

Emotions as Evaluative Feelings

Bennett Helm (2009)

Slides by Jeremiah Tillman

Helm's Big Picture (Again)

The central thesis: Emotions are intentional feelings of import; that is, they're affective modes of response to the ways our circumstances come to matter to us.

- The phenomenology of emotions, i.e., the character of the feelings they involve as good or bad.
 - Emotions can be redescribed as pleasures and pains.
 - The intentional content of the feeling of emotions: the feelings are pleasing or painful in regard to what matters to us.
- Holistic, non-reductive theory of emotion

Critical Question

Can we agree with Helm that emotions are feelings of things as good or bad without committing to the other part of his view that the best framework for understanding such positive and negative evaluations is pleasure and pain?

- The purpose of this question is to draw out the differences—if any—between emotional pain and physical pain.

The Reductive/Component View of Emotion

This is the traditional view that emotions can be reduced to three components:

- (1) belief
- (2) a desire
- (3) some bodily sensation

For example, fear is (a) the belief that something is dangerous, (b) the desire to avoid (or mitigate) the danger, and (c) a sinking feeling in the stomach.

Helm's criticism

The traditional view doesn't seem true to our actual emotional experiences.

- The traditional view also assumes that mental states—beliefs and desires—are distinct from phenomenal states like a sinking feeling in the stomach.
- This is because the traditional view holds that mental states are intentional, while bodily sensations are just qualitative states. Such states aren't 'about' anything like mental states are.

Helm's criticism (cont.)

The traditional view also seems to be committed to the cognitive–conative distinction, which Helm rejects.

(1) Something is cognitive if it has a mind to world direction of fit. We change our minds to fit the world (as we do with beliefs).

(2) Something is conative if it has a world to mind direction of fit. We change the world to fit our minds (as we do when we try to satisfy our desires).

Intuitions about Emotions

- Case example: I'm afraid an early frost will kill my tomato plants and will be disappointed if they're damaged.
- My fear can be broken into four aspects:
 - (1) It's intentional
 - (2) It's passive
 - (3) It has an affective tone
 - (4) It motivates action in various ways

Intuitions about Emotions (cont.)

Helm's view: fear is just what pains the subject. What the pain refers to is the danger the early frost poses to my tomato garden.

- What the pain refers to is its intentional content.
- In the feeling of fear, a negative evaluation impresses itself on the subject.
 - Negative evaluation is Helm's broad way of talking about pain.
- This is a point against the reductive view

Emotions and Import

Import designates that something is worthy of our attention and action; we care about it.

- We're "vigilant" for circumstances affecting the object of import favorably or adversely.
- We're prepared to act on its behalf.

Emotions and Import (cont.)

Helm again distinguishes the three aspects that structure emotions:

(1) Target

(2) Formal object, here described as “the implicit evaluation of the target characteristic of each emotion type” (Helm, 251). For example, the early frost is characterized as dangerous.

(3) Focus, what explains or anchors the import an object has for a subject, as we said last class.

Emotions and Import (cont.)

- However, we don't experience an emotion in isolation, according to Helm; rather, emotions are best understood in terms of broad patterns of other emotions.
- Emotional commitment: "To feel one emotion is to be rationally committed to feeling a whole pattern of other emotions with a common focus" (Helm, 251).
 - Holistic and nonreductive theory
 - Such commitments to import motivate us to act, and produce desires (?)
- "projection": the import implicit in one emotion is projected—that is, applied to—other emotions. This is meant to be an explanation of how emotional commitment is possible.

Emotions and Import (cont.)

