

DAVID HITCHCOCK



ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST EMOTIONS

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How surprising! People sometimes argue for an expression of emotion and sometimes argue against feeling an emotion. These arguments are not the usual sort of argument for or against a statement, so it is not obvious how to analyze them and how to evaluate them. But don't worry! On my conception of arguments as composed of illocutionary act-types, they can be analyzed as being what they seem to be (arguments for or against a Searlian expressive). And one can evaluate the inference in arguments for expressions of emotion by means of my conception of consequence as transmission of acceptability, where acceptability is an objective status that applies to all kinds of illocutionary act-types, not just statements. And one can evaluate the inference in arguments against an emotion by means of an analogous conception of refutation as transmission of the opposite of acceptability, a status that we might call 'rejectability'.

Keywords: argument, consequence, emotions, illocutionary act-types, refutation

David Hitchcock, McMaster University, Department of Philosophy, Hamilton, Canada L8S 4K1, e-mail: hitchckd@mcmaster.ca, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3357-2518>

Introduction

It is commonly held that the conclusions of arguments are propositions or statements of propositions (Vorobej, 2006; Dutilh Novaes, 2022). Alternatively, they may be regarded as “standpoints,” i.e., pro or con attitudes to “the proposition [...] expressed in the speech act on which the argumentation turns” (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984: 5). If we look at texts and discourses in which people advance arguments, however, we occasionally come across arguments whose conclusion is on its face the expression of an



emotion, not the assertion of a proposition or the expression of a pro or con attitude to a proposition. To support this claim, I provide examples of such arguments, as well as examples of arguments against feeling an emotion. Currently accepted approaches do not have the tools to analyze and evaluate such arguments directly. I show that my conception of arguments as composed of illocutionary act-types and as including con-arguments as well as pro-arguments (Hitchcock, 2021) can analyze such arguments without any need to “reconstruct” them. I show that reconstruction of the targets of such arguments as statements distorts their meaning. Further, I show that one can evaluate the inferences in such arguments using my conception of consequence as transmission of acceptability (Hitchcock, 2011) and a corresponding conception of refutation as transmission of the opposite property, which might be called “rejectability.”

Examples of arguments for and against emotions

We find an argument justifying an expression of an emotion near the beginning of Plato’s *Phaedo*, written more than 2,300 years ago:

1. How strange, [...] gentlemen, seems to be this thing which people call pleasure. How surprisingly it naturally relates to what seems to be its contrary, pain. They cannot come to a person at the same time, but someone who pursues and catches the one is almost always compelled to catch the other also, as if they were two beings attached to one head (Socrates, in: Plato’s *Phaedo* 60b3-c1; Grube’s translation, modified).

Socrates is *expressing* surprise at the nature of pleasure; he is not *asserting* that he is surprised. His expression of surprise is triggered by feeling pleasure after rubbing a painful place on his leg, then generalizing on the way these apparent contraries follow one another. Surprise is an emotion, one of six that facial emotion recognition software can now reliably recognize.¹ The sentence that follows his expression of surprise is most plausibly regarded as a justification of his act of expressing it. His argument invites its addressees to share the emotion he expresses and provides supporting reasons for their

¹ The others are anger, sadness, happiness, disgust, and fear (Naga et al., 2023: 2824). Paul Ekman (1992), who first singled out the six emotions as universally recognizable from facial expressions, used the term ‘enjoyment’ instead of ‘happiness’. One could also call it ‘delight’.

doing so. The second premiss may be doubtful,² but our focus here will be on the inference.

There is a considerable body of scholarly literature on the occurrence in arguments of words indicating emotions and of “emotion statements” (French “*énoncés d’émotion*”), statements that attribute an emotion to an experiencer, sometimes mentioning the source of the emotion (Plantin, 2011: 145). Plantin has developed methods and principles for analyzing phenomenologically the use of emotion statements in argumentation, including attempts to justify such statements. Sara Cigada (2019) has used Plantin’s methods along with the Argumentum Model of Topics of Eddo Rigotti and Sara Greco (2019) in a close analysis of a three-sentence argument supporting a claim that there was tension in a school for children of Lebanese origin on the day following the killing of Charlie Hebdo cartoonists in Paris.³ But the emotion statements in the investigated arguments’ conclusions are generally assertions that some experiencer (French “*lieu psychologique*”) has an emotion, not expressions of an emotion. Exceptionally, Plantin mentions in passing the possibility that a rule of emotional inference might take the form: If A has a commitment to B, if A does not keep their commitment to B, then shame on A (Plantin, 2011: 200). But he does not remark on the oddity of a rule allowing inference of an expression of emotion (here, moral disapproval) from the description of a situation. To the best of my knowledge, there has been no thematic scholarly attention to arguments supporting expressions of emotion. Nor has there been thematic scholarly attention, as far as I know, to arguments against feeling emotions, such as this advance notice of a test of a fire alarm system:

2. Please note that alarms will ring intermittently during this period. Do not be alarmed and do not vacate the building unless instructed.

