitivists that emotions rely for their objects on some prior awareness of them (known as their 'cognitive base').[15] For example, unless we suppose that Mary has perceived the dog, we cannot properly conceive of her fear as being *about* the dog. Similarly, it does not seem coherent to suppose that someone who is glad or angry *that p* has not apprehended *that p*. Consider how strange it would be to say that Sam is glad that he has won the race but that he has no idea that he has.

A straightforward way to explain this requirement is by noting that emotions are responses to their object.[16] If Mary is afraid of the dog, it follows that she is afraid *in light of* or *on occasion of* the dog's presence. It sounds just as bizarre to say that Mary fears the dog but that she is not afraid in light of its presence. What Mary fears is what she responds to with fear, i.e. the reason for which she is afraid. Thus, she must have registered the dog.

If this is account is accurate, then ascriptions of emotions imply that they are felt because of their object (where 'because' specifies a motivating reason). Although this explanation does not explicitly refer to value properties, it is crucial to note that it would not work if the reason specified were the emotion's object *simpliciter*. We fail to comprehend the dog as something that should upset Mary unless we suppose that she responds to a specific feature of it. For there to be a genuine explanatory relation Mary must respond to the dog *qua danger*. It is only if the dog is apprehended as being of concern to Mary in this respect that we can understand its presence to be a reason for which she is afraid. This is why emotion ascriptions support the content-priority view. Their coherence depends on the implied explanatory relation between the emotion and its intentional object. And this relation depends on the latter exemplifying a certain evaluative property.

[15] Cf. Mulligan (2010, 476), Mitchell (2019, 791), Milona & Naar (2019), among many others.
[16] Cf. Kenny (1963, 51f.), Dietz (2018), [author ref. removed].

To further support this account, note that it relies on a widely accepted general constraint on reason explanations. This constraint states that something qualifies as someone's motivating reason for an action or attitude only if it is taken by her as a reason to perform the action or hold the attitude. Thus, even if the reason for which someone feels an emotion is not actually a reason to feel it, the cogency of explanations in terms of this reason requires conceiving of her as responding to something that, to her, presents itself as a corresponding normative reason.[17]

This constraint nicely explains the connection between emotion ascriptions and explanations in terms of value. The evaluative property to which an emotion is a response, according to the content-priority view, is a reason to feel it: danger is a reason to be afraid; a genuine offence speaks in favour of anger. Accordingly, if Mary fears the dog under the aspect of danger, she responds to (what she apprehends as) a reason to be afraid. In conceiving of her in these terms we secure the cogency of the explanation implicit in thinking of her as fearing the dog.

At this point, one might want to reply that this requirement is satisfied also if we think of emotions as responses to non-evaluative features of their object. After all, such features can be normative reasons, too. Thus, plausibly, the dog's being aggressive and sharp-toothed are reasons for Mary to be afraid of it.[18]

However, this reply won't do. While such features can clearly be reasons to feel emotions, too, their status as normative reasons depends on their connection to value. It is only *in their capacity as grounds of danger* that the dog's aggressiveness and sharp teeth speak in favour of fear. To appreciate this, note that these features may in principle be reasons for different emotions. For example, for someone who relies on the dog to protect her property, they might be reasons for contentment. In this case, they favour a different emotion in virtue of

[17] This point is made forcefully by Hornsby (2008, 258f). Since the intelligibility of emotion ascriptions derives from the understanding imparted by reason explanations, it is ultimately derivative of the intelligibility conferred by normative reasons.
[18] Cf. Deonna & Teroni (2012, 96ff.).

their relation to a different value (the importance of keeping the property safe). This suggests that, for non-evaluative features to qualify as normative reasons for emotions, they must be suitably linked to a specific value. The cogency of 'Mary is afraid because of the dog's aggressiveness and sharp teeth' requires thinking of her as responding to these features *as grounds of danger* and thus as having apprehended the dog in evaluative terms.

In light of this argument, it seems that for us to so much as coherently think of emotions as taking objects, we are committed to the content-priority view. Since nowadays most philosophers of emotions recognize them as directed, Mitchell seems thus wrong to claim that the view is dispensable in favour of competing accounts.