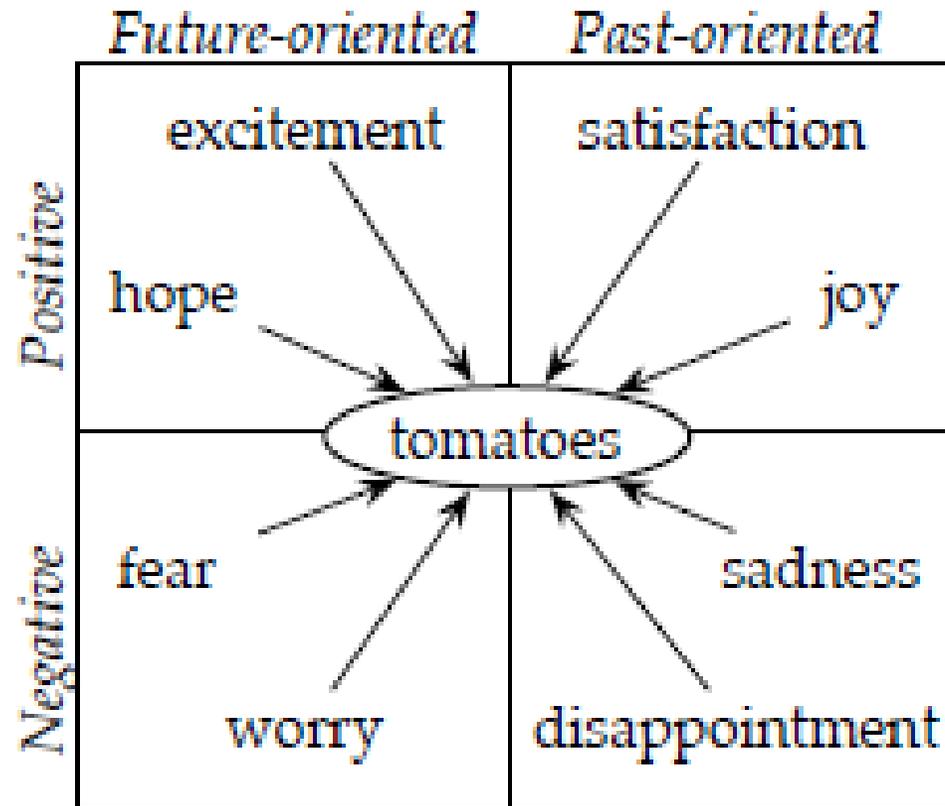


Figure 1. Pattern of emotions with a common focus

Question

- Are physical pains best understood in terms of broad patterns of interconnected emotions?
 - What are some future and past-oriented emotions concerning physical pain?
 - When it comes to physical pain, it'd seem like we just want to avoid past and future pains.

Pleasures and Pains

- To experience an emotion is to be pleased or pained by the import of the circumstances that matter to the subject.
 - There's a distinctly affective nature to our emotional responses to import.
 - For example, feeling badness is just to be pained by what makes you feel bad.
- Q: Is it our physiology or just our affectivity that plays a crucial role in our understanding of emotions?

Pleasures and Pains (cont.)

- This view poses a challenge to the cognitive–conative distinction
 - (1) It seems like emotions project import onto the world rather than respond to it as an independent object. (This seems conative with a world-to-mind fit.)
 - (2) It also seems like emotions are pleasures and pains, feelings of import to which we're receptive. (This seems cognitive with a mind-to-world fit.)
- But . . .

Pleasures and Pains (cont.)

Helm suggests that we do away with the distinction.

- Emotions constitute import holistically, by forming broad patterns that are made intelligible by the way each emotion is a rational commitment to the import of its focus.
- Moreover, the affective aspect of emotion has intentional content, contrary to what the traditional view holds.
 - This is just to say that pain—that is, the negative evaluation implicit in the feeling of a negative emotion—is about what matters to us.
 - Q: Can Helm make the same point about emotional holism and import without appealing to pleasure and pain, or would that be too “intellectual” an account?

Objection

We have to distinguish the intentionality of emotions from their phenomenology.

Helm's response: This reply misses the point that the affective aspect of emotion is intentional.

- We don't take the import of our emotions non-emotionally as the objection's distinction would suggest.
- Thus, having an emotion is just to recognize something's import.