



Objectless Emotions

Roger Lamb

Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Vol. 48, No. 1. (Sep., 1987), pp. 107-117.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0031-8205%28198709%2948%3A1%3C107%3A0E%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Z>

Philosophy and Phenomenological Research is currently published by International Phenomenological Society.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ips.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Objectless Emotions

ROGER LAMB

University of Queensland

In what follows, I begin by discussing the kinds of emotions there are, where kinds are determined by reference to the various relations emotions may be thought to have to intentionality. I then turn to a discussion of one of those kinds and suggest that some of its members have a curious meta-physical status.

1. In one of his early articles on emotion,¹ Irving Thalberg claims that there are some “emotions² like depression, euphoria, apathy and the like” that are not “*about* something” and that “depression, euphoria, and total apathy have no objects.”³ In support of this claim, he writes:

I said that *depression, euphoria, and total apathy* “*have no objects.*”⁴ Grammar partly explains my meaning: We can say of someone that he is depressed, euphoric, or apathetic *simpliciter*; and there is no use for phrases like “So-and-so is depressed (euphoric, apathetic) that (about, with, at, over, on account of). . . .” [But] we cannot say “John hopes,” “John simply resents,” or “John suspects.” John must hope for something, or that something will or did happen; he must bear a grudge against, or feel misgivings toward, somebody. I need more than grammar to explain how embarrassment, worry, and anticipatory pleasure have objects; for it is quite correct to say, *tout court*, “John is embarrassed (worried, delighted).” However, it is a grammatical fact that there is a use for questions of

¹ Irving Thalberg, “Emotion and Thought,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (January 1964): 45-55; reprinted first in *Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Stuart Hampshire (Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 201-25; and again in an abridged form in *What is an Emotion?: Classic Readings in Philosophical Psychology*, ed. C. Calhoun and R. C. Solomon (Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 291-304. Page references which follow are to the APQ version.

² *Ibid.*, p. 46a. Thalberg discusses his use of ‘emotion’ in this article in the following passage: “For expository convenience I plan to stretch the label ‘emotion’ to fit a heterogeneous assortment of reactions, moods, appetites, inclinations, aversions, desires, and attitudes, as well as emotions in the strict sense [?!], like rage and disappointment” (*Ibid.*, p. 45b). For the purposes of this paper I will be adopting Thalberg’s “stretched” use of ‘emotion’.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴ My emphasis.

the form, “What is he embarrassed (worried, delighted) about?” “Is he embarrassed (worried, delighted) that (with, etc.) . . . ?” . . .

We have, then, emotions which *cannot*⁵ take objects (depression, free-floating anxiety); emotions which must take objects (hope); and emotions which may . . . have objects (embarrassment).⁶

What can be said about these ideas?

2.1 First of all, it *is* true, as Thalberg claims, that we can say of someone that he or she is depressed, etc., *simpliciter*, and this does seem to be a point in *deep* grammar (unlike the superficially similar point about embarrassment above); yet it is manifestly *not* true that “there is no use for phrases like ‘So-and-so is depressed (euphoric, apathetic) that (about, with, at, over, on account of). . . .’” It may be quite useful, as for example in attempting to explain the actions of *S* and *J*, to suppose that *S* is depressed about the state of the market, or that *J* is depressed over the state of his marriage. It is thus, rather evidently, not a necessary feature of depression that it have no object. Instead, as implied above, it is a necessary feature that, taken as a type, its instances (= tokens) *can* have objects; and also, of course, a necessary feature that its instances *can* be objectless. And we have to *look to the instances*, not just to the type, to determine which sort of case we have before us.

Assuming with Thalberg that they are all regardable as ‘emotions’, I suggest that we should, and indeed that we often naturally do, regard those *instances* of such emotions as depression, euphoria, anxiety, etc., which instances are in fact objectless, as ‘moods’. On this suggestion, some emotion-*instances* are (additionally) moods. Some are not. Those that are *not* are the ones that *do* have objects. Thus, *sometimes* the emotion of depression is, as well, a mood; sometimes it is not.

