

Conceiving of Emotions and of Evaluative Properties: Emotions' Necessary**Explanatory Role**

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I feel fear of the Great Dane in front of me. I am envious of my colleague's publication list. I feel admiration for activists at a human-rights demonstration. My fear, envy and admiration are unique experiences in themselves and unique ways in which I experience the Great Dane, the publication list, and the activists, as fearsome, enviable and admirable (respectively). This raises two questions: how are emotions related to our ability to conceive of emotions themselves and of evaluative properties? In this paper, I present my attempts to answer both questions. I argue that feeling an emotion is necessary for one to be able to conceive of the emotion and to acquire emotion concepts. I also argue that emotions are the basic way we conceive of evaluative properties. This novel metasemantic and epistemic account has implications for our view of concepts of evaluative properties and the way we can acquire them. Most importantly, it brings forth a necessary explanatory role that emotions play in fixing our reference to evaluative properties, acquiring concepts of these properties and forming beliefs about them. The account provides crucial groundwork for establishing emotions' epistemic role.

Introduction

In this paper I examine the role emotions have in our ability to think about two important aspects of the evaluative realm: emotions themselves and a subset of evaluative properties – *fearsome, enviable, offensive, admirable, disgusting*, etc.¹ I argue that emotions

¹ I use *italics* to denote properties.

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play a necessary explanatory role with respect to both aspects, albeit somewhat different roles. After providing some preliminaries regarding how I understand emotions in this paper (section 1), I present (section 2) my emotional version of Jackson's (1982) Mary – the case of Alegra, who has never felt disgust.² This thought experiment provides the starting point for my accounts of how emotions are related to our ability to conceive of emotions themselves and our ability to conceive of evaluative properties. In section 3 I argue that feeling an emotion is necessary for an agent to acquire the concept of the emotion – Alegra did not possess DISGUST before feeling disgust.³ In section 4 I turn to how emotions are related to our access to some evaluative properties. I approach this question as a metasemantic question regarding the way in which emotions contribute to content-determination with respect to evaluative properties. I argue that emotions fix our reference to a subset of evaluative properties such as *fearsome*, *admirable*, *disgusting*, etc. This makes emotions the basic way we think about such properties, giving them metasemantic precedence over other mental states and a necessary explanatory role in acquiring concepts of these properties. Emotions' crucial role manifests both in: 1) what explains Alegra being able to think about *disgusting* in the first place, and 2) the epistemic implications of what she gains from feeling disgust. In section 5, I conclude the paper by discussing how my view differs from other theories and its significance.

1. Preliminaries and Assumptions regarding Emotions

In this section I will present the view of emotions I will be working with and assuming. In a nutshell, according to my view, emotions are *phenomenal* mental states that

² Others have discussed emotional versions of Mary and analogical cases. I will present Goldie's (2002) in section 2 and will discuss it in sections 3 and the conclusion. In the concluding section I will also discuss Mitchell's (2021) and Kauppinen's (2024) views and the way they are related to similar thought experiments.

³ I use BLOCK capitals to denote concepts.

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 have *representational content* and represent a specific subset of evaluative properties –
affective-evaluative properties (as I will call them).

1.1 – Emotions are Phenomenal Mental States⁴

While we can reflect on beliefs that we have without noting an accompanying phenomenology, this simply does not seem to be the case with respect to emotions – it seems impossible to have an emotion without feeling it. A Jamesian subtraction thought experiment further supports this: if one recalls an emotion and subtracts all feelings that arise, one seems to be left with nothing more than a “cold” evaluation which differs significantly from an emotion. Indeed, emotions having phenomenology seems necessary to the characterization of emotions as valenced (Arnaud, 2025). In addition, we are able to differentiate emotions based on how they feel – fear feels differently from anger and from hope. In fact, it seems reasonable that most people in typical circumstances differentiate between emotions based on how they feel. This, as I will argue in 1.4, is because emotions’ phenomenology and their evaluative content are non-contingently (Goldie, 2004) and irreducibly (Mitchell, 2020) connected.

Two phenomena may seem to contradict emotions’ being necessarily phenomenal. These are: the attribution of emotions to creatures that lack phenomenal consciousness and unconscious emotions.⁵ Let me explain why I do not think this is the case. With respect to the former, I am happy to deny that creatures that lack phenomenal consciousness have emotions. LeDoux (2015:99), for example, argues that although all organisms can detect and respond to threats, this does not entail that they feel fear, precisely because lack of consciousness entails lack of emotions, including fear. In my view, the data we have in support of emotions being

⁴ This view is widely accepted by a variety of philosophers and theories, for example: Goldie (2002), Prinz (2008); Tappolet (2016: 11) and Deonna and Teroni (2012: 3).

⁵ I thank an anonymous reviewer for these objections.

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phenomenal is far stronger than ascriptions of emotions to creatures that lack phenomenal consciousness.

There is much controversy regarding how we are to understand unconscious emotions and whether there are such things.⁶ Proponents of unconscious emotions turn to a variety of phenomena such as: so-called repressed emotions, feeling guilt while later (in therapy, perhaps) learning that one was in fact angry, and having a fear of spiders. In my view, all of these phenomena can be explained without turning to unconscious emotions. Fear of spiders is better understood in terms of a disposition to emote and not an occurrent fear (see also: Deonna and Teroni, 2012, and Whiting, 2018). Such dispositions, even if they are unconscious, do not entail unconscious occurrent emotions. With respect to repressed emotions, while it is common to talk of such emotions, Freud (1915\1957: 177) himself objected to the idea that emotions can be unconscious. What is repressed is not the emotion but (to refrain from psychoanalytic jargon) the relevant ideas or causes of the emotion (see also: Hatzimoysis, 2007). The guilt-anger example should be understood in a similar way. The emotion one felt was guilt, which was felt instead of feeling anger, because the content that would give rise to anger was repressed (see also section 3). None of these purported counterexamples entail occurrent unconscious emotion and thus do not contradict my claim.⁷ I take all this to be sufficient to show that there is something it is like to have an emotion, that an emotion is always felt, always phenomenal.

1.2 – Emotions are Representational⁸

⁶ Proponents include: Lacewing (2007), Lemaire (2022) and Arnaud (2025); opponents include: Hatzimoysis (2007) and Whiting (2018).

⁷ Those who remain unconvinced by the above may take issue with my argument, given the important role emotions being phenomenal plays in it.

⁸ There are a number of philosophers that argue against the claim that emotions are representational, such as Whiting (2009), Hutto (2012), Schroeter, Schroeter and Jones (2015), Shargel (2015), Gert (2018) and Naar (2021). In addition, Deonna and Teroni (2012) argue that emotions are evaluative attitudes towards their objects and do not have evaluative content.

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I will be assuming the following modest and uncontroversial understanding of a state being representational: A state is representational if and only if it: 1) has an object it is about, making it an intentional mental state; 2) it represents its object in a specific way, as being a certain way, and 3) it has correctness conditions – it can either represent correctly or not.⁹ An example should help see how this applies to emotions. Think about my hearing that my friend was promoted. Having heard the news, we can imagine I feel happiness, admiration or envy about the promotion. These three emotions have a clear intentional object – the promotion. However, they differ considerably in the way they represent the promotion. For example, happiness represents the promotion as something good that has obtained while envy represents the promotion as something good that I wanted for myself. Thus, each emotion represents the promotion as having a distinctive property. This property, which individuates different emotion-types, and seems necessary for specifying emotions' correctness conditions, is referred to in the philosophy of emotions as the emotion-type's formal object (Kenny, 1963).¹⁰ Lastly, we can ask whether my emotions represent the promotion correctly or not – depending on the fit between the way the emotion represents the object and the way it really is. For example, if the promotion is in fact a demotion in disguise, my happiness and envy will be incorrect.

