

# In Defence of the Content-Priority View of Emotion

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[doi:10.48106/dial.v75.i2.05](https://doi.org/10.48106/dial.v75.i2.05)

Jean Moritz Müller. 2021. “In Defence of the  
Content-Priority View of Emotion.” *Dialectica*  
75(2): 251–274. [doi:10.48106/dial.v75.i2.05](https://doi.org/10.48106/dial.v75.i2.05).



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A prominent version of emotional cognitivism has it that emotions are preceded by awareness of value. Jonathan Mitchell (2019) has recently attacked this view (which he calls the content-priority view) on the ground that extant suggestions for the relevant type of pre-emotional evaluative awareness are all problematic. Unless these problems can be overcome, he argues, the view does not represent a plausible competitor to rivaling cognitivist views. As Mitchell supposes, the content-priority view is not mandatory since its core motivations can be accommodated by competing views. I argue that Mitchell misconceives the view's principal motivation. Properly reconstructed, this motivation provides a strong case for its indispensability to an adequate cognitivist treatment of emotion. Moreover, Mitchell's survey of candidates for pre-emotional value awareness can be seen to rest on contestable assumptions.

According to a classical version of emotional cognitivism, emotions are preceded by a form of value awareness (e.g., Lyons 1980, chap. 3; DeSousa 1987, 122, 133; Kenny 2003, 143ff; Mulligan 2010, 485ff; Müller 2017, 288ff; 2019, chap. 4). 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, 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.<sup>1</sup> According to him, the various candidates that have been proposed for this state are all problematic. Mitchell thus claims that there is at present no persuasive formulation of the view. Unless the problems he raises can be overcome, he proposes, the view does not represent a plausible

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<sup>1</sup> Mitchell's criticism considerably elaborates an objection to this view raised previously by Deonna and Teroni (2012, 93ff). Cf. also Teroni (2007, 407).

competitor to rivalling cognitivist views. As he argues, the content-priority view is by no means mandatory since the main considerations in support of it can be accommodated by its rivals, too.

Mitchell's paper is a significant contribution to an ongoing debate between opposing strands of emotional cognitivism and extends an important invitation to proponents of the content-priority view to clarify their core commitments. As I argue in this discussion, I do not think that Mitchell's case against the view is persuasive, though. 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 an adequate cognitivist treatment 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 itself makes it a rather strong contender among current cognitivist accounts.

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) and argue that, properly reconstructed, this motivation provides strong grounds to consider it indispensable (section 3). Finally, I turn to his considerations on specific candidates for pre-emotional value awareness (section 4).

## **1 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

To be precise about how the link between emotions and values is conceived on this view, it is worth making explicit that the relevant use of “response” is one of at least two familiar uses. Consider the following examples:

Maria moved her queen in response to Peter’s moving his pawn.

The court’s sentence was a response to his offences.

Jenny responded with pride to her son’s achievements.

In each of these cases, “response” (or one of its grammatical variants) serves to ascribe a reason for which a certain action or attitude is performed or held. Accordingly, there is a cognitive requirement for the reason to have registered with its subject prior to her acting (feeling) for this reason.<sup>3</sup> On a different use, which has its home in scientific contexts, the term serves to ascribe a mere cause, rather than a motivating reason. Consider, for example, the statements:

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2 On this use of “response”, cf. Bittner (2001, chap. 4) and Müller (2019, 63f; 2021a).