2.2 Secondly, according to Thalberg as already cited there are *three* kinds of emotions:

⁵ My emphasis. If it should be supposed that (or even wondered whether) Thalberg, in talking about depression, euphoria, and total apathy, has only intended instances of these phenomena, this sentence with its “cannot” should settle the issue in the negative. In this connection it is also fair to draw (or even force) readers’ attention specifically to that earlier remark in the first paragraph of this passage which goes: “and there is no use for phrases like ‘So-and-so is depressed (euphoric, apathetic) that (about, with, at, over, on account of). . . .’”

All the same it is difficult to avoid the supposition that, in Thalberg’s remarks here, there is some unfortunate slippage between tokens of and types of emotion; for supposition of slippage explains the presence of the more radically mistaken of his claims.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47a.

- (1) emotions which *cannot* take objects — exemplified by depression, euphoria, and apathy. [Yet, as will now be evident, the case has not been made (nor is it easily makable) that there are any members of such a kind.]
- (2) emotions which *may* (or may not) have objects. [One must agree that there is such a (non-null) kind as this one, and can disagree only with Thalberg's examples of members of this kind. Whereas he initially puts forward embarrassment, worry, anticipatory pleasure, and delight as examples, it seems instead that his putative examples of (1), viz., depression, euphoria and apathy — and possibly some others, for example fear — are better regarded as examples of (2); and that Thalberg's supposed examples of (2) should, in fact, be better regarded as examples of (3).]
- (3) emotions which *must* take objects. [For it is not just that "there is a use for questions of the form 'What is he embarrassed (worried, delighted) about?'," but that there is such a use in every case. People do not ever worry without worrying about something, are never delighted without being delighted about something, and are never embarrassed without being embarrassed about something.]

So, in summary, the claim here is that the divisions are not as Thalberg has them in the passage cited: i.e., they are not between emotions which "cannot take objects," "emotions which must take objects," and "emotions which may . . . have objects"; rather, *the* division is simply between emotions which must take objects and those which may. Moreover, those *tokens* of the various emotional-types capable of being objectless which are in fact objectless are properly additionally regarded as *moods*.

3.1 It is worth noting at this juncture what at first appears to be a third view on the related questions of kinds of emotions and objectless emotions, one presented at approximately the same historical time as Thalberg's, viz., that of Anthony Kenny in *Action, Emotion, and Will* (1963):

- (A) The most (A) important difference between a sensation and an emotion is that emotions, unlike sensations, are *essentially* directed to objects. . . . It is not in general possible to ascribe a piece of behaviour or a sensation to a particular emotional state without at the same time ascribing an object to the emotion. . . .⁷

⁷ My emphasis. Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will* (Routledge & Kegan Paul,

On one natural interpretation of the first claim in (A), this would constitute a third distinct view. For one might well read it as saying that *all* emotions are like Thalberg's *third* variety. It would follow that Thalberg's account is overly complex; and so also the one favored here, though it less so.

By way of entertaining a possible counter-example to the 'essentially directed'-claim, Kenny considers depression:

- (B) But are (B) there not objectless emotions, such as pointless depression and undirected fears? . . . There are indeed such emotions. . . . We are often unaccountably depressed, on days when for no reason everything seems black; *but pointless depression is not objectless depression, and the objects of depression are the things which seem black.*⁸

And to this point the "natural interpretation" survives, for in this passage Kenny does not, in fact, allow that a genuine counter-example is forthcoming from an examination of depression. "Pointless depression," he says, is not "objectless depression."