The following examples of arguments for and against emotions should give a sense of the argumentative phenomena that are the focus of this article. They are either invented on the basis of everyday experience or adapted from material found on the Web:

² It is most plausibly interpreted as an assertion that whoever pursues and catches pleasure is almost always compelled to catch pain also, i.e., as meaning by “the one” pleasure and by “the other” pain. But, arguably, a sophisticated hedonist can “pursue and catch” pleasure without almost always feeling pain before or afterwards.

³ I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing to my attention the work of Plantin and of Cigada.

3. The driver in front of me waited until the light turned green before putting on the car's left-turn signal. How infuriating!
4. Don't get angry. It won't make the waiter who messed up your order any more helpful.
5. Sad to say, my old school of which I have such fond memories has been torn down.
6. Please don't feel sad. My dear old oak friend that I've known my whole life died and was taken down today.
7. How delightful! It reminds us of our trip in the Appalachians ten years ago, among other things driving along the Blue Ridge Parkway.
8. Don't be delighted. You should not be pleased if someone calls you *warugashikoi*, which means "too clever by half."
9. You wash ground beef before cooking it? How disgusting. You are splashing bacteria-filled juices all over your kitchen's surfaces. Food thoroughly cooked does not require any washing. All bacteria will be killed during heating.
10. It's all pumped in there from the nearby geothermal power station, but don't be disgusted – it's honestly the most refreshing thing ever, especially if you've been short on showers for a while.
11. Russia is developing a rail-mobile intercontinental ballistic missile that will be indistinguishable from an ordinary freight train. How scary!
12. Dear friends, don't be surprised about the fiery trials that have come among you to test you. These are not strange happenings. (1 *Peter* 4:12-13)

Analysis of arguments for and against expressions of emotion

I propose a way of analyzing such arguments that takes them at face value as arguing either for or against experiencing an emotion. I can take them at face value because I analyze (Hitchcock, 2021) a single-inference argument as consisting of illocutionary act-types, for which I use John Searle's (1975) taxonomy. For example, Socrates' argument quoted above (example 1) has as its conclusion an expressive and as its supporting reasons two representatives; the claim of support is implicit, but could be signaled explicitly by inserting the word 'for' at the beginning of the sentence 'They cannot come [...] attached to one head'. The notice of a fire alarm test (example 2) is best construed as an argument against feeling alarmed, with the word 'don't' signaling that the stated reason counts against the feeling; the word 'don't' could be preceded by the word 'so' as an explicit indicator of an inference.

If one takes the conclusions of pro-arguments to be statements, in the sense of asserted propositions, or expressions of a pro-attitude to a proposition, then one needs to reconstruct conclusions that on their face are expressions of an emotion as in reality something other than what they appear to be. For example, the conclusion of Socrates' argument in example 1 might be

paraphrased as a statement (i.e., an asserted proposition) that pleasure naturally relates to its apparent contrary of pain in a surprising way or as a pro-attitude to this proposition. The paraphrase, however, dulls the force of Socrates' statement, depriving it of its expressive vividness. Similar paraphrases are possible with the other examples in the previous section of arguments for an expression of emotion (examples 3, 5, 7, 9 and 11). In some of these cases (examples 3, 5, 7 and 9), the speaker or author is expressing a personal emotional reaction, so that the paraphrase is better expressed by means of a first person singular proposition, such as (in example 3) the proposition that I am furious at the driver of the car ahead of me. In these examples as well, such paraphrases deprive the original of its expressive vividness. Further, such paraphrases appear to have different conditions for acceptability than the corresponding originals. An asserted proposition or a pro-attitude to a proposition is acceptable (in the ontic sense of being worthy of acceptance) if and only if the proposition is true. But an expression of an emotional reaction to a state of affairs can be acceptable (in the ontic sense that the emotion is justified by that state of affairs) even if the person expressing the emotion does not in fact feel it. Socrates is expressing surprise at the unexpected temporal association of pleasure with pain; his expression of surprise is justified, since surprise is a legitimate reaction to any unexpected event or situation and the alleged regular alternation of seemingly contrary feelings is (supposedly) not what one would expect. But, given his habitual activity of asking questions about ethical matters, Socrates may well have noticed much earlier than on the last day of his 70 years on Earth the unexpected relationship of pleasure and pain, and thus not himself be feeling surprise when he advances his argument. Similarly, the expressions of emotion may be legitimate in the other examples, even though the speaker is not actually furious (example 3) or sad (example 5) or delighted (example 7) or disgusted (example 9) or scared (example 11) at the time of expressing the emotion. What is at issue in judging the acceptability of the conclusion is not the actual emotional state of the speaker but the legitimacy of the emotional reaction that is expressed as a response to the situation described in the premisses.

Evaluation of arguments for and against expressions of emotion

How can one evaluate the inference in an argument whose reasons are offered in support of or against an (expression of) emotion? Expressions of emotion may be sincere or insincere, warranted or unwarranted, but (in contrast

to statements of emotion) they are not true or false. So standard conceptions of consequence and refutation couched in terms of truth-preservation or alethic incompatibility do not apply. One needs a broader conception, such as the following:

A conclusion follows from given premisses if and only if an acceptable counterfactual-supporting generalization rules out, either definitively or with some modal qualification, simultaneous acceptability of the premisses and non-acceptability of the conclusion, even though it does not rule out acceptability of the premisses and does not require acceptability of the conclusion independently of the premisses (Hitchcock, 2011: 209).

