



## Emotion: Phenomenology and Content

Reviewed by [Simon Belt](#) May 2011

This was a one-day conference focusing on two aspects commonly associated with emotional experience: *phenomenology* and *content*, hosted by the [Manchester Centre for Emotion and Value](#) (MANCEV) at Manchester University, and supported by the [Royal Institute of Philosophy](#).

**MANCEV** was set up in 2008 to serve as a hub for research into the emotions and their relation to both aesthetic and ethical value, and claims to be one of the foremost places for research into the emotions and value, with a wide ranging expertise amongst academic staff and a flourishing graduate community.

**Peter Goldie**, Director of MANCEV opened the *conference* held in a seminar room at the

University, and having a peak attendance of 20 people - 4 of whom were external speakers flown in for it. To dignify this seminar with the title of a conference at an academic institution may help attract external funding for University lecturer and student activity, but it demeans the value of an historically prestigious academy in the process.

**Michelle Montague** (Bristol University), introduced her *paper* on 'Evaluative Phenomenology and Content' first, and to her relative credit there was a four page hand-out to go with her introduction though it read more like the abbreviated minutes of a briefing session for web developers, and nothing like a discussion about philosophical issues. Reading out the four pages of abbreviated minutes or definitions didn't help any, and the banal classification of various sample emotions as positive or negative left me wondering what one dimensional landscape I'd stepped into and whether I'd be getting a gold star or a red dot to put on my name badge.

If I didn't know I was sat in a Philosophy department at a supposedly top university, I'd think I was sat in a discussion about developing alternative Cascading Style Sheets for a website that aimed to respond to a visitor's emotional state when they ticked either a happy or sad box on the front page of a website. I've sat through some dry Information Technology courses on developing applications using the latest computer programming techniques, but none of those had such repetition of the words 'Properties' and 'Attributes' of emotions without explaining or contextualising them, whether they were 'Positive' or 'Negative', or had 'Value' or 'Disvalue' in their associated state of affairs. Is humanity really so binary?

Ok, I'm not a philosophy student, but if someone can explain these concluding sentences of the presentation, please do:

In experiencing the negative affect that is part of experiencing sadness, the negative affect is itself experienced as something of disvalue. This disvalue experienced as part of the negative affect resembles the disvalue that is attributed to the state of affairs of the friend's death. It is then partly in virtue of this resemblance relation that the negative affect experienced as a property of experience represents the disvalue attributed to the friend's death.

In the discussion, Michelle agreed that life was more complex than a two dimensional computer programme, suggested I read about John Searle's Chinese room (the second time this has been suggested to me in as many months), which will be very useful for the Salon discussion in October entitled ' [Artificial intelligence and human consciousness](#) '. She also took on board the need to think about aspects of experience she wasn't comfortable giving a positive or negative score to, like surprise for example. The introduction of Spock from Star Trek (a fictitious character from a sophisticated and socialised human imagination), as someone we should try and get inside the head of to imagine the world got me thinking.

Next up was **Matthew Ratcliffe** (Durham University), who introduced his *paper* on 'Feeling, Thinking and Believing', well that is to say he talked through some slides we saw on screen. I quite liked Matthew's presentation actually despite not being given a copy of his

*paper*

as he tried to historically situate the development of thinking on the relationship between feeling and believing and explain what he meant by each term. Further, he explained how the notion of *belief*

has been under theorised and the difficulty posed by trying to theorise it, but stuck his neck out by attempting it and explaining the steps he's taken in doing so.

Matthew counter-posed his approach to that of **Tamar Szabó Gendler** which he categorised as very neat and tidy in the use of her *alief*

category as way of catching everything outside of the reasoned belief system. This is perhaps a fruitful topic of discussion for a future Salon and rather a shame he lives in Durham. Alas for someone who's research specialism is the philosophy of psychology and psychiatry it was a shame when he avoided the request to try and explain why he thought philosophy and psychology had under theorised belief, and why belief in religion for example was under such assault ideologically - with the slight of hand comment '

***it wasn't his area of specialism or interest***

'. I think I feel I don't believe that.

After lunch, **Jean Moritz Muller** (Manchester University) replacing Jan Slaby at the last minute, presented on 'Emotions and the (Re)presentation of Value'. Jean Moritz was also the key organiser of the day's events so did a great job in putting together a presentation slot with such calm professionalism. Alas, his presentation followed a similar vein as Michelle's in the morning repeating with Hare Krishna reordering of the same banal phrases of representation, presentation, value, disvalue, emotions as positive or negative.