He is clearly right about one thing: when one is deeply depressed, 'everything can seem black'. Then should we agree further with him that 'all those things that seem black' *are* the many *objects* of the depression? To force rational assent to this *further* proposition, *further* argument or discussion would be required. For there is at least one compelling alternative to this conclusion, and that is: that 'everything's seeming black' to us in the midst of certain of our more profound depressions can simply be regarded as a name for, or a representation of, a recognizable characteristic or feature of such depression, a feature that must, logically, be present if the phenomenon in question is to count as both profound, and *non-directed*, depression.⁹ Thus, the presence of this feature will involve the fact that there is no ('particular') object for such depression — i.e., we may not be depressed *about* anything ('in particular'). The expression 'everything seems black' will, as Kenny implies, be appropriately used on these occasions with respect to our experience (even though such use has misled at least one philosopher). Yet, use of this expression should *not* be taken as indicating that we are depressed *about* quite a large number of things (as if, for example, many calamities had befallen us at approxi-

1963), p. 60.

⁸ My emphasis. *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

⁹ Gosling's suggestion is simpler (but slightly less plausible): ". . . 'things look black to me' may . . . be just another way of saying that I feel depressed. . . . 'He is depressed because *everything* (my emphasis) looks black to him' is on a par with 'he is taller than you because he overtops you.'" [J. C. Gosling, "Emotion and Object," *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 494-95.]

mately the same time). *Nor*, certainly, need it be taken to mean that we are quite literally depressed about *every thing*, i.e., about all things (however those around us might be supposed to make sense out of that)!

But Kenny's general discussion about the possibility of objectless emotion is not confined to his remarks about depression. Also relevant is his adjacent discussion, anticipated above in (B), of fear, but more specifically, of what he calls "neurotic fear."

- (C) Still, there (C) are cases where we are afraid, but afraid of nothing, or of something, but we know not what. Perhaps we awake in the morning with a sinking feeling, and a loose and general sense of dread; only later do we remember a dangerous task to be performed. . . . [this] experience may be described in physical terms or emotional terms. If the former, then it is possible that it may later turn out to be some emotion other than fear (e.g. if the thought later occurring is of some disastrous mistake already made). If the latter, then the emotional terms derive their appropriateness from the fact that the physical sensation was later followed by the anticipation of ill. To be sure, the words 'I am afraid' may well have come into the subject's mind before the thought of the future danger; but if such words occurred to him regularly divorced from all such context, they would gradually lose their meaning. *In the case of the neurotic fear*, the neurosis is described as 'fear' partly because the verbal behaviour of the neurotic echoes the utterances of those who have ordinary object-directed fears, partly because immobilisation is part of the behaviour pattern of non-neurotic fears of certain objects. The use of the word 'fear' in such cases is therefore dependent upon its use in cases where fear has an object.¹⁰

It is reasonably clear from the last two sentences in this passage that Kenny does concede that tokens of fear *are* sometimes genuinely objectless — even if he does not do so with respect to any cases whatever of depression. (His 'criteriological' account of fear, which is his ultimate defense of the 'essentially directed'-claim and which allows the otherwise curious concatenation in (A) of "essentially" and "in general" need not concern us here.) Thus, on a more general level, Kenny's views — firstly about fear and secondly about emotions generally as found in (A) — can be seen as committing him *to the views advanced here*, viz.: (i) that some *tokens* of certain emotion-types are genuinely objectless, and (ii) that no *emotion-types* are (such that all of their tokens are) objectless.

3.2 While the third view, alluded to above, ultimately fails to surface in Kenny, it does make its appearance more recently in Solomon's *The Passions* (1976).

Emotions are *about* something. . . . Following recent phenomenological tradition, this feature of emotions can be called their *intentionality*; that is, all emotions are *about* something.¹¹

¹⁰ My emphasis. Kenny, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-62.

Solomon's own treatment of the test case that some depressions seem to pose for this thesis is interestingly different from Kenny's.