1.3 – Emotions Represent Affective-Evaluative Properties (AEPs)

The examples above should make it clear that I understand emotions as representing properties like shameful, admirable, enviable, disgusting, etc. These properties are a subset of evaluative properties, which I will call Affective-Evaluative Properties (AEPs). Note that regardless of the metaphysics of AEPs, it seems clear that concepts of AEPs are not merely

⁹ Importantly, I am not taking a stand on the metaphysical import of the 'way' or 'correctness' conditions.

¹⁰ From within a representational account such as mine, this will be the property the emotion represents, but for other theories, the formal object is not a part of the representational content (see Deonna and Teroni, 2012).

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causal but rather have to do with whether the object merits the emotion (something is not fearsome merely because it causes fear).¹¹

There are good reasons to accept the claim that emotions represent these properties. First, the difference between emotions about the same object (fearsome vs. amusing, for example) seems to be a difference in the way the object is evaluated (Mitchell, 2021:45-46). Second, such properties share structural traits with emotions: they both have degrees and are valenced, with the valence of the emotion and the property matching up (Tappolet, 2016:83-84). To this we can add that emotions' evaluative phenomenology counts in favor of emotions representing evaluative properties (Mitchell, 2021:57-60). Lastly, the beliefs emotions give rise to are evaluative, which suggests that emotions have a similar content (Ibid).

There are two alternatives to this view that should be addressed. The first alternative is to argue that emotions represent so-called objective properties like *danger*.¹² There are several reasons to reject this. First, while *danger* seems like a plausible candidate for fear to represent, it is unclear which non-AEP alternatives apply to other emotions. Even with respect to fear we should be skeptical because we feel fear about non-dangerous objects: fiction, things we imagine or dream, a devastating counter-argument, or my favorite basketball team losing (see Roberts, 2003:24, 510). Second, and related, consider the claim that disgust is a reaction to pathogens, indigestible or harmful things. Introspecting on the emotion from a pre-theoretical point of view, makes it seem false that objective properties such as these are what disgust represents. As Dokic and Lemaire (2013:239-240) argue, a layperson seems unable to specify such properties as related to disgust, or the incongruent as

¹¹ This is important to account for what's wrong with a phobic's fear. The phobic fear represents the dog as fearsome, as meriting fear, while it is not. Crucially, the phobic also lacks reasons to represent it as fearsome.

¹² I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to be clear about this alternative.

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 related to amusement, which casts serious doubt that these are the properties that figure in emotions' representational content.

The second alternative is to turn to the supervenience of the evaluative on the non-evaluative, suggesting that emotions represent non-evaluative properties on which the evaluative supervenes. For example, my fear represents a conjunction of properties that constitute a danger in a specific situation, and not *fearsome*. There are two ways to understand this alternative. A simple claim, according to which supervenience makes it sufficient to represent the relevant non-evaluative properties. We can see that this is false by noting that what makes an emotion correct is whether its object has the relevant AEP.¹³ What we attribute to a person who is afraid of a non-fearsome dog is a misrepresentation of the fearsomeness of the dog and not a misrepresentation of (subvenient) non-evaluative properties. The evaluative component is necessary, and a representation of non-evaluative properties is insufficient for assessing whether an emotion is correct.¹⁴ In 4.1.1 I argue against a more complex understanding – that one can represent an AEP in virtue of representing non-evaluative properties on which it supervenes. From here on out I will call AEPs all and only properties that are emotions' formal objects.

1.4 – Emotions' representational content is related to their phenomenology

I can now present one last building block of my view of emotions – that emotions' phenomenology and their representational content are connected, as reflected in the following three correlations. First, as noted above, the valence of the AEP an emotion represents, and the valence of the emotion's phenomenology match up. For example: disgust, shame, anger and envy feel bad and represent their objects negatively, while happiness, excitement, elation,

¹³ I refrain from using the locutions “veridical” or “true” with respect to emotions, to avoid confusion with the way we talk about perceptions and beliefs. An emotion is (in)correct when it represents (in)correctly.

¹⁴ If one is not committed to a representational account, one can still accept this insufficiency claim but argue that evaluative component in non-representational (see: Deonna and Teroni (2012)).

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hopefulness and admiration feel good and represent their objects positively. Second, the intensity of the emotion is connected to the emotion's representational content, as the following example illustrates. Imagine a friend saying: "sure, what you did was shameful but not *that* shameful!". What explains such a statement is that the intensity of the shame I'm feeling is taken to be an expression of my shame representing my action as very shameful. Lastly, that these two aspects of emotions are related also fits well with both of them being means for differentiation between emotions – by how they feel or by the evaluative property they represent.¹⁵ Thus, emotions' phenomenology is a counterpart of their evaluative content, the two are inextricably intertwined, and part of what makes emotions what they are. This has led some to reject the attitude-content distinction when it comes to emotions (see Goldie (2000) and Mitchell (2019)) and provides additional support for emotions being always felt (1.1).

1.5 – The emerging view of emotions

Emotions, according to the picture above, are "felt evaluations" (see also Helm (2001), Goldie (2004), Mitchell (2021)). While other mental states can represent evaluative properties (such as a belief that the lioness is fearsome), emotions are unique in that: 1. They are always phenomenal, unlike evaluative beliefs. 2. Their phenomenology is affective – qualitatively different from that of perceptions and intuitions with the same content (if there are such perceptions or intuitions). 3. They are mental states that essentially represent these properties. I take all this to support the claim that emotions can provide us with an awareness (with affective phenomenology) of their intentional object's AEP.

¹⁵ My claim is neutral with respect to what explains this connection. Representational content can be that which determines phenomenology, as representationalists argue (for an introduction see Lycan, 2000) or it could be the other way around, as phenomenal intuitionism argues (for an introduction see Kriegel, 2013). My view is consistent with both accounts (with relevant qualifications and details).

2. Alegra, an Emotional Mary

In his original thought experiment, Frank Jackson (1982) asks whether Mary, who obtains all the physical information there is to obtain about colors, learns anything new upon experiencing color for the first time. Jackson poses this epistemic question en-route to a metaphysical conclusion vis-à-vis physicalism. I pose parallel questions to those posed by Jackson, with two significant differences. First, my protagonist, Alegra, experiences an emotion for the first time. Second, as opposed to Jackson's metaphysical focus, I am concerned with metasemantic conclusions and their epistemic implications. With this in mind, let me introduce Alegra.

Alegra was born to parents who decided to do everything they can to ensure that their child will have a happy life, much like most parents. However, they also made a radical decision. They decided that Alegra should never feel disgust. They made sure she was always given tasty foods, never introduced to bad tasting medicine, never saw a disgusting picture or encountered something that might disgust her. Her parents, incredibly, were successful and Alegra never felt disgust. However, her parents did teach her about disgusting things – rotting meat, vomit, stink bombs, disgusting ideas and behaviors, etc. They also taught her that people tend to feel something called disgust in such situations and tried to describe what it feels like. Being philosophically informed parents, they further taught her that disgust represents its objects as disgusting. Having grown up, Alegra was successful in labeling scenarios and objects as disgusting and in predicting whether people would tend to feel disgust in different situations. Alegra was a happy girl most of the time and admired her parents for their dedication. However, she also felt sad for being protected from an aspect of the world, unpleasant as it may be. On her 18th birthday, Alegra exercised her new legal rights

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and decided to leave the house without her parents protecting her from the disgusting.
Alegra, though cautious, ended up stepping on some dog poop on the sidewalk and
felt disgust for the very first time in her life. The next few hours outside occasioned
some more disgusting moments, as one could expect.