3 This use of “response” comes with a view of motivating reasons as being (typically) non-psychological facts or aspects of situations. I take it to be common ground that, on this view, in order to act or feel in light of some aspect of a situation, one must have epistemic access to it. Cf. e.g., Bittner (2001, 71), Hornsby (2008, 251). There are other accounts of motivating reasons, which do not require them to be apprehended prior to the action or attitude they motivate. Thus, on traditional, psychologistic views, such as e.g., the view that motivating reasons for action are belief/desire pairs, there is no constraint for one to be aware of one’s reasons prior to acting. However, psychologism has come under considerable pressure. For example, it is not clear that any sense can be made of the idea that we act *in light of* our beliefs and desires (cf. e.g., Dancy 2000, chaps. 5, 6). Also, when it comes to emotion, there are specific considerations in favour of non-psychologism. As I argue in section 2, there is an intimate link between the intentionality and motivating reasons of an emotion. What I am afraid of, for instance, seems also to be a reason for which I am afraid. This connection is lost if we think of reasons as psychological entities. For considerations on these lines in favour of non-psychologism about reasons for emotion, cf. also Dietz (2018), Littlejohn (2018, 533f, 536).

Sensory pain is a response to tissue damage.

Sunburn is the skin's response to exposure to sunlight.

One might, in principle, formulate the view that emotions are responses to value in accordance with this second use of “response”. This formulation does not entail that emotions are preceded by value awareness since causes are not subject to the cognitive requirement on motivating reasons: one's skin burns in response to high exposure to sunlight irrespective of whether one is aware of the sunlight. However, this is not how proponents of the content-priority view think of emotions. Their view is motivated by considerations on the ascription of motivating reasons to emotion.<sup>4</sup> (I elaborate on the view's principal motivation in the next section.)

Since the evaluative properties to which, on the content-priority 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.<sup>5</sup> 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* (cf. Lyons 1980, 77ff, 99ff; DeSousa 1987, 122; Kenny 2003, 143ff; Müller 2017, 288ff; 2019, 69ff).<sup>6</sup> 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 to be directed at something *under a specific aspect* (which is commonly called, following Searle 1992, 131, its “aspectual shape”).

4 One might consider as exceptions theorists who subscribe to a “causal-evaluative” account of emotion. Cf. esp. Lyons (1980, chap. 3). Note, though, that Lyons thinks of emotions as caused by evaluative judgments, not by values per se. A plausible way of understanding why Lyons takes values to be mentally represented prior to emotion is because the link between emotions and value seems very different from responsiveness in the mere causal sense. This difference can be made more precise by conceiving of them as responses in the reason-ascribing sense.

5 On the dominant version of this view, emotions are perceptual experiences of value (e.g., Tappolet 2016).

6 Mitchell is explicitly concerned with the view as advocated by these authors.

The fact that, on the content-priority view, evaluative aspects are supplied by a distinct state should here not be taken to conflict with the claim that they qualify the intentional content of *the emotion* rather than exclusively of the preceding state. While, arguably, in the case of some intentional states, the aspect under which those states are directed at something is supplied by that very state, there is no presumption that this has to be so.<sup>7</sup> That an intentional state is directed at something under a certain aspect does not imply that it is this same state which presents that thing under this aspect. Indeed, it seems if the view required this, it would end up mischaracterizing paradigm cases of intentional attitudes as lacking content. On a common conception of belief and desire, what one believes or desires is believed or desired under a certain aspect which is supplied by another, preceding cognitive state. Consider my desire that the government acquire more covid vaccine. In desiring this, I desire something (a certain prospect) presented in a specific way, which is specified by the proposition *that the government acquire more covid vaccine*. I may not desire that same thing as characterized by the proposition *that the government acquire more tozinameran*. Here, the relevant aspectual shape is not made available by the desire itself, but by the state of entertaining or grasping this proposition, which is a necessary precondition of having this desire.<sup>8</sup> (The same goes mutatis mutandis for doxastic attitudes.) As my later considerations on the evaluative aspect qualifying objects of emotion suggest

7 A possible candidate for an intentional state whose aspectual shape is supplied by the state itself is perceptual experience. As Searle (1992, 157) characterizes visual experience, an experience of a car has an aspectual shape which is provided by certain features presented by this very experience (e.g., shape, colour, movement). This example may seem controversial, though, not least since it is a matter of debate whether perceptual experience has intentional content in the first place. Note, also, that I do not think there is any problem with a reading of Searle's view of intentionality as allowing that some mental states are self-standing intentional states while others depend for their intentional features on further intentional states. This reading is certainly congenial to its phenomenological predecessors. Cf. esp. Brentano's (1973, chaps. 7, 8) distinction between presentations and acts founded on presentation as well as Husserl's (2001, V) distinction between objectifying and non-objectifying acts. Further support for this point is provided by Naar in his (2020, 25) as well as in (2022).

