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ARTICLE

Feeling and Orientation in Action: A Reply to Alix Cohen

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Abstract

Alix Cohen argues that the function of feeling in Kantian psychology is to appraise and orient activity. Thus she sees feeling and agency as importantly connected by Kant's lights. I endorse this broader claim, but argue that feeling, on her account, cannot do the work of orientation that she assigns to it.

Keywords: Kant; agency; feeling; Stoicism

1

Alix Cohen's overarching thesis in 'A Kantian Account of Emotions as Feelings' is that what we naturally think of as 'emotions' covers a diverse range of mental states that can nevertheless all be understood as modes of *feeling* by Kant's lights. My concern here lies with Cohen's account of feeling, rather than the overarching thesis about emotion. Cohen claims that (1) 'feelings are affective appraisals of our activity'; and (2) 'as such play an indispensable' role in orienting that activity (Cohen 2020: 429). From this angle, Cohen's abiding concern in the article is to show that feeling and agency are importantly connected by Kant's lights, and to give some indication of how.[1]

The textual bedrock of Cohen's account is Kant's threefold division of 'all faculties of the mind' into the faculties of cognition, desire and the feeling of pleasure and displeasure; Cohen reasonably takes this division to mark irreducible functional distinctions.[2] In developing her account of the particular role of feeling in Kantian psychology, Cohen argues that feelings 'are about ourselves and the state of our agency' whereas cognitions and desires are 'about the world' (p. 444). Let us accept this characterisation of how feeling is distinct from cognition and desire. However, Cohen, I will argue, overlooks important Kantian resources for modelling the particular way in which feeling might be 'about ourselves', and as a result fails to explain how feeling can orient action.

2

I begin with Cohen's claim that 'feelings are affective appraisals of our activity'. This will lead me to an objection that Cohen considers, that her account ends up assimilating feeling to some kind of self-cognition. I suggest that her response to this

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objection miscasts the role of feeling, because it overlooks distinctively Kantian resources for modelling how feeling might be 'about ourselves'.

Cohen's appraisal claim, more fully stated, is that 'the faculty of feeling has the distinct role of making us aware of the way our faculties relate to each other and to the world' (p. 429). This elaboration distinguishes the appraisal function of the 'higher' and 'lower' faculties of feeling, respectively. The lower faculty of feeling appraises 'the relation between subject and objects' (p. 439), where the sort of activity that is appraised might include things like some cake's tasting a certain way. Pleasure appraises this tasting in the yay-mode, pain in the boo-mode. The higher faculty of feeling appraises the relation of our faculties to one another in various kinds of judgement: the examples Cohen develops are epistemic pleasures (e.g. the delight of discovery) and moral contentment (satisfaction at having acted well).

Now Cohen suggests that feelings of pleasure and pain must be interpreted in light of their context in order to have meaning – in order, say, for a particular painful feeling to figure as dread, rather than remorse.[3] This gives rise to an objection that she considers. Take the case of an epistemic pleasure, like the delight of discovery. Such a feeling would seem to involve awareness that one has judged in a certain way, and advanced one's understanding of some matter. Therefore, such a feeling would seem to provide 'at least some sort of evidence about us and our activity', suggesting that it might then be a form of self-cognition (p. 19). The worry is that taking feeling to be 'about ourselves' risks assimilating feeling to cognition, and thus flouts the reasonable supposition that Kant's threefold faculty division marks irreducible functional distinctions.

In answering this objection, Cohen distinguishes 'two modes of awareness of our mental activity, namely, the awareness of what we are doing and the awareness of how it is going' (pp. 446–7). Introspection is invoked here as a kind of observation that takes mental goings-on as its objects.[4] Introspection, Cohen continues, may allow for self-awareness of the first sort ('of what we are doing'), but feeling provides awareness of the second sort ('of how it is going'). Cohen's response is that each provides a distinct kind of 'access' to one's own mental activity, enabling her to hold the appraisal function of feeling apart from the self-cognitive function of introspection.[5] Nevertheless, inasmuch as Cohen speaks of each as providing 'access' to our mental activity, she aligns the two: they are ways of relating to mental activity. This response, I contend, does damage to Cohen's own account of how feeling might be 'about ourselves' in a way that ultimately could be understood as orienting action.