Intuitively, experiencing disgust affects the way Alegra can now conceive of disgust
and the disgusting – an intuition that bears directly on the two questions I am concerned with,
and highlights the unique role emotions have. Similar intuitions will arise, in my view, from
analogous scenarios that focus on other emotions. To see this, consider Goldie's (2002:244-
245) thought experiment:

Irene is an icy-cool ice-scientist. Being an ice-scientist, she knows all the
properties of ice. In particular, she has complete knowledge of the dangers that
can arise from walking on ice; show her any icy pond or lake and she will know
where the dangers lie. Yet she is icy-cool, and has never felt fear (far-fetched
perhaps, but no more than Mary and her black and white world; imagine that
Irene has been brought up in an incredibly coddled manner). Nevertheless, in
spite of this lack, she not only has a theoretical concept of dangerousness; she
also has a theoretical concept of fear, as being a sort of state that, roughly, plays
a causal role: people are typically afraid when they perceive dangerous things,
and they respond to fear by behaving in certain typical ways. Then, one day,
Irene goes out onto the ice, falls, and for the first time feels fear – fear towards
the dangerous ice.

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As will become clear, Goldie and I have different views about Irene’s and Alegra’s concepts FEAR and DISGUST, as well as DANGEROUSNESS and DISGUSTING. However, at this point, I’d like to use his example to emphasize that the arguments I will put forward are intended to reveal something general about emotions, and their relation to concepts of emotions and of AEPs, and not just disgust. Before I proceed, let me stress two more points. First, as Goldie notes, these scenarios might seem far-fetched.¹⁶ For example, with respect to disgust, some may think that Alegra must have been disgusted by her own excrements. This particular worry can be dismissed by noting that babies and toddlers in fact do not seem to be disgusted by their excrements (cf. Rottman, 2014). Disgust, generally and excrement-specific, occurs developmentally at a later age, owing (at least in part) to societal learning. We can thus imagine Alegra’s parents teaching her that dog poo is disgusting, but not her own.¹⁷ Similar concerns can be dispelled regarding Irene’s fear, and other emotions. Those who still find these thought experiments unbelievable can bracket them, as they do not do the heavy philosophical lifting in this paper. I invite Alegra-skeptics to treat these examples as vehicles intended to assist in homing-in on the relevant issues at hand – specific emotions and their relation to the concepts of the relevant emotions and AEPs they represent. It is these issues, not specifically whether Alegra learned anything, that are crucial. Second, I believe that my line of argument can be supported without any metaphysical commitments about the properties themselves. I am thus neutral about what sort of property *disgusting* is. With respect to what disgust is, I am not metaphysically neutral but will rely on the account of emotions introduced in section 1. Section 3 is devoted to the way emotions are related to thinking about emotions

¹⁶ I thank two anonymous reviewers for raising this concern.

¹⁷ These findings also call into question the “pathogen view” of disgust and *disgusting* (see 1.3).

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themselves, while section 4 is devoted to the way emotions are related to thinking about AEPs.

3. Thinking about disgust

I assume it will not be contested that Alegra experienced something new when she first felt disgust. Disgust is to her now a phenomenally distinctive mental state, which it was not before. This is similar to Mary having a new experience of seeing something as red. One may ask what difference this makes. The answer is that Alegra is now able to do some things she was unable to do beforehand. She can, for example, recognize an experience as disgust, and what it is like. Before feeling disgust, Alegra had several indirect ways to identify tokens of disgust: use her knowledge that disgust tends to arise in particular situations, that it represents these situations as disgusting, that it is associated with particular facial expressions, that people use the word “disgusting” when feeling it, etc. Now that she has experienced the specific way it feels, she has a new way of identifying disgust. In addition, she now has a new set of beliefs she could not have beforehand – first-person beliefs about the experience of disgust such as -disgust feels like *this*-.

In section 1 I argued that emotions are necessarily phenomenal and that their phenomenological content is tightly related to their representational content. Due to this, in my view, feeling disgust (or any other emotion) reveals the essential phenomenal nature of the emotion. This is similar to Johnston’s (1992) Revelation thesis according to which the essential nature of colors is revealed in color experience. Note that this claim is about the essence of the emotion itself being revealed, which is crucially different from claiming that feeling disgust reveals the nature of the property *disgusting* (see section 4). A consequence of this claim is that Alegra’s new way of identifying disgust, as opposed to her old ways, is a

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fail-safe way. If Alegra feels disgust, she can be certain that the emotion she is feeling is disgust.¹⁸

Some may object that instances in which someone says something like “I thought I was feeling disgust but in fact it was indignation” show that the fail-safe claim is too strong. This worry can be resisted in two ways. First, it may be the case that I felt disgust but upon reflection I understand that the object is not disgusting but rather offensive. Second, such sentences assume that indeed what one felt, felt like disgust. Perhaps it is possible that it wasn’t disgust after all, but the crucial thing for me is that it is transparent to one that *this feeling* is how disgust feels. If both replies are rejected, we can settle for less than 100% confidence while retaining the claim that feeling an emotion provides a direct way of referring to the emotion and its essential nature.

If the above is correct, an additional claim can be defended. Alegra, in-virtue-of feeling disgust, has acquired the concept DISGUST that she did not possess before. To explain this claim and argue for it, I must first provide a clear statement of how I understand concepts.

The way I am using the term “concept” in this paper is the way in which philosophers of emotions seem to be using the term (for example: Prinz, 2004: 23; Salmela, 2014: 25-7; Tappolet, 2016: 17, Döring, 2008: 91) – A Fregean inspired account, which also dominates the philosophy of perception (see Byrne, 2005: 232). Concepts, according to this view, are constituents of content (see Evans, 1982 and Crane, 1992).¹⁹ Being constituents of content, they are also inferentially relevant (as emphasized by Tappolet and Döring). Thus, concepts can be said to be constituents of the content of propositional attitudes.

¹⁸ This claim runs against Williamson’s (2000) Anti-Luminosity argument (for arguments against anti-Luminosity see: Berker (2008), Cohen (2010), Steup (2009)).

¹⁹ This is opposed to a psychological understanding of concepts, according to which concepts are mental entities, and more specifically, mental representations (see for example: Fodor, 1987).

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With concepts understood in the way outlined above, we can add that if someone lacks the concept C, she cannot have a thought in which C is a part. For example, I cannot have the thought *-that is a mountain-* if I do not possess the concept MOUNTAIN. Thus, possessing a concept is a psychological ability of predicating a concept in propositional thought (see Peacocke, 1992 and Deigh, 1994).

In what follows, I will be assuming this Fregean view about concepts and use the terms “concept” and “concept possession” in the ways I have described above. I will also be assuming that when we think about a property we employ a concept in thought, which requires acquiring and possessing it.

With this view of concepts in mind, I can turn to my argument against the possibility of Alegra possessing the concept DISGUST prior to feeling disgust. The argument rests on two claims: 1) the concept of an emotion is a partially phenomenal concept, and 2) one cannot possess a phenomenal concept without undergoing the relevant experience.

Let me start with claim 1. I argued in section 1 that emotions are essentially and necessarily phenomenal. Assuming I am right, the acquisition and possession conditions for a concept of an emotion should reflect this. Otherwise, the concept may very well refer to a mental state identical to emotions in its representational content (a belief or intuition, perhaps) that is not an emotion. Thus, the concept of an emotion, such as DISGUST, must necessarily be partly a phenomenal concept. Here it may be claimed that there are other ways to refer, track or pick out an emotion – by action tendencies, facial expressions, eliciting conditions or a relevant physical mechanism.²⁰ This seems false to me. First, no emotion is always accompanied by the relevant action tendencies and facial expressions, and many emotions seem hardly trackable by these means (see, for example: Feldman-Barrett, 2017: Ch. 3). Not so with the experience of the emotion, which is essential to it. That being said, I

²⁰ I thank two anonymous reviewers for this objection.