8 One might think there is a further, evaluative dimension to the aspectual shape of desire. On a familiar Aristotelian picture, desire is directed at some prospect *under the guise of the good*. On this account, desire is similar to emotion as conceived on the content-priority view. One might want to resist this account of evaluative content if one sees a tension here with the fact that evaluative aspects are plausibly supplied by the respective type of attitude (desire, fear, anger etc.). In this connection, cf. Deonna and Teroni (2012, chap. 7). Cf. also Müller (2017). It is worth stressing, though, that this response is not available to Mitchell since it tells just as much against the rivalling view he favours, on which emotions are forms of value awareness. Cf. also Mitchell

(section 2), the fact that the aspectual shapes of some intentional states are supplied by distinct states might plausibly be due to the specific way in which these states are directed.

If we suppose, then, that there is a plausible sense in which emotions have evaluative content on the content-priority view, Mitchell's way of contrasting the content-priority view with rivalling cognitivist accounts thus can seem a little puzzling. 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 evaluative property (cf. 2019, 771). 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.

Admittedly, from what Mitchell writes, it is not entirely transparent to me why he supposes that the attribution of evaluative content to an emotion entails that it constitutes a form of value awareness. Perhaps Mitchell implicitly assumes that aspectual shapes are always supplied by the very state to which they are ascribed. Given this restriction, for an emotion to have evaluative content implies that the emotion itself (rather than some prior state) presents its object as (dis)valuable. It then seems that one comes to be aware of the value of an emotion's object only in having the emotion. If what I just said about aspectual shapes is correct, this requirement is by no means trivial, though, and there are reasons to resist it. Whether or not Mitchell is ultimately making this assumption, his understanding of evaluative content, in any case, strikes me as somewhat restrictive in that it precludes its attribution to states other than forms of value awareness. Although this, in turn, has certain ramifications for how we are to chart the territory of extant cognitivist views, I shall here not quibble further over Mitchell's take on emotional content, but instead focus on whether his attack on the content-priority view, as explicated here, is successful.

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(2022) for a recent criticism of the idea that emotional attitudes do not contribute to emotional content.

## 2 The Intelligibility of Emotion

The content-priority view is motivated by the thought that evaluative properties make emotions intelligible.<sup>9</sup> 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 (2019, 774). 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 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* (cf. Lyons 1980, 78, 99ff; DeSousa 1987, 122, 133; Kenny 2003, 143ff, 51–52; Müller 2017, 288ff).<sup>10</sup>

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 (2019, 792). This is mislead-

<sup>9</sup> While it has also been defended on phenomenological grounds, this is its main motivation. Cf. Lyons (1980, 78, 99ff), DeSousa (1987, 122, 133), Kenny (2003, 143ff), Müller (2017, 288ff).

<sup>10</sup> Mitchell (2019, 774, fn.6) touches on the relevant understanding of intelligibility. Yet he does not engage with it in the paper.



ing 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 (2019, 792), it is perfectly coherent to ascribe emotions to people that are not experientially intelligible to them. 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.<sup>11</sup>

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, 485–486). 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 puts it, “outside of” emotion (2010, 486). In response, Mitchell makes little 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 seems 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

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<sup>11</sup> Although experiential intelligibility is irrelevant to the principal motivation for the content-priority view, one might still wonder whether the view has some resources to accommodate for this idea. On this issue, cf. fn.29.

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.