Recall that Cohen's broader aim is to show that feeling is in some way required for agency: feeling is 'indispensable for beings who act and need to appraise their relationship to the world and to themselves in order to act' (p. 431). But Cohen's suggestion that feeling provides 'access' to mental activity is not a promising start for an inquiry that aims to show how such activity, and thus agency, might *require* feeling. For the talk of 'access' suggests an explanatory model in which the mental activity is independent of the feeling that appraises it, just as it is independent of the introspection that might observe it. Such an explanatory model does not position us to understand how feeling could be 'indispensable' to the activity. Cohen miscasts the self-representing business of feeling in her reply to the objection. For in fact it does not suit her purposes to think of feeling as a way of relating *to* ourselves: the idea she wants, it seems to me, is that feeling is a mode of self-manifestation[6] or self-presentation.

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As I see it, Cohen's broader explanatory task requires thinking about how, through feeling, the self might manifest *as subject*, and not (as in introspection) as an object. Kant famously has a model for this kind of self-presentation in the idea of pure apperception, the self-consciousness that is internal to genuine thought.[7] Apperception, as Kant puts the point in the *Anthropology*, thinks the 'I' *as a subject* rather than *as an object* (7: 134, n.). If Cohen wants to show that feeling is necessary for embodied agency, then perhaps she ought to align feeling with apperception – at least inasmuch as each might be understood as manifestations of subjectivity (felt and thought manifestations, respectively).

This alignment of feeling and apperception is, moreover, on Kant's radar. We can see this if we turn to the opening section of the *Anthropology*. Kant begins with the idea that having the 'I' in one's thoughts – apperceptive self-consciousness – is what most fundamentally makes one a person, rather than a thing (§1, 7: 127). But suppose we want to take seriously the idea that a child who does not yet have the 'I' in his thoughts nevertheless *does* things, is *some* kind of agent – even if not yet a 'moral' agent, subject to imputation. Then we must also suppose that the pre-rational child is manifest to himself in some way. He is not some kind of machine, blind to himself. Kant seems to be alive to this point. For as he indicates that the dawning of apperceptive self-consciousness is a transformative moment in human development, he also takes care to indicate that it is a transition *from* a merely felt mode of self-manifestation: 'When he starts to speak by means of "I" a light seems to dawn on him, as it were ... – Before he merely *felt* himself, now he *thinks* himself' (*Anthropology* §1, 7: 127). Kant here aligns feeling and apperception, even as he distinguishes them: both are ways in which 'self' is manifest as a subject, rather than as some kind of object. And it makes sense that Kant would align feeling and apperception in this way, if embodied agency is something that persists through the dawning of apperceptive self-consciousness, even if this agency is *transformed* in the process as well. Indeed, the passage suggests that Cohen is right to suppose that, by Kant's lights, feeling is required for embodied agency. For if the pre-rational child is some kind of agent – if he *does* things, moves by himself – then he must be manifest to himself in some way. Here Kant says that he is manifest to himself merely in feeling.

This remark about felt self-manifestation undoubtedly raises questions about its relation to Kant's threefold division of the faculties of the mind. For in drawing that division, he consistently speaks of the faculty of feeling in terms of pleasure and displeasure. While it is plausible that embodied agency needs to be manifest to itself in feeling, it is not obvious that this self-manifestation needs to be valenced, felt as pleasure or displeasure. I do not have an answer to the textual question about how the *Anthropology,* §1, remark about feeling relates to the faculty of feeling in Kant's threefold faculty division. However, that remark points to a dimension of feeling that is missing in Cohen's account; in what follows, I will try to indicate why Cohen needs it to explain how feeling does the work of orienting action.