The formulations of logical constructs or statements with embedded and self-evident truths took a similar approach as Michelle with sentences to consider like 'Sam is angry with Maria because she is being offensive'. The response of anger and someone being offensive is like Janet and John go to university books, where the statement could be lifted from any National Union of Students and University policy document produced in the last few years. Maybe Maria's actions are quite rational but being interpreted as offensive by someone hypersensitive and looking for offense, then responding with the pre-ordained orthodoxy of anger which is negative is just so dull and contrived. To think that academics trying to philosophise about the mind do so by starting from such contrived examples, that unquestioningly accept a contemporary political orthodoxy of victimhood, beggars belief (going back to Matthew's intro). This reminds me of George Orwell's 1984 and after the event justifications of a political paymasters's policy agenda, and I for one think society deserves better from their universities.

The most shocking aspect of the day though was when asked to explain what was meant by the terms 'value' or 'disvalue', used so liberally by Moritz and Michelle, there was only panicked floundering. As if that wasn't alarming or bad enough, the Director of the Manchester Centre for Emotion and **Value** (MANCEV), Peter Goldie also offered no explanation but had a word in my ear at the break to say that everyone there was familiar with the literature and terms, and although it was nice to have non academics like myself at the *conference*, there was no need to explain such terms (that'll be the red dot sticker I disvalued and not the gold star I so valued then). Hmm..., can't see it would do any harm for the Director of MANCEV to try and explain it in a few sentences rather than try and condescend his way out of it.

With all the respect that's due to the learned professor, if you're able to summarise the meaning into one word, surely summarising it into a few sentences would be a doddle by comparison, oh, unless of course it was important to obscure the fact that there was no actual value to using the word other than avoiding an elucidation of meaning. The fact that the image of the Centre for Emotion and Value is a tree rather than anything human centred rather expresses the detachment from society for me, and I'd encourage the MANCEV page trying to explain the substance of one of the two words that make up its '*cohering*' name. Or is that me just being philistine and I should just take on trust that the word has a useful meaning in this context?



After the word in my ear, **Julien Deonna** (University of Geneva), presented a *paper* entitled 'Emotion and Desire', where the theme of the day - binary options, took the form of open

(emotional) or closed (motivating) desires. The most interesting aspect of this presentation was an articulation that a better way to understand action was that it came from the thinking process leading to emotional states triggering action rather than emotions being interpreted and modified by the thinking process to result in action. To match this view of the value of human intellectual activity ultimately being good for triggering emotional states rather than thought dominating or at least modifying emotional states, the examples used were focussed around responding to barking dogs.

Throughout the day, there was very heavy focus on the more primal and base level emotions, with many examples having man's relationships to animals as a focus rather than more elevated emotions or culturally advanced or socially sophisticated activity. In fact almost all the examples focussed on individual behaviours as though society didn't exist, just self-preoccupied individuals who just happened to have fridges (made somehow, through man as social being, but never actually considered), with beers in for individuals to drink alone to satisfy childish object in mouth desires. The rich and rounded processes that go into the writing of a script for Star Trek, jumped back into my mind to realise that '**this may indeed be philosophy reader, just not as we know it**'. Alas, I'm not qualified to decide whether that thought was facilitated by a closed or open desire to say so.

Last up and refreshingly balanced was **Adam Morton** (University of Alberta), with about a page worth's of **paper** on 'Feeling is Cognitive Pressure'. What a breadth of fresh air (as Matthew would have us feel our body expand positively) Adam was with a presentational appreciation that man is a social being and exists in a sophisticated relationship in society and responds in a complex and not linear fashion with contrasting and contradictory aspects to their personalities. He also got the point that the current emphasis of emotional outpouring was historically specific and has not always been so, and that there was maybe a dialectical relationship in cognitive processes of rationality and reason. Although he'd not thought through this, his attempt to try and reason towards it was something to get out of the day.

**Postscript:** Some people have suggested that I must be exaggerating about the quality of the **p**  
**apers**

presented to this '

**conference**

', and that the high standard of thoughtful and contemplative discussion these will have led to was just too intellectual for me. Obviously people do cover up for their lack of intellectual insights and all, though not sure I'm not clever enough to do that. I would happily publish the links to the papers presented, or given to participants. Alas, there were

**no papers**

, though Michelle's hand out at the beginning of her introduction may be useful to publish. I would love to offer you more, but there just wasn't any.