I also do not think it is appropriate here to dismiss appeal to this type of reason explanation as a case of overemphasizing the philosophical significance of “folk reports”. If this is what Mitchell has in mind, I think it is worth stressing that we are here concerned with reason explanation. The appropriate way to get clear on the structure and content of reason explanations of a given attitude or action is to look at common explanatory practice. It is not as though we will find a more “theoretical” form of reason explanation by consulting affective science. Nor it is obvious that we can read such explanations off first-person experience alone.<sup>12</sup> Inasmuch as the content-priority view is, fundamentally, a claim about motivating reasons for emotions, it thus seems perfectly warranted to consider reports on the lines investigated by Mulligan in assessing the view.<sup>13</sup>

As far as I can see, the most plausible way to understand Mitchell’s scepticism 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:

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- 12 Admittedly, as I suggest in section 4, *fn.28* and *fn.29*, the type of explanation considered by Mulligan is plausibly mirrored by the phenomenology of emotion. Since an adequate account of reason explanations must cover third-person explanations, too, I do not think phenomenology can substitute for the role of common explanatory practice in this context, though.
- 13 I also do not think that we should be concerned here about the fallibility of such explanations. As I argue below, the reasons attributed by the type of explanation at issue have a special status in that they constrain our very grasp of the phenomena they explain. This considerably restricts the space for errors in connection with the role they assign to values.

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 (cf. Teroni 2007, 411; Deonna and Teroni 2012, 96ff).

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 content-priority view and, accordingly, what makes this view seem mandatory.<sup>14</sup>

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,” see Mulligan 2010, 476; Mitchell 2019, 791; Milona and Naar 2020, among many others). 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.

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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 (Mitchell 2019, 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 an adequate account of emotions conceives of them as having cognitive bases (2019, 791). This claim, too, articulates a conceptual constraint on emotion qua directed (see below).

A straightforward way to explain this requirement is by noting that emotions are responses to their object (cf. Kenny 2003, 51–52; Dietz 2018; Müller 2017, 287–288; 2019, 68–69). 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 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.

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.<sup>15</sup> In this respect, the intelligibility conferred by such explanations can be conceived as a kind of rational intelligibility.

This constraint on motivating reasons 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

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<sup>15</sup> This point is made forcefully by Hornsby (2008, 258–259). 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.

Plausibly, the intelligibility of emotion ascriptions is underwritten also by considerations on emotional valence. I develop this point in response to a possible reply to the argument I am presently developing in section 3.

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 (cf. Deonna and Teroni 2012, 96ff).

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 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, and certainly all cognitivists, recognize emotions as directed, Mitchell seems thus wrong to consider the view dispensable in favour of competing accounts.

In order to properly situate this view of emotional directedness, it is worth adding that it also sits well with further observations about the relevant type of reason explanation and that there are clear analogues in the case of other, familiar attitudes and actions. As DeSousa (2011, 72) notes, there is something trivial about reason explanations of emotion citing corresponding value properties. They seem vacuous, yet perfectly appropriate.<sup>16</sup> If the very coherence

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<sup>16</sup> This point is made most explicitly in connection with the explanatory role of truth and goodness in connection with ascriptions of belief and desire, respectively, in DeSousa (1974, 538).

of such ascriptions depends on our conceiving of the emotion as a response to the corresponding value, this is just what is to be expected. Such explanations are parallel to explanations that instantiate schemes like

*S* avoids *x* because *x* is averse.

*S* criticizes *x* because *x* has done something wrong.

*S* thanks *x* because *x* has done something beneficial to *S*.

Such explanations seem vacuous because there is a conceptual requirement for the respective action to be motivated by a particular (dis)value.<sup>17</sup> Like these actions, emotions can be understood as conceptually committed to a specific reason. They form part of a familiar and rather large class of psychological phenomena that are united by their responsive character.<sup>18</sup> In this respect, the fact that emotion ascriptions are subject to a conceptual constraint involving values as reasons should not make them seem in any way peculiar. Note, further, that there are analogues to this kind of conceptual commitment in the case of responses in the mere causal sense. Consider, e.g., a property like sunburn, whose ascription is subject to conceptual constraints concerning its cause: we cannot coherently conceive of an inflammation of the skin as a sunburn unless we think of it as caused by exposure to sunlight (cf. [Dardis 2008, 115](#)).<sup>19</sup> Attitudes and actions that are conceptually committed to