3

Cohen, we noted, claims that the function of feeling is to appraise, and thereby orient, activity. Thus the orientation claim is presented as a consequence of the appraisal claim. The rough-and-ready version of the orientation claim is that appraisal in the yay-mode supports the continuance of the activity, while appraisal in the

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boo-mode supports its cessation. We carry on with what is pleasurable, and in that sense the feeling orients activity. But this rough-and-ready version of the claim does not obviously offer a picture of *orientation* at all: for orientation involves having a sense of direction, or guidance towards an end, that is missing here.

Orientation is originally a geographical concept,[8] which Kant mines for its metaphorical value in his 1786 essay 'What does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?' Cohen draws on the essay in the elaboration of her thesis that feeling orients action; but, I will argue, she fails to give due weight to certain clues in the text that she would need to exploit in order to explain how feeling orients action.

Kant's concern in the 'Orientation' essay is to work out what it might mean to make progress in our thinking about the supersensible, when one can no longer get one's bearings from sensible experience – somewhat as one might orient oneself in a darkened room. To move intelligently about in such a room, one needs to have some idea of the relative position of its objects: how the chair is placed relative to the door, for example. If someone 'as a joke' moved the furniture around, so that everything that was previously on the left is now on the right and vice versa (8: 135), then the relative position of the objects to one another would remain the same.[9] Someone familiar with the room and the relative position of the objects within it, who suddenly found herself placed in this darkened room, would then not be able to find her way about. Since the relative position of the objects goes unchanged, Kant argues that we are not oriented in space simply through mapping relations, as Cohen observes (pp. 445–6). Orientation requires 'a *subjective* ground of differentiation' (8: 135), so that we locate things in space in relation to the felt difference between our right and left. Unpacking the metaphor, Cohen interprets this 'subjective ground of differentiation' as *feeling*:

> just as we orient ourselves geographically on the basis of a felt sense of the difference between our left and our right, so, too, we orient our activity on the basis of the difference between our feelings of pleasure and pain. (p. 446)[10]

For Cohen, orientation *presupposes* both the cognitive business of mapping and the desiderative business of there being somewhere you want to go. But orientation itself is neither. Orientation, on her account, is the distinct function of feeling.

Cohen's basic view of how feeling orients activity has already been sketched: pleasure is appraisal in the yay-mode, which orients activity by promoting its continuance – as it were, a green light to continue in the same direction. Pain is appraisal in the boo-mode, as it were, a red light to stop. This is a picture of being directed, perhaps, but not of guiding oneself by means of these feelings. To see the point another way, go back to the appraisal function of feeling in Cohen's account. If feeling appraises activity, then its verdicts concern the appropriateness of that activity *for me*. This is how she understands the idea of a 'subjective ground of differentiation', when the geographical metaphor is cashed out in psychological terms. However, this could only orient my action – give me *direction* – if I endorse the idea that everything pleasurable should be pursued or continued. Without this commitment, I don't see how feeling, so conceived, orients action.

In fact, Cohen tacitly acknowledges this difficulty. As already noted, she remarks that we need judgement in order to interpret feelings (themselves only modes of pleasure and pain) in light of their context, so that a given painful feeling is (e.g.) remorse rather than dread. Cohen refines the orientation thesis on similar lines, adding that

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judgement is also needed if we are going to be appropriately guided by our feelings, since 'not everything pleasurable should be pursued' and 'not everything painful should be avoided' (p. 448). Thus she suggests that feeling provides defeasible appraisals that need to be subject to judgement to orient activity. But then it is no longer clear that *feeling* does the distinct work of orienting activity, as she wishes to maintain.