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 need not deny that there can be a scientific, theoretical (as Goldie calls it) or behavioristic concept of the emotion or that these aspects of emotions can be of interest. However, as Roberts (2003: 18-19, 28, 38-40) argues when discussing scientifically-oriented theories of emotions like Griffiths', emotions' significance in our lives has to do with their being mental states and mental structures of meaning. Other conceptions of emotions do not carve emotions in the right place or way. Such conceptions are helpful to our understanding of what an emotion is only if they can be interpreted in terms in which we experience our emotions (Ibid:54). The concept of an emotion-proper, cannot exclude its phenomenal aspect as a mental state – and it is thus (partly) phenomenal.²¹

Regarding the second claim, the thought that we can acquire a phenomenal concept by having the relevant experience seems straightforward. For example, some philosophers (Loar (1990), Lycan (1990), Tye (1995)) argue that what happens to Mary after being released is that she (only) acquires the phenomenal concept RED_{exp}, which she lacked before. Moving closer to home, Goldie (2002: 245-6) argues that Irene gains a new phenomenal concept of fear after feeling fear – a concept of what it is like to feel fear.

According to my view, the experience is not merely a way for us to acquire the phenomenal concept. Rather, it is necessary for acquiring it. The following group of examples supports this: a. an extreme version of Alegra, a creature completely devoid of emotions and related sensations, b. the way people with high-functioning autism are (misleadingly!) portrayed in popular culture, and c. the portrayal of sophisticated psychopaths in movies and TV. In all three examples, the agents lack the ability to recognize an emotion (or more than one) from a first-person perspective – they have never had the phenomenal experience of the relevant emotion. Consider Travis Bickle (De Niro's *Taxi Driver*). While he is certainly very well acquainted with the experience of anger and rage, he (let's assume)

²¹ I will shortly have more to say about what might be called “adjacent” concepts.

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has no experience of remorse. It seems clear that we will be reluctant to accredit him with the ability to *genuinely* think about the experience of remorse. In my view, what explains this reluctance is that he lacks the relevant phenomenal concept of what-remorse-is-like.

Alternatively, consider someone with a neurological condition that inhibits her from feeling a tickle. It seems completely counter-intuitive to claim that she has the phenomenal concept of what-a-tickle-is-like. Thus, if one lacks the experience, one does not possess the relevant phenomenal concepts.

Above I referred to the phenomenal concepts of the experience. This allows for the possibility of two different concepts, a phenomenal concept of the experience and another non-phenomenal concept. However, given my argument above – that the phenomenal component is essential to the concept of the emotion itself – I reject this possibility. My view is that lacking a phenomenal concept of disgust, entails lacking the concept DISGUST altogether. This also reveals a restriction on acquiring the concept of the emotion – acquiring it requires feeling the relevant emotion, being able to recognize it from within. This can be put in terms of the following necessary condition:

For any agent A, emotion E and emotion-concept C, for A to acquire C, A necessarily has had at least one experience of E.

The argument above entails that Alegra and the other agents could not have acquired the concepts of the relevant emotions. They do not have thoughts that employ the concept.²² Thus, Goldie is wrong to claim that Irene possessed a non-phenomenal concept of fear. Because FEAR necessarily has a phenomenal aspect, she did not possess FEAR.

This view is stronger than other possible views. A perhaps attractive alternative is to claim that even if I am right that concepts of emotions are phenomenal, one can still acquire

²² I am not claiming that they lack the concept EMOTION. They lack the concepts of specific emotions which the agents have not experienced. Plausibly, the emotionless creature lacks EMOTION (due to lack of any affective experience), but I leave this aside.

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them without feeling the emotion, but one would only have a partial grasp of it, or could not master it.²³ There is an ongoing debate whether experience is a necessary condition for acquiring and possessing phenomenal concepts, for mastering them, or not at all (Rabin (2019) provides an overview). The debate is tightly related to metaphysical issues (physicalism) and considering it in detail will lead us astray. Luckily, I can point at why I think these alternatives are false with respect to concepts of emotions without delving into metaphysics. While I agree that concepts of emotions can be more or less mastered or fully understood, I reject the possibility of acquiring them by deference, a move crucial for the alternatives. I reject this because the relation between a phenomenal concept and its referent is more intimate than a causal or tracking relation – phenomenal concepts are constituted by the relevant experiences (see Balog (2009: 306-309)). A token employment of a phenomenal concept in thought refers to the experience *because* it is constituted by the experience.²⁴

My argument calls for an explanation of the fact that we can think about the agents above as talking about emotions, and of my description of Alegra as having beliefs and thoughts about disgust. One possible explanation for this is that all these agents have concepts that fall short of being genuine emotion concept and are “emotion-adjacent”. My argument for emotion concepts being phenomenal provides one reason to not view these concepts as emotion-proper. Another reason arises from the constitution-relation I have just discussed. A genuine concept of an emotion necessarily refers to it as an experience, and therefore a concept that lacks the phenomenal aspect does not refer to the emotion per se. Another possible explanation is to understand these agents in a way analogous to Hare’s (1952: 124-6, 163-5) amoralist – someone who believes or accepts moral judgments but is in

²³ I thank two anonymous reviewers for this objection.

²⁴ Again (see note 22), this will be a specific experience, tightly related to the emotions’ representational content, as I argued in section 1. Thus, one cannot acquire the phenomenal concept of a specific emotion by somehow combining the concept of the relevant AEP and a concept of phenomenal experience in general or some other phenomenal concept one does possess (putting aside how such a “mixing” of concepts is supposed to work, noting that surely an inferential mixing is irrelevant here). One must undergo the specific experience.

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no way motivated by them. Hare argues that because motivation is intrinsic to moral judgements, the amoralist is not making genuine moral judgements, rather, he is making “inverted commas” moral judgments.²⁵ According to this understanding, the purported amoralist is using the same word, “wrong” (hence the name of the view), but he is expressing an outsider’s or anthropological-like judgment. Applied to our cases, when Alegra had beliefs about disgust, they were about the word “disgust”, which to her (before feeling disgust) meant something like “the emotion people feel when they step on poo” or “the emotion that is merited by stepping on poo”. Her utterances do not mean exactly what ours do.

4. Thinking about the disgusting

In the previous section I was concerned with how feeling emotions is related to conceiving of emotions and acquiring concepts of emotions. Nothing of what I have argued for thus far necessarily entails anything about AEPs, which I now turn to. Recall that as opposed to the metaphysical aim of Jackson’s thought experiment (with respect to the property *red*), I am concerned with epistemic and metasemantic questions regarding AEPs and the significance of feeling an emotion vis-à-vis thinking about them.

In this section I will argue that emotions are the basic way in which we refer to AEPs, making other forms of reference to AEPs parasitical on emotions. I will be arguing for the following necessary condition: for any agent A, if A can think about an AEP, this is in virtue of some agent B having felt the relevant emotion E. An emotion, according to my view, will play a necessary explanatory role in an agent’s ability to refer to AEPs. Put somewhat differently, the explanatory chain of reference to an AEP will necessarily include someone

²⁵ What explains this analogy in the case of emotions will not be Hare’s prescriptivist theory of moral language but rather the essential connection of our concepts of emotions to emotions’ phenomenology.

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having felt the emotion – the emotion (partially) explains the possibility of referring to the AEP. I will now turn to developing this argument and the relevant notion of basicness.