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17 As suggested by my considerations on the intelligibility of emotion, the conceptual requirement is, strictly speaking, that the respective attitude or action be a response to *what is apprehended as an exemplification of this value*, which can be a real exemplification or what is merely apprehended to be one. But I take it that this conceptual connection to the corresponding value qua motivating reason is sufficient to account for a certain air of vacuity of explanations even of the factive type “*S* Φs *x* because *x* is (dis)valuable”. This is because there is a basic kind of intelligibility which is conferred both by explanations citing actual and those citing merely apparent exemplifications of value. Cf. [Hornsby \(2008\)](#) on the disjunctive character of this type of reason explanation.

18 For a thorough account of analogies between emotion and action cf. [Naar \(2020\)](#). Naar likewise argues that the connection to reasons, in particular to normative reasons, is a core aspect of both phenomena. This parallel is elaborated by him in the context of an exploratory defence of an account of the fittingness of emotions in terms of normative reasons provided by values in [Naar \(2021\)](#). In this connection, cf. also [Müller \(2017, 299ff\)](#). Much of Naar’s discussion, too, focuses on the above types of action, albeit without explicitly conceiving of them as sharing with emotions a conceptual commitment to a particular motivating reason.

19 While I am not sure I agree with Dardis’s substantive account of causally committed properties, he offers some very helpful general remarks on this category.

certain reasons can plausibly be thought of as the reason-theoretic analogue of reactions that are committed to causes in this way.

### 3 The Indispensability of the Content-Priority View

Supposing these remarks are on the right track, I do not think that the credentials of the content-priority view as a plausible contender among cognitivist 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.

This consideration in support of the content-priority view can be framed as an argument of a classical transcendental form: If we are to avoid making it unintelligible how emotions can be directed at something we must maintain that they are responses to this thing as (dis)valuable. This argument takes it as agreed that emotions are directed and proceeds to its conclusion via a constraint on the intelligibility of their directedness. Transcendental arguments of this sort are not uncommon in the theory of intentionality.<sup>20</sup> They differ from their traditional anti-sceptical cousins which start from a psychological premise and proceed to a conclusion about the mind-independent world. The type of argument in question, in contrast, both starts from a psychological premise and has a psychological conclusion. In accordance with a common dialectical purpose of transcendental arguments, the point of this transcendental argument for the content-priority view is to show that the value responsive-character of emotion is a condition on something that all cognitivists, including Mitchell, take for granted.

Maybe there will be some resistance to this inference in light of Mitchell's scepticism about pre-emotional value awareness. If a survey of the various candidates that one can think of in this context turns out not to yield a single viable option, one might think this should give us pause. The appropriate thing to do given Mitchell's charge, one might think, is to revisit the considerations offered in favour of the content-priority view and to try and find fault with the constraint on intelligibility which underwrites this inference.

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<sup>20</sup> For prominent exemplars of this cf. McDowell's (1996) and Brewer's (1999) principal argument for conceptualism about perceptual experience. This argument attempts to establish that perceptual experience has conceptual content by adverting to a constraint on the intelligibility of beliefs with empirical content. Both authors also offer a related, transcendental argument which is more similar to the one I outlined above. It invokes the same intelligibility constraint on empirical beliefs in order to show that they are responses to perceptual experiences.

Though this may seem a natural response, I don't think it is successful. To see why, it is important to be clear on the status of this constraint. Considering the close analogy between emotions and reason-committed actions made explicit at the end of section 2, this constraint seems no less integral to our understanding of emotions than the idea that in criticizing someone we respond to some purported wrongdoing or the idea that in thanking someone we respond to some purported benefit is to our understanding of these actions. If this is right, letting go of this constraint is not a palatable option. Consider, for instance, what would become of our grasp of criticizing someone if tokens of this action were no longer conceived as responses to a purported mistake? I don't think we need to be committed to a purely descriptive approach to the metaphysics of mind and action to find this prospect deeply dissatisfying.