4. The phenomenology of responding to value

Supposing these remarks are on the right track, I do not think that the view's credentials as a serious contender among theories of emotion are contingent on further characterizing the prior value awareness. If emotions are intelligible as directed only as responses to value, this should in fact be sufficient to accept it. Still, I think it is worth finally taking a look also at Mitchell's main objection to what some authors take to be the most promising way of elaborating the content-priority view. As they propose, emotions are preceded by states of evaluative 'seeing-as' or axiological perceptions of their objects as (dis)valuable.[19]

Mitchell's objection to this formulation of the view is based on the constraint that, in the case of paradigmatic emotional experiences, pre-emotional evaluations must be discernible phenomenologically from emotion.[20] For Mitchell this requires that, when undergoing such experiences, the evaluation be phenomenologically conspicuous as preceding the emotion. As he rightly notes, this requirement is not met. Consider common 'quick-fire' emotions, such as a bout of terror felt in response to a suddenly approaching car when intending to cross the

[19] Cf. [author ref. removed]. Cf. also Pugmire (2006, 18f.).
[20] Cf. Mitchell (2019, 783).

road.[21] Such emotions are clearly experienced as immediate reactions rather than as subsequent to perceptions of value. Mitchell takes this to undermine the proposal's phenomenological credentials.

While it is fair to enquire about the phenomenological plausibility of this formulation of the view, this objection is too quick, though. It is not obvious why we should follow Mitchell in requiring that evaluative perceptions be discernible from emotion in the throes of experience. A straightforward reason to reject this requirement might be that paradigmatic emotional reactions are often simply too quick for prior evaluations to be registered at the time.

While my earlier remarks on the intelligibility of emotion might be adduced in support of this reply, I do not think that it is in fact necessary to advert to them. In keeping with Mitchell's concern with emotional phenomenology, we can also provide first-person grounds to take this line.

Note, first, that it is not uncommon for responses to occur too fast for us to simultaneously discern precisely what motivates them. Consider reflex-like actions, such as automatically hitting the brakes when spotting an obstacle on the road or unreflectively backing away from a close talker. As with quick-fire emotions, here we seem to respond without conscious prior perception of the situation in evaluative terms. From the first-person perspective, we immediately act on the bare perception of its basic spatial layout. However, we can retrospectively check this impression. That is, we can probe the source of these responses, e.g. by recalling different features of the situation or by imaginatively modifying it, in order to find out what, as Pugmire (2006, 17) nicely puts it, "clicks". Such tests are likely to confirm, for example, that my inclination to back away from a close talker was motivated by her proximity. By imaginatively varying the talker's relative distance, I may even succeed in further specifying the motive: there is a certain invisible yet significant boundary (surrounding,

[21] Cf. (ibid., 785).

perhaps, my peri-personal space) relative to which she was *too* close. To think of the action in these terms is to apprehend it as a response to an intrusion and hence to the situation construed in evaluative terms.

It seems that these same tests are applicable also in the case of quick-fire emotions. I can similarly probe, for example, the source of my terror at a suddenly approaching car. Thinking back to the incident and focusing on what emotionally resonates with me, I may find out that I was responding specifically to the suddenness of the car's appearance and its speed. Plausibly, there is room for even further precision. By imagining counterfactual variations concerning the car's relative distance, speed and direction, as well as by picturing the respective consequences, I may even come to see that I was frightened specifically by the car's being too fast for me to be confident in my ability to avoid collision and the corresponding anticipation of serious injury. In realizing this, I apprehend my terror as a response to an impending adversity or threat. Crucially, since I apprehend the car qua threat as *motivating* my terror, this evaluation is apprehended as being prior to emotion.

More could be said about this mnemonic-imaginative reconstruction of emotional responses. But it suggests that it is not quite obvious that phenomenologically immediate emotions threaten the proposal under consideration. If we can retrospectively detect evaluative states that precede them, it seems plausible that these reactions happen too quickly for us to discern the prior state in responding. And this in turn casts doubt on Mitchell's requirement to this effect and hence his principal objection to this proposal.

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