The starting point for my argument is to consider how Alegra comes to identify things as disgusting after feeling disgust. While from the outside it may seem that nothing has changed (she could identify disgusting things before feeling disgust), from the inside there is a substantial difference. Alegra can now think thoughts such as “disgusting things are those that make feeling *this* appropriate”, she can tell from the inside what disgust is, what it feels like, which gives her a way of thinking about the disgusting that she lacked before. Alegra has gained an important way of conceiving of the disgusting.

Upon further reflection we can see that this is more than just a way of conceiving of disgusting things. Disgust seems to have precedence as a way of conceiving of the disgusting. It seems clear, for example, that disgust and experiences of disgust were the guiding principle for Alegra’s parents when they were trying to pick examples of disgusting things. Likewise, when Alegra asked her parents what all the disgusting things have in common, it seems clear that their response will invoke disgust. The same precedence is reflected in the way we try to explain to our children whether something has an AEP – we invoke and refer to emotions. For example, when parents see that their child is frightened by a small dog, they tend to tell her: “I know you’re scared, but there is nothing to be afraid of, the dog isn’t scary”. On the other hand, if something scary does happen, they tell the child: “that was scary! I was afraid too”. Alternatively, think about a child disgusted by the “yucky broccoli”. In both cases the children are scared or disgusted but the parents’ reaction will have to do with whether the emotion is appropriate or not. Granted, parents may also talk about descriptive properties of

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the dog (as Deonna and Teroni (2012:95-98) would insist), like it's being small, but even when they do, this will be as part of the explanation of why the emotion is not appropriate.²⁶

The above allows for a very weak interpretation, according to which emotions are just the easiest way to pick the examples, to answer Alegria's questions or to teach children. I want to argue for a much stronger claim: emotions are not just *a* way to conceive of AEPs – they are *the basic way* we conceive of them.

4.1 – Emotions as the basic way we conceive of AEPs

In this subsection I will explain and develop the relevant notion of basicness which is invoked by the claim that emotions are the basic way we conceive of AEPs. Similar claims have been defended by others. For example, Deonna and Teroni (2012: Ch. 10) argue that justified emotions constitute a privileged epistemic route for evaluative judgments. Mitchell (2021: 66-68), who relies on Wiggins (1987), argues that emotions and evaluative properties are “made for each other” in that the one is immediately and intrinsically intelligible in terms of the other. Lastly, D'Arms and Jacobson (2022: 16-17) can be seen as arguing that emotions are the basic way we conceive of evaluative properties because the significance that such properties have can only be explained through human emotions. In my view, the claim that something is the basic way we conceive of a property is best put in metasemantic terms. The merits of this approach should be clear as we progress.

To put my approach in general terms, let W denote a way we conceive of a property F , and W_B denote a basic way we conceive of F . My view is that W is a basic way we conceive of property F iff and because W has explanatory and metasemantic precedence over other ways we conceive of F . The metasemantic precedence relevant to the notion of

²⁶ In the case of fear, parents may also say that the dog isn't dangerous. I'd like to note two things about this. First, even if they talk about danger, in instances such as this they will still also turn to the emotion. The dog not being dangerous will be used to explain why fear is not appropriate. Second, clearly parents will not talk about the broccoli lacking pathogens or turn to some other “objective” property. See my discussion in 1.3.

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basicness I am defining here is that of reference-fixing – W_B is basic because it fixes our reference in thought to F. Any account in the business of arguing that a way we have of conceiving of a property is the basic way we conceive of it should offer us: a. an explanation of why this is the case, and b. the consequences of this way being basic. I will not make any general claims regarding a. or b., but rather concentrate solely on emotions. I will argue that what explains emotions being the basic way we conceive of AEPs is an important connection emotions have to AEPs (a.). I will also argue that emotions being the basic way explains why we tend to form beliefs about AEPs by relying on emotions, and that beliefs about AEPs formed by relying on other methods will be explanatorily parasitical on emotions (b.).

I will start unpacking my claim by briefly presenting a similar picture with respect to perception, that should clarify (though not in itself support) the one I have in mind. There is something special about perceiving the perceptible – for example, colors. Perception seems to be able to provide us with a direct way in which we can have access to the color something has. This is why the grasp of color concepts bottoms out in perception. Emotions, in my view, have a similar role with respect to the affective-evaluative.²⁷ Consider the difference between believing that you have done something shameful (without feeling shame) and feeling shame about what you have done. In the first instance, one has a cold intellectual understanding; in the second, a hot, direct experience of the shamefulness of one's actions.²⁸ According to my view, there is something special about this direct experience that emotions can provide, which has to do with emotions being uniquely able to represent AEPs.

The argument in support of emotions being the basic way we conceive of AEPs, consists of three steps. In the first step, I will argue that although representing AEPs is tricky

²⁷ This is one of the claims made by Perceptualists in the philosophy of emotions, who advocate an analogy between emotion and perceptions (see for example: Döring, 2008 and Tappolet, 2016). That being said, while I cannot go into details here, the perceptualist view involves other crucial claims with which I disagree. Thus, this claim should not be understood as a commitment to or endorsement of the perceptualist view.

²⁸ As is clear from 1.2, emotions are to be understood as representational mental states, thus, this claim is not a naïve-realist claim according to which perceptions provide us with “direct awareness” of the properties.

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business, emotions are able to do so (4.1.1). In the second step I will establish that emotions have metasemantic precedence over other mental states that may refer to AEPs (4.1.2). The third step is the conclusion this argument entails (see 4.1.3): that having an emotion *E* is a necessary enabling condition for referring in thought to affective-evaluative property *F* (for any such property). Put as an explicit condition, I will be arguing that:

*For any agent A, AEP F, and emotion E(F) (F being E's formal object), if A can think about F, this is in virtue of some agent B having felt emotion E.*²⁹

4.1.1 – AEP representation, not as easy as it seems

In section 1.3 I argued that emotions represent AEPs and not merely non-evaluative properties. In this subsection I will argue that representing non-evaluative properties does not amount to representing AEPs. Thus, if a mental state represents an AEP, it cannot represent it solely in virtue of representing other properties. Given this conclusion, only mental states that can represent AEPs themselves are candidate mental states for being the basic way we conceive of AEPs. That emotions are not just a candidate but rather the best candidate for such a role will be my focus in the next subsection.

The claim above is reminiscent of the discussion in metaethics regarding whether evaluative concepts can be disentangled into a non-evaluative description that is co-extensive with the evaluative concept, plus an evaluation that provides the way the description is evaluated (see McDowell (1981 [1998]: 201-2)). According to McDowell, evaluative properties and concepts are *shapeless* with respect to the non-evaluative features that constitute the properties.³⁰ This entails that it is impossible to find a pattern between all of the

²⁹ This way of putting the condition allows for deferential refence – see 4.2.

³⁰ Many in the relevant literature slide from talk about properties to talk about concepts. I agree with Kirchin (2010: 8-9), that the argument is best seen as one that pertains to the concepts being shapeless, which motivates a tentative conclusion regarding the properties themselves.

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disjunctions of non-evaluative properties that constitute an evaluative property from a non-evaluative point of view – the concept of the evaluative property will outrun any non-evaluative characterization that could be given and it cannot be disentangled (Kirchin, 2010: 6). What I want to do now is to show that the shapelessness hypothesis applies to AEPs. To do this, I will reject the two types of disjunctions that can be claimed to be disentangled ways in which we represent AEPs.

Disjunction-Type 1: We represent AEP F by representing all (and only) F things.

Disjunction-Type 2: We represent AEP F by representing a disjunction of other properties of which F consists.