Moods are generalized emotions: An emotion focuses its attention on more-or-less particular objects and situations, whereas a mood enlarges its grasp to attend to *the world as a whole*, typically without focusing on any particular object or situation. Depression, for example, is aimed at *the world in general*. . . .¹²

In a later passage he enlarges the scope of this kind of statement beyond that of depression to include euphoria and melancholy.

There are passions which . . . need not be about anything in particular; these are moods. The difference between an emotion and a mood is the difference in what they are about. Emotions are about particulars, or particulars generalized; moods are about nothing in particular, or sometimes they are about *our world as a whole*. Euphoria, melancholy, and depression are not about anything in particular . . . they are about *the whole of our world*. . . .¹³

Whereas Kenny attempts to save the intentionality thesis (with respect to apparently objectless depressions) by urging that when "we are . . . unaccountably depressed, on days when for no reason everything seems black, . . . the objects of depression are the things that seem black,"¹⁴ Solomon is inclined, instead, to variously put 'the world as a whole' = 'the world in general' = 'our world as a whole' = 'the whole of our world' in the object position. Kenny's suggestion has one virtue which has, perhaps, not been so apparent until this point: its meaning is reasonably clear. It is rather doubtful, however, that the same can be said of Solomon's suggestion(s): the *Gegenstand* Variations on a theme of Solomon have an incantatory ring to them.

Nevertheless, the motivation for putting forward such 'objects' is clear enough. One initially subscribes to the idea that all emotions have objects (and also, of course, that depression is an emotion). By the first conjunct it is meant that every token of every emotion-type has its object. It then becomes necessary with respect to each token of depression that its object be in principle determinable. And, of course, if one can actually say what the object is even in difficult cases, difficult in that the depressions in question appear to have no object at all, then the condition of in principle determinability can be met. So, with regard to depressions which do look to be depressions without any 'particular' object, it may seem feasible

¹¹ Robert C. Solomon, *The Passions* (Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1976), pp. 172-73.

¹² My emphasis. *Ibid.*, p. 133. Solomon's use of 'emotion' can be confusing. In this passage he first uses it generically and then, relative to the genus so nominated, specifically.

¹³ My emphasis. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

¹⁴ My emphasis.

(and hence, perhaps, intelligible) to reply that such cases have a 'general' object: *the world* (though, of course, only the world 'in general'). What does this mean? I am certain that I do not know. Hopefully, those courageous explorers who plumb the *real* depths of depression, *Angst*, etc., will have the answer. In the meantime, until some intelligible account of the alleged object of such depressions is given, we should put on ice any inclination we may have to accept 'global-object' views, since we owe it to ourselves to be able to give intelligible descriptions of views we are inclined to accept.

3.3 Still other authors, defending various generally 'cognitive' accounts of emotion and consequently friendly to the view that all emotion-tokens have objects, make use of the notion of the 'subconscious' in sustaining the view. Thus, William Lyons in his *Emotion* (1980) writes

. . . what are often described as cases of objectless fear might be better described as cases in which the object is not properly formulable or expressible, as with fear of something which is *subconscious*. . . .¹⁵

So . . . objectless emotions are only objectless in that they do not have a particular object which can be expressed, if at all, clearly and succinctly, or localised. For example objectless fear or depression might be focussed on something like one's consciously or *subconsciously* realized ignorance or inability to cope with the situation.¹⁶

I would not wish to deny that some tokens of fear and depression may have objects which, owing to a variety of causes, are not immediately available to the emotional subject for description (or descriptive assent). But there is no need to suppose that every case of apparently objectless emotion (which is not about all 'the things which seem black', nor about 'our world in general', etc.) is like this. Or, rather, there is no logical requirement. Such requirements as there may be are posed only by some *theories* of emotion.¹⁷ The point that there is no logical requirement may be put, and perhaps defended, by claiming that there is nothing incoherent about such exchanges as the following:

"S is depressed (happy) today."

— "What about?"

"Oh, nothing. She's just depressed (happy), that's all."