To back up this point, let me elaborate somewhat on the place of this conceptual commitment within our understanding of the corresponding phenomena. As some further reflection suggests, in the case of many reason-committed actions as well as the emotions, the intelligibility constraint on their directedness is at the same time a constraint on their intelligibility as the kinds of psychological phenomena they are. A helpful way to see this is by considering joint explanations of emotions and actions such as e.g., "S responded with indignation and harsh criticism to x's wrongdoing" or "S was grateful to x and thanked x for x's beneficence." Such explanations are perfectly cogent. Moreover, it seems that part of their cogency is a matter of the respective emotion and action making sense as cognate responses to a specific (dis)value. To refer to them as cognate responses is not, or not merely, to refer to their common motivating reason, but also to call attention to the fact that they are similarly valenced: both action and emotion are *negative (positive)* responses.<sup>21</sup> I take it that this aspect is fundamental to our conception of each of these actions and attitudes. Intuitively, criticizing or thanking someone is essentially a valenced response. These actions are a form of sanction (in a suitably broad sense of "sanction" that includes forms of positive acknowledgment or appreciation). The same goes for the negative (positive) character of indignation (gratitude). While we may wish to reserve the term "sanction" for certain valenced actions, we can highlight this similarity by speaking of indignation (gratitude) as a case of taking a positive or negative stand or position on something or, perhaps more colloquially, as

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<sup>21</sup> This is all I mean to convey by using the term "valence". There is no commitment here to a substantive account of valence as being, e.g., a form of (dis)pleasure or action tendency.



form of (dis)approval.<sup>22</sup> However, and crucially, our appreciation of these phenomena as sanctions or position-takings is contingent on their recognition as value responses. Criticism is coherently conceivable as a negative response only in virtue of the (purported) disvalue of its target. It seems very puzzling to suppose that this target is negatively sanctioned without being sanctioned for its (purported) negative import. (*Mutatis mutandis* for the act of thanking someone.) Similarly, indignation's character as a negative response depends on its character as a response to disvalue: it makes little sense to conceive of indignation as the taking of a negative stand on something without conceiving of this stand as being taken because of this object's (purported) negative import. (*Mutatis mutandis* for gratitude.) Now, if the intelligibility of emotions as position-takings hinges on our ability to conceive of them as responses to value, then we should be wary of dispensing with the intelligibility constraint I have made explicit. That is, what is at stake here is not the "mere" fact that emotions take objects, but their character *as the specific attitudes they are*. To ignore their commitment to particular values as motivating reasons is to crucially impoverish our grasp of them in the same way that ignoring this commitment in the case of valenced actions makes them unrecognizable as the actions they are.

I take this to provide strong warrant for thinking that this constraint is not really up for dispute. Accordingly, I doubt that the suggested response to Mitchell's survey is feasible.<sup>23</sup> In assessing this response, it is moreover worth pointing out that it also loses much of its initial force if we look to similar dialectical contexts outside the philosophy of emotion. Once we somewhat broaden the perspective, it is not at all evident that the apparent shortage of plausible candidates for a form of awareness to which we are committed by virtue of our core understanding of a certain phenomenon requires revisiting this understanding. Consider, for instance, the kinds of implicit cognition that have been posited by major contemporary accounts of conceptual or semantic competence in order to explain how someone may possess a word or concept

22 For this characterization, cf. also, e.g., Greenspan (1980, 229) and Mulligan (2010, 485). Cf. also Müller (2018; 2019, chap. 4), where I argue that it applies to all emotions.