Disjunction-Type 1 – The claim that we can come to represent AEPs by representing all (and only) F-things can be rejected for three reasons. First (R1), when we consider that an AEP (such as *disgusting*) is represented, we in no way require that other (let alone all) disgusting things be represented. Second, (R2), given the creatures that we are, with our limited cognitive capabilities, we do not seem capable of entertaining complex thoughts that consist in the disjunction of all disgusting things. Third (R3), even if a disjunction is co-extensional with a property, representing the one does not amount to representing the other. This should be clear by considering (for example) that representing all and only equilateral triangles does not amount to representing those triangles as equiangular. Likewise, long before anyone knew that Broca’s area is a brain structure required for language processing, it was clear that people talked. Thus, one could refer in thought to all and only actual creatures that have a Broca’s area by thinking about creatures that talk. However, this would not amount to representing such creatures’ brains as including Broca’s areas.

Disjunction-Type 2 – The way in which R1 and R2 provide us with ground for rejecting type-1 disjunction applies (*mutatis mutandis*) to the claim that we represent AEP F by representing a disjunction of the properties of which F consists. In an earlier paper (Kenan, 2022), I defend

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an argument that provides another reason (R4) to reject the Type-2 disjunction. I argue that we can organize properties on a spectrum in terms of how complex it is to represent them. Properties that can be represented by relying on sense data alone will be on the “simple” side of the complexity spectrum. At the other end of the spectrum are “representationally-complex properties”. What makes such properties representationally complex is that they are representationally irreducible. A property is representationally irreducible if representing it requires representing something over-and-above properties that are nonetheless necessary for representing it. Representing something as a tree, for example, requires representing something over-and-above representing a large green-topped brown cylinder with branches of such-and-such size and shape. This makes it representationally-complex.

In that paper, I further argue that evaluative properties are clearly representationally-complex. The argument behind this claim runs similar to some of my claims above – we can easily think about representing all the non-evaluative properties of an offensive act, without representing the act as offensive. In addition, it is possible for mental state M_1 to represent act A as offensive and for mental state M_2 to not represent it as such, while holding constant the non-evaluative properties that are represented. Thus, representing a disjunction of properties does not amount to representing an evaluative property, even if the evaluative property metaphysically supervenes on the disjunction – metaphysical supervenience does not entail representational supervenience (Kenan, 2022:7). If this is correct, even a creature that could entertain the type-II disjunction would not be representing the property *disgusting* in-virtue of representing the disjunction.³¹

Thus, according to this argument, representing disjunctions of non-evaluative properties will not amount to representing AEPs, which entails that we do not represent AEPs

³¹ This claim is different from arguing against a metaphysical reduction of AEPs to long disjunctions, nor does it entail any metaphysical claims.

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solely in virtue of representing non-evaluative properties. Coupled with the *irreducibility* argument from above, this leads to the conclusion that while representing non-evaluative properties seems necessary for representing AEPs, it is insufficient.

We thus have four reasons that support the conclusion that there is no fully descriptive way to think of properties such as *disgusting*.³² Two of these reasons (R1, R2) may turn out to be a function of contingent facts about human psychology, but they are important nonetheless. The latter reasons (R3, R4) reveal that after non-evaluative representations are accounted for, there remains a gap to be filled for an evaluative property to be represented. Thus, the shapelessness hypothesis applies to AEPs. This gap entails two things. First, a mental state that represents AEPs must be itself capable of representing evaluative properties and not only non-evaluative properties. Second, we need an explanation of how it is that we bridge the gap and come to refer to AEPs and acquire these shapeless concepts. Enter emotions.

4.1.2 – *Emotions fix reference to AEPs*

If mental states with non-evaluative contents cannot represent AEPs, the only relevant candidates for representing such properties, let alone being the basic way we conceive of AEPs, are mental states that can themselves represent AEPs. By “themselves” I mean that it is the relevant mental state that bridges the gap left by non-evaluative representations. Emotions, I have argued in section 1, are mental states that indeed can represent AEPs themselves. Benbaji (2015: 175) refers to this as “emotional awareness”, meaning an awareness of the determinate features of an evaluative property, features that cannot be

³² See also D’Arms and Jacobson (2022: 64) for related arguments against the possibility of cashing out concepts of such properties in non-evaluative terms.

Penultimate draft. Please cite published version: *Synthese* 207:16 (2026). spelled out in terms of non-evaluative concepts.³³ Thus, emotions fit the bill. However, evaluative intuitions and evaluative perceptions arguably can represent AEPs themselves as well. Granting this, for the sake of the argument, we need a reason to believe that it is emotions, not other mental states, that are the basic way we conceive of AEPs. I now turn to arguing that emotions fix reference to AEPs, and therefore have such metasemantic precedence.

Thus far I have been able to steer clear of metaphysical questions regarding AEPs. However, in establishing emotions' precedence over other mental states, we must start with the possible (general) analyses of such properties. For my purposes we can differentiate between two analyses.³⁴ According to the first analysis, AEPs are mind-dependent, in that their existence depends in some essential way on the mental states of human beings. According to the second, AEPs are mind-independent, in that their existence does not depend on such mental states.

There is virtually only one mind-dependent theory on the market – Sentimentalism – according to which AEPs depend upon emotions.³⁵ If this is the case, emotions clearly have metasemantic precedence over the other mental states in fixing reference to AEPs, much like perception does if colors are mind-dependent and metaphysically depend on color perception.

Matters are less straightforward if AEPs are mind-independent. Turning to a standard problem in metasemantics will allow me to show that emotions trump intuitions and evaluative-perceptions even if AEPs do not metaphysically depend on emotions. The problem I have in mind is how to distinguish content-determining tokenings from mere accidental

³³ I agree with this general characterization. However, Benbaji seems to think that for something to provide awareness of property F is for it to provide awareness of the property's nature. I do not intend such a strong use of "awareness".

³⁴ I put aside skeptical or error-theory accounts of AEPs, frameworks that make the question I am trying to answer irrelevant.

³⁵ This claim is supported by the fact that Sentimentalism is the only mind-dependent view that get extensively discussed in Deonna and Teroni's (2012: Ch.4) textbook about the philosophy of emotions, which naturally aims to be quite exhaustive. The same can be said regarding Tappolet's book on emotions (2016: Ch. 3).

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 tokenings. There is widespread debate about how to solve this problem, which I will not attempt to solve. What I want to do is exploit the distinction between content-determining tokenings and non-content-determining tokenings.

The way to ascertain which tokenings are content-determining is to ask ourselves what happens in cases where different tokening-types come apart. For our purposes this translates into asking what happens when the way the world is represented as being by intuitions and evaluative perceptions comes apart from the way it is represented by emotions.³⁶ Take, for example, a scenario in which one feels shame about a racist remark and contrast it with an evaluative intuition (or perception) that represents the remark as benign. We can see that emotions, and not misaligned intuitions (or perceptions) are the right kind of state to fix the reference to *shameful* by examining how we cash out the content for the concept SHAMEFUL. We talk about something being shameful iff it makes shame fitting. Thus, the content of the concept makes irreducible reference to the emotion. It would be strange if the emotion were not the reference fixer of the AEP, but another mental state to which the concept makes no reference.³⁷ Thus, we have strong reasons to argue that emotion tokenings are content-determining with respect to AEPs, which gives emotions metasemantic precedence over other mental states.