However, it is conceivable that feeling could orient action if it were understood as a certain mode of self-manifestation. The sort of feeling I have in mind would be a sense of what is appropriate for one, as a creature of a certain kind. Kant points to something like this in the 'Orientation' essay, when he maintains that what orients *thinking*, at least where the supersensible is at issue, is 'a felt need of reason' (8: 140; also 8: 136). So it is this 'need', which is manifest in feeling, that provides the direction that is required in order to speak here of *orientation*. Kant conceives of this direction as 'the whole end of [the human being's] vocation (*Bestimmung*)' (8: 142). This notion of the human being's *Bestimmung* is a developmental idea, debated in the eighteenth century; for Kant it most basically means that the rational nature of the human being is not exactly a given endowment, but rather a perfective – something to be completed, through what we do and how we choose.[11] What matters for our purposes is that the sort of feeling that Kant is prepared to speak of as orienting activity (specifically, thinking about the supersensible) is a feeling of this vocation. This is not orientation by pleasure or pain, but rather something more like a sense or feeling of one's own constitution as an essentially rational animal. This sort of feeling seems to incorporate the element of direction that would be needed to follow through on the idea that feeling – of some sort – orients action.

But what sort of feeling is this? The answer, I surmise, might need to begin with the passage from *Anthropology,* §1. There, I suggested, Kant points to a felt self-manifestation that is required if we are going to suppose that a pre-rational child *does* things, is a genuine agent (though not yet a 'moral' agent). Inasmuch as we are prepared to think of at least some non-rational animals as genuine agents, rather than Cartesian machines, then the point that embodied agency requires felt self-manifestation would extend to these cases.[12] The idea, which has independent plausibility, is that genuine agency requires some presentation of one's own subjectivity – and if not through the 'I think', then (for the non- and pre-rational) merely through feeling. But how do we understand this felt self-presentation?

Some might be inclined to think of it as a kind of proprioception, the sense of the disposition of your limbs in space. But proprioception lacks the element of direction that is needed for orientation: so it is not the idea we should pursue, if we want to consider how feeling might orient action. The feeling we are after might involve proprioception, but it cannot be reduced to it. Nor will it do to think of the feeling in question as a sense of the dynamic and kinematic possibilities of one's own body: to have a felt awareness of one's own powers of movement is not itself to feel what to do, what movements are appropriate. And *that* kind of feeling, as I have been suggesting, could not be bare pleasure or pain. An animal's hunger is not blind pain, though it is a way of feeling itself in a certain state. This feeling is not separable, presumably, from a discerning affinity for what is nourishing, what it is appropriate to eat. If the idea of felt self-manifestation can be developed along these lines, it would give us the element of direction that we would need in order to claim, with Cohen, that feeling orients action.

This conception of orientation that I am sketching is Stoic in origin.[13] I cannot take up this background here, much less argue for its significance in Kant's

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own philosophical development.[14] But it is perhaps worth noting that, in the Stoic account, pleasure is something that might (or might not) follow upon the appraisal that a certain object or action is suitable to the animal's constitution; it is not what makes that appraisal, and it is not what orients the animal in action.[15] More needs to be said to develop Kant's suggestion that embodied agency generally requires self-manifestation in feeling, not only in relation to the Stoic account, but also with regard to the particulars of embodied *rational* agency, as Kant understands this. For a rational agent can of course commit herself to pursuing pleasurable experiences as an end in itself (and perhaps in this special case might be 'oriented' by pleasure and pain), just as she can commit herself to perfecting her essentially rational nature.

Where does this leave us? Cohen argues that feeling appraises activity, and thereby orients action. She takes the feelings at issue to be pleasure and pain, since this is how Kant points to the faculty in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. But Cohen's account of how this faculty appraises activity does not warrant the result that feeling orients action. At the same time, Kant does have things to say about how feeling – of some sort – orients action. I have suggested that this feeling is a felt self-manifestation that might be thought of, along Stoic lines, as having a sense of one's own constitution. One problem is that such feeling is not obviously specifiable as any kind of pleasure or pain. In other words, if the primary function of feeling is to issue boo/yay appraisals of activity, then the faculty would not obviously be the source of this other sort of feeling. Cohen should either explain how the faculty of feeling could indeed be the source of such genuinely orienting feelings by Kant's lights, or relinquish the intriguing thesis that feeling orients action in Kantian psychology.[16]

Notes

1 Cohen remarks that 'Kant often hints ... that the connection between feeling and agency is crucial' (p. 446, n. 54), and argues to the conclusion that 'Kant takes feelings to be mental states that are intrinsically connected to rational agency and its conditions' (p. 454).