¹⁵ My emphasis. William Lyons, *Emotion* (Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 75.

¹⁶ My emphasis. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁷ This point, in fairness to Lyons, is one that he may be thought to be sensitive to, writing as he does in one place that: "Whether one is to say that there are cases of objectless emotions or merely that the object is rather strange, such as one's ignorance in a given situation, may be undecidable." [*Ibid.*, p. 76.]

For the sake of contrast, the exchange which results by replacing “depressed” with, e.g., “ashamed” clearly is incoherent.

Perhaps the world is still such that this point can be made most forcefully with respect to happiness. For surely one can (still) simply be happy on a given day, without having to be either happy about *x* or happy that *p*. To insist, from some theoretical perspective, that one must be happy *about . . .*, *with . . .*, or *that . . .*, is to ‘over-intellectualise’ these types of states. Of course, one *can* be happy *about* (etc.), and there may even be persons who, owing to causes particular to their own psychologies, can *only* be happy in this intentional manner. But, happily, one can still be happy *simpliciter*. Sometimes it’s infectious.

And when things are like that with us, we are in a happy mood.

3.4 The three attempts (of Kenny, Solomon, and Lyons) to provide objects for evidently objectless emotions, as various as the attempts are, do have several features in common. It is to be noted that they are all attempts to conserve a theoretical fabric which threatens to unravel in the same particular corner. They share this reparative function, and their proponents are motivated by the shared desire that something be found which fulfills that function. Secondly, they are just about equally *ad hoc* in character. By this I mean that their only apparent ‘virtue’ is that of theory conservation. But we know to be suspicious of this property standing on its own.¹⁸ Theory conservation as a property of a move, position, or view, only becomes a virtue in the presence of other intellectual virtues attaching to the same move, position, or view. Its evaluative coloring in this respect is all reflected.

4. Thus we are left at the end of this brief examination with a substantial difference between *two* kinds of emotion-types, those types that can have objectless tokens and those that cannot. (We indirectly mark off this difference by calling objectless instances of the possibly objectless types, ‘moods’.)

This way of regarding things will bind us to various developing theoretic-claims such as “No emotion is *necessarily* a mood”; will suggest various others such as “Remorse is never a mood”; and might raise some promising lines of enquiry and hypothesizing as well, e.g., (i) “Why do some, but not all, emotions have objectless instances?” and (ii) “Is it because some are, from a cognitive-evolutionary point of view, relatively primitive?”

¹⁸ Perhaps the ‘subconscious object’ view of Lyons has the advantage over both the multiplicity-of-objects view of Kenny (regarding depressions) and the global-object view of Solomon in that it can be acknowledged that at least sometimes our depressions and happinesses, etc., do have objects that are temporarily unacknowledged by us.

5. Given that (on this account) moods are objectless emotion-tokens, it follows that moods are *not* “characterized by . . . the intentional . . . inexistence of an object,” that is, are not “characterized by . . . reference to a content, direction toward an object . . . , or immanent objectivity”;¹⁹ and from this it might be thought to follow (given, further, the *requirement*²⁰ of “immanent objectivity” for the mental as resurrected by Brentano) that moods are *not* regardable as mental phenomena.

Moreover, if one says that this “immanent objectivity” = df. “intentionality” then, on the over-all account so far proposed here, an emotion like depression could turn out to be an intriguing emotion, indeed. For it could, in a way, given the necessity and sufficiency of intentionality for the mental, ‘bridge’ the mental and the non-mental. *Depending* on whether or not it was object-directed, depression could be either a mental phenomenon or a non-mental phenomenon.