4.1.3 – *Emotions as the basic way – conclusion*

In this section I was concerned with providing an account of how we come to conceive of AEPs and acquire concepts of AEPs. We have established that: 1) Concepts of AEPs are shapeless. 2) Non-evaluative representations do not amount to representing an

³⁶ Note two things. First, usually these ways are aligned. Second, if they come apart systematically, this entails that intuitions and evaluative perceptions do not represent the same properties as emotions, meaning that they do not represent AEPs, which emotions do, ex-hypothesi. If that is the case, intuitions and evaluative-perceptions necessarily are not the basic way we conceive of AEPs.

³⁷ Note that even if SHAMEFUL is cashed out in terms of an intuition (understood as a non-belief state) that shame is apt, this still makes irreducible reference to shame.

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AEP, leaving a representational gap. 3) Emotions can bridge the representational gap by being able to represent AEPs themselves. 4) Emotions fix reference to our concepts of AEPs. I can now present the conclusions that arise from the arguments in this section.

First, it is by turning to emotions that we can group together different things as having the same AEP. Thus, emotions fix reference to AEPs, giving them metasemantic precedence over other mental states. Now, because once semantic meaning is fixed it remains the same across possible worlds, this metasemantic precedence entails that emotions play a necessary explanatory role in conceiving of AEPs. According to the resulting picture, evaluative-perceptions, intuitions and beliefs about AEPs are explanatorily parasitical on emotions, even when no token emotion is involved in the token perception, intuition or belief.

Second, token mental states that do not themselves represent AEPs obviously cannot play a necessary explanatory role in the acquisition of concepts of AEPs. The same is true with respect to mental states that can represent AEPs themselves but are dependent on emotions to do so, because they are explanatorily parasitical on emotions in this regard. Thus, emotions play a necessary explanatory role in the acquisition of concepts of AEPs.

All this amounts to the conclusion we are after – emotions are the basic way we conceive of AEPs, a necessary enabling condition for our conceiving of AEPs and for acquiring the concepts that refer to AEPs.

4.2 – Alegria, feeling disgust and thinking about the disgusting

Returning to Alegria and discussing her situation in light of my arguments I will help clear up some possible complexities and questions. It will thus be a helpful way of concluding this section and demonstrating the crucial metasemantic role emotions play and its epistemic implications. I will address two questions we need to ask ourselves with respect

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 to Alegra: 1) what explains Alegra being able to think about *disgusting* in the first place, and
 2) what she gains from feeling disgust.

Alegra, I assumed, can think and have beliefs about *disgusting* and thus has the concept DISGUSTING, prior to feeling disgust. This may seem to contradict my conclusion that emotions play a necessary explanatory role with respect to conceiving of AEPs and acquiring the relevant concepts. However, recall that the condition I was defending is that for any subject A, if A can think about an AEP, this is in virtue of some subject B having felt the relevant emotion E. This necessary condition allows for B to be identical to A, or for A and B to differ. When A and B are not identical, we are looking at an instance of deferential reference. This is what happens with Alegra. Her reference to *disgusting* succeeds, and she was able to acquire the concept in the first place, by relying on her parents having felt disgust. It is an instance of a social division of labor that allows for deferential reference and for acquiring concepts deferentially, like the speaker in Burge's (1979) arthritis example. In the drastically non-paradigmatic example of Alegra, it is not her emotions but rather her parents' emotions that play the key role in the explanatory chain of her beliefs and concept acquisition. Those who are not brought up as Alegra was acquire such concepts by feeling the relevant emotion. Put differently, feeling the relevant emotion is necessary for one to non-parasitically acquire and possess a concept of an AEP. Whether parasitically or not, in both cases emotions explain the possibility of thinking about AEPs.

Acknowledging the possibility of deferential reference to AEPs raises two issues. First, one might object that I am being inconsistent – I rejected deferential acquisition of genuine emotion concepts in section 3 but accept it with respect to AEPs. There is no such inconsistency here. Assuming that a plausible default position nowadays is to accept deferential reference and concept acquisition, what needs motivating is rejecting deference. The motivation for rejecting deference in section 3 was that the division-of-labor view is

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 implausible for phenomenal concepts – we cannot have deferential phenomenology. The concept of an emotion is necessarily and constitutively phenomenal, and thus, to acquire the concept, the agent herself must feel the emotion. However, my argument that emotions fix reference to AEPs does not entail that concepts of AEPs are phenomenal, nor have I argued that they are. The motivation for rejecting deference with respect to concepts of emotions does not generalize to concepts of AEPs, allowing for deferential reference to AEPs.³⁸

Second, the possibility of deferential reference may raise the following objection. Why think that emotions have the necessary explanatory role I am advocating if Alegra could simply refer to AEPs by thinking something like -the properties that are the focus of this paper-? I grant that such reference is possible. However, a thought like the one above merely refers to something else that refers to AEPs, and does not refer to them directly. Had this paper been concerned with Care Bears, the thought would refer to Care Bears rather than to AEPs. Such ways of referring to AEPs cannot plausibly be what fixes our reference to AEPs, which is what I am concerned with. The same rationale explains why mental states whose AEP content is deferential or parasitical cannot fix reference to AEPs.

Emotions are what explains Alegra's ability to think about *disgusting* in the first place. This is sufficient for emotions to have a crucial role in her ability to think about *disgusting*. Emotions' role is further vindicated by moving to what she gains after feeling disgust. Alegra now has a direct way of thinking about and referring to *disgusting*. This direct way is epistemically significant in two ways. First, it means that she is no longer an outsider who would fail to group new possibly disgusting things by relying on non-evaluative data (the outrunning element in the shapelessness hypothesis). She no longer needs someone else to tell her why this new example is disgusting; she can feel it. She can now be far more

³⁸ The fact that most philosophers (including some I have discussed) who argue for deferential reference do so with respect to concepts of properties, and not of experiencing these properties, should not be taken as evidence that my rationale does extend to concepts of the properties. In fact, I think it is a merit of my account that it shows that the possibility of deferential reference differs between these two types of concepts.

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confident in her ability to recognize the relevant patterns in a meaningful way. Second and related, she can now have a much deeper understanding of the concept DISGUSTING.³⁹ This may affect the justification she has for her beliefs, much like gaining expertise is likely to affect justification for beliefs about the relevant objects. Thus, feeling disgust can have positive epistemic effects on Alegra's beliefs about disgusting things, despite her having known all there was to descriptively know about *disgusting*.

5. Conclusion – The Significance of the Emerging View

Emotions, according to the account I have argued for in this paper, are of unique metasemantic importance. By considering the epistemic effects that feeling disgust had on Alegra, we have seen that emotions are important both vis-à-vis our ability to conceive of emotions themselves and to conceive of affective-evaluative properties. This, I have claimed, is a result of the nature of emotions and the way they are related to AEPs, independently of a metaphysical account of AEPs. However, a difference emerged between the role emotions play in conceiving of emotions and in conceiving of AEPs.

With respect to conceiving of emotions, an issue virtually unaddressed in the literature on the philosophy of emotions, I have claimed that feeling an emotion reveals its essence qua a phenomenal mental state. This also entails that one cannot acquire concepts of emotions without having felt them (pace Goldie, 2002). Deferential reference to an emotion qua an experience is impossible. One can only think about them in an inverted-commas sort of way.

With respect to conceiving of AEPs, I have argued that emotions are the *basic way* we conceive of AEPs. The relevant notion of basicness is that of metasemantic and explanatory

³⁹ I am here in agreement with Kauppinen (2024:16) and Deonna and Teroni (2022: 19-20) who argue that a creature devoid of feelings will fail to fully understand evaluative judgments it makes. However, my emphasis is on what explains the possibility of making such judgments in the first place.