23 As one referee noted, one might instead feel forced by Mitchell's critique to adopt a form of error theory about emotion. This view endorses the intelligibility constraint, but denies that emotion ascriptions pick out real psychological phenomena in the first place. For reasons I elaborate in the main text below, I do not think this option is actually forced on us. Note, also, that this line of response is not available to Mitchell. It involves conceding that rivaling cognitivist views cannot make sense of emotions as directed as well as rejecting the realist commitment shared by most cognitivists.

without having a fully articulate understanding of the principles governing its use (cf. e.g., Peacocke 1998; Toribio 1998). These forms of cognition are introduced in response to the recognition that extant philosophical conceptions of propositional knowledge do not account for our cognitive relation to these principles in accordance with this plausible restriction. In fact, one of the main explanatory purposes of introducing them is very much in line with the role played by pre-emotional value awareness on the content-priority view, i.e., to acknowledge certain types or linguistic or concept-involving behaviour as rationally intelligible (cf. Peacocke 1998; Toribio 1998).<sup>24</sup> This is not to say, of course, that they are posited without any concern for whether they actually form part of our psychology. But their point is first and foremost that of sustaining what is independently recognized as an adequate characterization of semantic or conceptual competence. This is normally not in and of itself seen as compromising the status of the respective account as a worthwhile contender in the field. And for a good reason: It seems misleading to be sceptical against an account that is founded on core features of our grasp of some phenomenon for the sole reason that it fails to fully align its psychological commitments with those of extant philosophical psychology. It may well turn out that, in the end, the apparent lack of candidates for the required cognition proves due to implicit theoretical strictures on our ontology of the mind that need loosening, rather to any fault with the account itself.<sup>25</sup>

While I thus remain unconvinced that the content-priority view should be deemed unpersuasive unless a more substantive account of pre-emotional value awareness is supplied, I still think it is worth finally taking a look also at Mitchell's main objection to what some authors see as the most promising way of elaborating the view. In this way, I hope to moreover show that Mitchell's survey of suggestions for this form of awareness does in fact not succeed in demonstrating that we are short of plausible candidates.

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24 Perhaps it will be objected that this example exclusively concerns subpersonal forms of cognition, while the content-priority view is committed to a personal-level form of value awareness. However, this is disputable. Cf. Toribio (1998).

25 There are prominent cases of this sort of ontological expansion in the philosophy of emotion: When Greenspan (1988, pt. I) and Goldie (2000, chap. 3) first introduced the idea of an intentional emotional feeling in order to recover what they deemed a pre-theoretically adequate view of emotion, their accounts were claimed unorthodox for conflicting with the then unquestioned separation between phenomenal consciousness and intentionality. Cf. e.g., Morris (1992, 251). Today, this idea is widely accepted.

## 4 The Phenomenology of Responding to Value

As the content-priority view is sometimes elaborated, emotions are preceded by states of evaluative “seeing-as” or axiological perceptions of their objects as (dis)valuable (Müller 2019, chap. 5).<sup>26</sup> Mitchell’s objection to this proposal is based on the constraint that, in the case of paradigmatic emotional experiences, pre-emotional evaluations must be discernible phenomenologically from emotion (cf. 2019, 783).<sup>27</sup> 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 road (cf. Mitchell 2019, 785). Such emotions clearly purport to be immediate reactions rather than consequences of a prior perception 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 us to notice that they are preceded by prior evaluations at the time. That is to say that while the emotion follows upon the perception of a value property, this very fact may itself not be conspicuous to us. It may take some post hoc enquiry to properly discern its psychological antecedents and, accordingly, that it is motivated by a specific value property.

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 be able to fully discern their mental antecedents and appreciate what they are motivated by. Consider reflex-like actions, such as automatically hitting the brakes when spotting an obstacle on the road or unreflectively backing away

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<sup>26</sup> As I read him, Pugmire (2006, 18–19) comes close to this view, too.

