

For the purposes of the final HRC workshop session, here is a brief outline of a broad and complex argument which I propose for discussion:

Perceptual theory of emotions

The perceptual theory of emotions is a view which, as well as attracting contemporary attention in the form of a revival, was held by classical phenomenologists, such as Scheler and Sartre, who claimed that ‘emotions are construed as, potentially, perceptual disclosures of values.’ (Poellner 2016:1). Broadly speaking, perceptual theories of emotion identify several significant parallels between sense perception and some emotions. Both are initially receptive experiences, caused by aspects of the environment of the subject, and both are intentional mental states with phenomenal properties. Access to the phenomenal characteristics of the intended objects seems to be direct in both cases; in sense perception the colour of a red object, for example, appears as directly perceived, as do evaluative properties such as beauty, or injustice in the emotional case. Whilst neither sense perceptions nor emotions can convincingly be explained merely as judgements, both can give rise to beliefs that are subject to change in accordance with the beliefs about their object. I can believe that my friend has arrived but then realise I mistook the sight of another person for him, and so my belief changes. An appropriate emotion such as indignation at an unkind remark might subside on the realisation that it was intended as a joke. The analogy can be extended to cases of irrational emotions, which would be understood as perceptual illusions; genuine horror experienced by a person seeing a mouse whilst being fully aware that the mouse is harmless, is understood as a case of emotional illusion rather than self-contradiction. We can experience emotions in cases where the object is not *directly* perceived, in imagination, or memory for example. In these cases the perceptual account would suggest that representations of the evaluative experience would also be indirect. In imagination, emotion would proceed from an imagination of direct experience; ‘the evaluative properties – determinates of fearsomeness and beauty, respectively – would need to be *intuitively* represented via images or analogia taken as resembling evaluative features of the intentional targets.’ (Poellner 2016:2).

However, if sense perception and basic emotions are both understood to provide direct access to phenomenal properties of objects, it must be acknowledged that emotions are typically particular, evaluative perceptions, and in this respect they seem to differ from sense perception. Perceptual experience is generally understood as transparent – a visual experience for example can be described purely by properties of the object involved, including the particular point of view of the subject, and the environment in which the object is viewed. To describe my visual experience of a car, I describe aspects of the car’s appearance as it is given to me, it is red, it has four wheels, and so on. By contrast, emotions are typically particular, evaluative perceptions, involving valenced attitudes such as approval or disapproval, and in this respect they differ from sense perception. So does the inclusion of valenced attitudes in emotions mean that whilst analogous, they cannot, after all, be considered literally as perceptions? Not necessarily; whilst objects of sense perception are perceived as possessing qualities such as colour or dimension, objects of emotion are perceived as possessing specific evaluative properties such as injustice or sublimity, direct awareness of which includes a feeling of approval or disapproval; the perceptual acquaintance with the injustice *is* my experience of anger, perceptual acquaintance with the sublimity of the painting *is* my experience of admiration. In both direct and indirect emotional experiences of value properties, values are experienced as motivating; a value ‘presents itself as an uptake of the value’s *pro tanto* justified “demand” to be or remain actual (if it is a positive value). And it is that property of meriting-to-be-actual that partly constitutes a positive evaluative property as such.’ (Poellner 2016:6). To experience that property is to register that it merits to be, or remain, realised. According to Scheler, ‘this is just what the valenced attitudinal component of the emotional experience – in, for example, admiration – presents itself as.’ (quoted in Poellner 2016:15). The value properties are not given *in addition* to the emotional experience, but are part of the emotional content, this is just how the contents of emotional experience are given.

To respond to concerns about the claim that evaluative properties are part of the content of emotional experience, consider an example of the experience of awe: if I am awed by a painting, and am asked to explain this experience by reference to non-evaluative properties, I immediately run into difficulty. I might start by pointing out that it is beautiful because of the symmetry, perspective or colour balance or I might declare that I like it because it complements the colour scheme in the room. But if I have to explain my emotional experience of *awe*, I cannot do this without referring to its evaluative qualities. However, Dokic suggests that: 'the apparent evaluative content of emotion is in fact the product of an informational enrichment initiated outside emotion' (Dokic, Lemaire:228). Whilst it is true that experiential phenomenology is permeated by previous experiences or judgements, it is not the case that it is this non-evaluative aspect that constitutes the content of the emotional *experience*. If Dokic and Lemaire are right, and emotional experience is a response to non-evaluative information, informational enrichment should, for example, provide knowledge that the mouse I observe is harmless, and therefore prevent genuine anxiety. However, in that example, I do possess the information that the mouse is not dangerous, but my emotional experience is still real. Emotional experience is not a response to non-evaluative information, but to that which must be characterised in valenced terms, for example the elegance of a piece of music or the unkindness of a remark.

The example of emotional illusion involving phobia might lead to a further concern about the acceptability of the theory. In the emotional experience described above, the emotion cannot be wholly explained by reference to properties of the mouse, but involves the reaction of the subject, the *felt* quality of anxiety, and in this, it differs from perception. To reiterate, this theory does not claim that all emotion types fit exactly into the perceptual model. Some emotions, of which fear is an example, have self-referential components; to be afraid, necessarily involves awareness of oneself as threatened, and as experiencing relevant physiological responses. But even discarding, for the moment, emotions of this type, if we take an emotion such as awe, which is not obviously self-referential and does not necessarily involve any bodily response, it still involves some kind of feeling, felt approval or disapproval for example. Can we say that this value component is a property of the object rather than merely caused by it? The conviction of the (in)appropriateness of an emotion suggests that we can. The disgust felt at the cruel treatment of an animal is experienced as an appropriate response. If, by contrast, I am in a bad mood due to receiving a tax bill and fly into a rage at some mild carelessness witnessed, the carelessness has perhaps motivated my fury but to the extent that I am aware of it as an inappropriate response, it cannot be said to have been the cause.

The limiting of examples to certain types of emotion does little to diminish the importance of the theory: 'If at least some emotions are indeed ordinary intuitions – perceptions – of values, it follows that their condition of success is veridicality, and that there can be literal (ie. Not "quasi-realist") knowledge of genuine moral, aesthetic, and other evaluative facts.' (Poellner 2014:300). One implication of this would be that attention to our emotions not only offers information about our own states of mind, but has the potential to provide information about how things are in the world.

Dokic, J. and S. Lemaire (2013). Are emotions perceptions of value? *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 43(2) 227-247.

Poellner, P. (2014). *Value*. In *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology* ed Luft S, Overgaard S. Routledge.

Poellner, P. (2016). Phenomenology and the Perceptual Model of Emotion. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 116, part 3.