It might be said in reply that there are no particularly intriguing possibilities here, that the idea of depression’s being some sort of ‘bridge’ is at best misleading. For, necessarily, the way things really are *on the proposed account* — so it might be urged — is (only) that some tokens of depression do have “objects” (and hence, they are regardable as ‘mental’ on Brentano’s criterion) while all *other* tokens of depression do not have objects (and hence they are not regardable as mental), and thus that there is no particular to serve as a ‘bridge’. (As for the type itself, it cannot serve

¹⁹ The quote passage is, of course, from Franz Brentano’s *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (1874) first published in an English translation, ed. by Linda McAlister, trans. by Antos C. Rancurello, D. B. Terrell, and Linda McAlister (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 88-89.

²⁰ Brentano claims that “intentional inexistence” / “direction toward an object” / “immanent objectivity” is both a *necessary* condition and a sufficient condition for something’s being a “mental phenomenon.” If we replace his various locutions with ‘intentionality’ then we can say that in paragraph (A) from *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* the claim is that intentionality is a necessary condition:

(A) “Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to a content, direction toward an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing [“*eine Realität*”]), or immanent objectivity. Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself, although they do not all do so in the same way. In presentation something is presented, in judgement something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on.”

But in the very next paragraph (B) from that work, the claim is that it is [also] sufficient:

(B) “This intentional in-existence is characteristic exclusively of mental phenomena. No physical phenomenon exhibits anything like it. We can, therefore, define mental phenomena by saying that they are those phenomena which contain an object intentionally within themselves.”

as a bridge because, Platonists aside, the type is not itself any sort of real phenomenon, mental or otherwise. The type itself, for example, neither has nor fails to have objects; only tokens of the type have these sorts of properties.)

Granting the parenthetical points made in the last two sentences, what this response would miss is a certain fairly immediate consequence of the facts *as the account in the preceding sections of this paper construes them*, which are that: (i) having an object is not — contra Kenny, *et alii* — a necessary feature of depression; and (ii) not having an object is, as well, not — contra Thalberg — a necessary feature of depression. The “immediate consequence” is that having an object (and thus not having an object) is a *contingent* property of things being instances of *depression*.

Thus, *it is compatible with*, though it does not follow from, the above account of things that a particular token of depression about something could, over the course of a day, say, lose its (property of) directedness and (thus) *become* objectless. (“Oh, I guess I’m not particularly depressed about *that* anymore. I’m just still feeling down, that’s all.”) Conversely, an initially ‘free-floating’ depression might come to ‘settle upon’ an object. Its being a mood would, accordingly, be a property that a particular token of depression could lose. Such tokens as these could then be said to have ‘bridged’ the ‘mental’ and the ‘non-mental’ (à la Brentano) in the sense that they would first be one, then the other: they would ‘travel’ from the one domain to the other.

Some, in consequence of long-standing philosophical lamentations regarding a certain apparent metaphysical chasm thought to have been vigorously opened up by Descartes, might welcome this idea; others, in consequence of their rejection of the very idea of such metaphysical voyagers, might think, “So much the worse for Brentano’s criterion of the mental.” Still others, supposing Brentano to have got it substantially right, but nevertheless finding it too strange or difficult a notion that a particular depression or happiness (etc.) might have such a checkered metaphysical history, would be driven back either to some position such as Kenny’s, or else Thalberg’s, where the having, or else the not having, of the property of intentionality is a necessary feature of depression, a feature it could not lose on penalty of losing its identity — two positions the great difficulties of which have already been indicated in the foregoing; or else driven back to what is the only remaining positional option, viz., the essentialist option — deliberately mis-referred to three paragraphs back as “the way things really are on the proposed account” (in which neither the having, nor the not having, of an object is a necessary feature of something’s being an instance of *depression*, *but*) — in which it *is* necessary

that individual tokens of depression are nevertheless either directed towards an object or else are objectless *for their entire history*. I do not discuss this option in the present paper, but go on record here as suspecting that it would do some considerable violence to the generally apprehended diachronic 'phenomenology' of depression and happiness, for example; and hence some violence as well to the ways in which, attempting to reflect that phenomenology, we are in fact inclined to talk about such states and, in particular, *their histories* in ourselves and others.