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 precedence over other ways of conceiving of AEPs. The metasemantic argument I put forth explains how emotions play the role of grouping together different things that are non-evaluatively shapeless. They bridge the gap between the non-evaluative and the evaluative and fix our reference to AEPs. Emotions thus figure in the “origin-story” of the generation of concepts of AEPs and are necessary for acquiring such concepts.⁴⁰ Following Pettit (1991: 609), according to whom a concept whose reference is fixed by an attitude is a response-dependent concept, we can conclude that concepts of AEPs are response-dependent.⁴¹

Emotions being the basic way we conceive of AEPs explains why we tend to form beliefs about AEPs by relying on emotions. In addition, it makes beliefs about AEPs formed by other ways explanatorily parasitical on emotions in the following way. While having an occurrent belief about an AEP does not require feeling an occurrent emotion, the very possibility to have such a belief is in virtue of an emotion somewhere down the causal-explanatory chain. This is evident in the case of Alegra and her deferentially acquiring concepts of AEPs and referring to them. The explanatory chain of such deferential reference will necessarily include an emotion felt by the deferred-to agent. Thus, one of my points in this paper is to emphasize that although emotions are certainly not the only way we can conceive of AEPs and refer to them, they nevertheless are the *basic way* we do and thus play a necessary explanatory role with respect to *any* way that we conceive of AEPs.

My account can be seen as providing a specific and novel addition to the endeavor to explain how emotions and evaluative properties are connected. Various accounts have been put forward, drawing from different accounts of emotions – most notably those of de Sousa (1987), Wiggins (1987), D’Arms and Jacobson (2000, 2023), Deonna and Teroni (2012,

⁴⁰ Thus, my account entails substantive commitments that make it inconsistent with a view according to which emotions represent AEPs in virtue of diachronic cognitive penetration that requires possessing the concepts before one can have an emotion.

⁴¹ Pettit (1991) argues for a global response-dependence of concepts. In his view, all basic concepts that we learn by examples, including those of completely objective properties, are response-dependent. I do not intend to make such a strong global claim.

Penultimate draft. Please cite published version: *Synthese* 207:16 (2026). 2022), Tappolet (2016), Mitchell (2021), and Kauppinen (2024). Although I cannot go into the details of these accounts, let me offer some comparisons that should assist in summarizing my account and its merits.

These views and mine all share the claim that emotions are essential in some way for our epistemic access to evaluative properties. What explains emotions having this role is what differs between the views. For example, for D'Arms and Jacobson, AEPs, which they call "sentimental values" are themselves response-dependent.⁴² Although they argue that even if the properties themselves are not response-dependent, they are of interest only because of the way they are related to human responses (2022: Ch.2), they clearly think that an account which 'merely' provides an epistemic relation is lacking in an important sense (p. 17). By contrast, I have argued that the metasemantic relation provides all that is needed and is preferable because it comes with no metaphysical implications. According to my account, emotions (the response) are the way we conceive of AEPs, even if AEPs are not constituted by our response (see Cuneo, 2001: 581).⁴³

The view that concepts of AEPs are response-dependent is advocated by some of the philosophers mentioned above (see also: Vanello, 2019; Wedgwood, 2007: 226-7). However, they either seem to assume that this is the case (Tappolet, 2016: Ch.3; Deonna and Teroni, 2022) or take a detour to explain why this is the case – for example, Wiggins' (1987) speculative evolutionary story, or D'Arms and Jacobson's turning to sentiments as a bridge between emotions and AEPs (2022: Ch. 2). By contrast, my account provides a clear and direct analysis of the claim that "emotions guide the application of concepts" of AEPs (Deonna and Teroni, 2022:19); the response-dependence of such concepts is a result of emotions' reference-fixing and necessary explanatory roles. Lastly, let me emphasize where

⁴² In some places it seems that Deonna and Teroni assume a fitting-attitudes analysis of these properties (2012:45, 2022:13), while in others they seem to not endorse such a view.

⁴³ See also Yablo (1995) and Wedgwood (2004) for arguments that response-dependence of concepts does not entail metaphysical response-dependence.

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 my account differs from Goldie's (2000, 2002), Mitchell's (2021), Deonna and Teroni's (2022), and Kauppinen's (2024), which all come close to some of my claims regarding emotions and AEPs.⁴⁴

Goldie and Mitchell view emotions as felt evaluations (or feelings towards value), much like I do. Goldie takes this to entail that experiencing emotions is necessary for fully understanding the relevant values. In his view, there is a difference not just in attitude but in content between an emotional experience of something as dangerous and a belief (2000:59-61). Setting aside the difficulty in explaining what this difference is (see Mitchell, 2021:103-106), this claim is weaker than my metasemantic precedence claim.

Mitchell and I share the focus on the experience of having an emotion and emotions' essential phenomenal component, while differing considerably in terms of approach and aims. Mitchell focuses on the first-person perspective and the "manifest image" of emotions (2021:3). My arguments do not pertain to the experience of having an emotion but rather to the roles emotions have vis-à-vis AEPs from a zoomed-out, meta-semantic point of view. The difference between our approaches is also reflected in the fact that Mitchell presents an emotional version of Mary only as part of his rejecting the "content priority view" (p. 82-83). In this context he addresses the question of how emotions are related to concept possession only in passing, while this is the main concern of my paper.⁴⁵ This conceptual element of my account is what enables explaining the role emotions have vis-à-vis concepts of AEPs as the basic role of reference fixing.

Deonna and Teroni (2022:18-19, 83) and Kauppinen (2024) do address concept possession. However, Deonna and Teroni argue that emotions are necessary for

⁴⁴ I thank an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to clarify these differences.

⁴⁵ This difference of approaches can also be seen in Mitchell's short discussion of the response-dependence of evaluative concepts, where he emphasizes the he is not concerned with the conditions for correct applications of these concepts but rather with the way evaluative properties are experienced as having the power to motivate affectivity (2021: 174).

Penultimate draft. Please cite published version: *Synthese* 207:16 (2026). *understanding* these concepts and mastering them (2012:83). Kauppinen, in a somewhat similar fashion, argues that emotions are necessary for *fully grasping* concepts of AEPs. Both these claims are much weaker than the role I ascribe to emotions – that of reference-fixing. This is because, in my view, had it not been for emotions, we could not acquire these concepts at all; whereas, according to their views, we could. Thus, in my terms, their accounts do not deliver metasemantic precedence. In addition, two tenets in Kauppinen’s account explain and motivate his claim that “fully grasping” a value via an emotion reveals its essence’s: a. evaluative properties are essentially action and attitude guiding, and b. emotions are motivational and directive. If one (like me) remains neutral regarding the nature of evaluative properties and emotions’ motivational role, the “essence claim” (and thus “fully grasping”) seem unmotivated and too strong. Thus, although we agree that the phenomenal aspect of emotions is of great importance, we are concerned with very different roles that emotions play. Note, however, that my account does not contradict the claim that emotions are (also) necessary for grasping AEPs.

I would like to end by highlighting two epistemic implications of my account. First, feeling emotions is necessary for knowing propositions regarding emotions-proper. One cannot know propositions in which genuine emotion concepts figure without them. Emotions also play a necessary explanatory role in knowing propositions about AEPs. The epistemic implication of this view pertains to justification emotions can provide. If beliefs formed by relying on emotions are to acquire their justification in some direct way from the emotions they are based on, it seems crucial that the content of these beliefs and of emotions match. My account supports this content-matching claim and offers an explanation for it: concepts of AEPs are tightly related to emotions and figure both in the content of emotions and in the beliefs’ content. To conclude, the characterization of emotions’ metasemantic role provides us with a clear analysis of the way emotions are related to evaluative properties. Coupled

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with the resulting epistemic conclusions, it also establishes a ground for developing an account of the way emotions justify beliefs, which is a matter for another day.

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