<sup>27</sup> According to a further objection, due to Deonna and Teroni (2012, 55), this formulation is cognitively too demanding and does not accommodate for the emotions of cognitively less sophisticated creatures. I have responded to this charge in some detail elsewhere (Müller 2019, chap. 5.3).

from a close talker. As with quick-fire emotions, here we seem to respond without conscious prior perception of the situation in evaluative terms. As things seem first-personally there and then, 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, 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 anticipated 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, I also understand the situation to be one in which the car was apprehended in evaluative terms prior to emotion.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> It seems that when I realize what ultimately motivated a reflex-like action or emotion in this way, this is usually accompanied also by a novel impression of what it was like first-personally to respond at the time. This is not to say we change our view as to what was phenomenologically conspicuous to us. Rather, we come to see what responding was like *pre-reflectively*. For examples of the kind of pre-reflective experience I have in mind, cf. the considerations on automatic action offered by Dreyfus and Kelly (2007, 52ff), Rietveld (2008), among others. Cf. also Müller (2021a; 2021b, 1068–1069). One might be skeptical here about how much work the appeal to pre-reflective experience can do by way of motivating the content-priority view on phenomenological grounds (cf. Mitchell 2019, 77). Considering these views of the phenomenology of automatic action, I am not sure, though, that there is anything problematic about the very idea that emotions can be pre-reflectively experienced as responses to value.

There is, perhaps, a worry here that this type of procedure is prone to post hoc rationalization and self-deception. Thus, one might wonder how we are to be sure that what we determine to be a motivating reason in this way did actually motivate our response. Given this concern, one might then come to question its use in answering Mitchell's objection.

However, while this type of mnemonic-imaginative reconstruction of responses, like other forms of post hoc enquiry into motivating reasons, is clearly not immune to mistakes, liability to error is reduced in this case by the procedure deployed for validating candidate reasons. To say that the features to which I selectively attend must "click" is to hold hypotheses and judgments about my reasons subject to a specific kind of experiential confirmation. Whether some aspect of the situation plausibly constitutes a reason for which I feel an emotion is a matter of whether it *palpably resonates with* the emotion (or my memory of it).<sup>29</sup> This form of validation is not subject to direct voluntary control and also surprisingly impervious to attempts at rationally persuading myself of the (purported) plausibility of certain candidates. In this respect, the procedure is considerably more reliable than common ratiocinative forms of post hoc explanation which rely exclusively on cognitive forms of validation, such as considerations of coherence with other beliefs I may hold about the circumstances (or counterfactual variations of them). In consequence, I don't think we have strong grounds to think it too undependable to be of much help in defending the proposed formulation of the content-priority view against Mitchell's charge.


If we, then, assume that this procedure can aid us in probing the source of responses in these cases, we should insist that there is room to question

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29 Accordingly, the intelligibility conferred on the emotion by attending to the right situational features is contingent upon validation by this same emotion. This to some extent echoes Mitchell's notion of experiential intelligibility: emotional experience itself is the arbiter of what makes sense of it. To be fair, in contrast to Mitchell's understanding, this type of intelligibility is post hoc rather than being conveyed by the original experience at the time. However, I think there may be some space here also to argue for a kind of intelligibility which is directly conveyed in having an emotional experience and which, arguably, underwrites the kind of understanding which can be achieved in this way after the fact. If we think of the content-priority view as characterizing what it is like, pre-reflectively, to feel an emotion, then, on this view, having an emotion involves experiencing oneself as feeling it for a certain reason. In this respect, one might argue, some minimal, pre-reflective understanding of the emotion is built into our very having it. While there is more to say by way of defending this account of emotional phenomenology and relating this further notion of experiential intelligibility to Mitchell's own view on this topic (cf. 2019, sec.2), it is perhaps fair to say, though, that the content-priority view may well have some resources to accommodate also for a form of understanding of the sort propounded by him.

whether phenomenologically immediate emotions threaten this proposal. That is, if my examples illustrating this procedure are cogent and we can retrospectively detect evaluative states that precede these reactions, it seems plausible that quick-fire emotions happen too quickly for us to discern the prior state in responding. This in turn casts doubt on Mitchell's requirement to this effect and hence his principal objection to this proposal.\*

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\* I would like to thank Jonathan Mitchell and Hichem Naar for extensive discussion of this material. I am moreover grateful to three anonymous referees for their sensitive and insightful comments.

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