2 Kant draws this three-part division in both Introductions to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (20: 245 and 5: 196–8), where he explains its significance for the particular task of the third *Critique* – the account of which lies outside of my scope here. Cohen draws on the division to argue against commentators who (in various ways) assimilate emotions – which she argues are all modes of *feeling* – to cognitions or desires. Kant's works are cited by volume and page of the *Akademie* edition (Kant 1900–), with any quotations from the Cambridge Edition volumes (Kant 1996, 2000, 2007).

3 Cohen argues that this warrants taking feelings as 'non-cognitive mental states with derived intentionality' (pp. 433–9). The claim that feeling plays an irreducible function in Kantian psychology is compatible, she argues, with the fact that feeling in us will for the most part be *related* to cognitive and conative states. I take no issue with this part of her account.

4 This conception of introspection figures for Kant when he raises methodological doubts about its possible contribution to empirical psychology (see *Anthropology*, §4, 7: 132–4); the interpretation of these remarks is debated, as Cohen notes (p. 447, n. 58).

5 Feelings 'afford us a unique form of access to, and appraisal of, our mental activity' (p. 447). Here Cohen makes a point of not endorsing any claim about the cognitive reliability of introspection.

6 We see such language (e.g. on p. 444), though it is not consistent through her account.

7 I assume the qualifier 'pure' throughout these remarks on apperception.

8 Originally as a transitive (but not reflexive) verb, applying to the placement of churches and corpses so that they *face east* (*Oxford English Dictionary* online, *s.v.* orient).

9 Kant is tacitly assuming the dimensions of the room and position of any windows and doors to be symmetrical on the same axis.

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10 It is not clear to me why geographical orientation is not also a matter of orienting our activity; i.e. Cohen sometimes seems to understand the orientational function of feeling exclusively with regard to *mental* activity, rather than activity generally, but does not explain this restriction of scope.
11 See *Anthropology* (7: 321–2). On Kant in the context of these debates, see (e.g.) Kuehn (2009) and Brandt (2003a).
12 Regardless of what Kant's own view about the agency of non-rational animals might be.
13 I refer to the Stoic doctrine of *oikeiōsis*, a term drawn from the standard word for expressing relations of belonging within a family; Inwood (1985: 184) describes it as nothing short of 'their novel theory of the basic state of affairs which grounds all human and animal action'. Important sources include Diogenes Laertius (1925: 7.85), Cicero's *De Finibus* (1998: 3.16ff.) and especially Seneca (2007: *Letter* 121) for a focus on animal action generally. All of these texts draw some distinction between an animal's (a) attachment to and (b) sense of its own constitution – with Cicero's and Seneca's texts indicating that (b), the *sensus sui*, is more basic. Long (1996: 257–62) interprets this *sensus sui* as a kind of proprioception; Martin (2015: 356–61) pushes back against Long's interpretation along lines compatible with the position that I have sketched above.
14 For a view of the doctrine's relevance to Kant's account of aesthetic judgement in the third *Critique*, see Brandt (2003b: 191–4); there is more work to be done along these lines.
15 Pleasure is an 'aftereffect' (ἐπιγέννημα) of appropriate action, i.e. action that promotes the completion of a creature's nature (Diogenes Laertius 7.86).
16 An earlier version of these remarks was part of my contribution to a workshop held at UNSW on 12 December 2019; I would like to thank the participants, especially Alix Cohen, for stimulating discussion. The workshop and this research are supported by an Australian Research Council Future Fellowship (FT180100494).

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