We can express this conception more concisely and clearly as *non-trivial acceptability of a counterfactual-supporting covering generalization*, and even more concisely as *transmission of acceptability*. To apply this conception to arguments for an expression of emotion, one needs to work out what it means for such an expression to be acceptable. Acceptability is to be construed in this context as an objective property: being worthy of being accepted (whether or not it is actually accepted). To understand what it means for an expression of emotion to be worthy of being accepted, we need to understand what it means to accept an expression of emotion. An obvious initial response is to construe acceptance of an expression of emotion as experiencing that emotion oneself: one accepts someone's expression of anger by feeling angry oneself, their expression of sadness by feeling sad oneself, and so on. This understanding fits some cases. For example, in accepting Socrates' expression of surprise at the connection of pleasure with pain, his friends would experience surprise. But actually feeling the emotion oneself seems too strong a requirement for other contexts. One can accept a friend's expression of irritation at the behaviour of an inconsiderate driver without oneself feeling irritated. It is enough if one recognizes the legitimacy of the friend's irritation. Legitimacy here means justification by the facts of the situation. Emotions, unlike such sensations as hunger pangs and gustatory pleasures, have a cognitive dimension. Surprise is a response to something unexpected, anger to a perceived injustice, delight to unalloyed enjoyment, fear to perceived danger, sadness to a devastating loss, disgust to noxiousness, and so on. One can interpret the acceptance of an expression of emotion as taking the emotion's cognitive component to be satisfied. For example, accepting someone's expression of anger would mean taking the behaviour about which they are angry to be in fact unjust.

There is an additional difficulty in applying the conception of consequence as transmission of acceptability. Generalizations of conditionals with an expression of emotion in the conditional's consequent do not sound like standard English. For example, a candidate for an acceptable covering generalization of Socrates' argument supporting his expression of surprise would generalize on the words 'pleasure' and 'pain':

Given that two things cannot come to a person at the same time but someone who pursues the one is almost always compelled to catch the other also, as if they were two beings attached to one head, then how surprisingly the one relates to what seems to be its contrary.

One can understand what this sentence means, but it sounds awkward. It is a bit more natural to express the same condition as a rule:

Given that two things cannot come to a person at the same time but someone who pursues the one is almost always compelled to catch the other also, as if they were two beings attached to one head, then you may infer how surprisingly the one relates to what seems to be its contrary.

Expression of the general condition as a rule carries with it the implication that it applies in counterfactual situations. For example, if wealth and poverty were like that, then one could legitimately (i.e., validly) infer how surprisingly wealth relates to poverty.

In this case, the rule seems valid, and the covering generalization acceptable. Surprise is a reaction to experiencing or thinking of something as unexpected, and one does not expect a person who pursues one of two things that one cannot experience simultaneously to generally catch the other, unless there is some reason for expecting a regular alternation (as for example with being awake and being asleep). One can extend this analysis to other emotions. For example, to accept an expression of anger is to regard the behaviour that is its target as in fact unjust.

What about arguments against experiencing an emotion? Here, tentatively, I propose an analogue to transmission of acceptability. We might call it "transmission of rejectability." It could be formulated as follows

A target's rejection follows from given reasons if and only if an acceptable counterfactual-supporting generalization rules out, either definitively or with some modal qualification, simultaneous acceptability of the reasons and acceptability of the target, even though it does not rule out acceptability of the reasons and does not require rejection of the target independently of the reasons.

As with the conception of consequence as transmission of acceptability, this condition could be formulated in terms of a rule rather than a covering generalization:

A target's rejection follows from given reasons if and only if a legitimate rule of rejection allows one, either definitively or with some modal qualification, to infer rejection of the target from acceptance of the reasons.

What makes such a rule of rejection legitimate would need to be spelled out for the particular case.

In the case of arguments against emotions, one type of rule would license rejection of an emotion if a condition is missing that is required for the emotion to be justified. Don't be surprised at something that was to be expected. Don't be angry if there is no injustice to be angry about. Don't be delighted if there is a serious downside to the joy you might be experiencing. Don't be sad if the loss is merely apparent. Don't be afraid if there is no real danger. Don't be disgusted at something that does not threaten your health. And so on.

There are also consequentialist arguments against expressing emotions, illustrated by the argument that getting angry won't make the waiter who messed up your order any more helpful in solving the problem (example 4).

Human languages may differ in the meanings they attach to words signifying a given emotion. In that case, valid rules permitting expression of an emotion may differ between languages, as may valid rules permitting rejection of an emotion. Joshua Jackson et al. (2019) found such variations in a study of colexification of 24 supposed⁴ emotion terms across 2,474 languages. But they also found a universal structure in terms of the hedonic value of the emotion signified by a term and the physiological activation in a person feeling an emotion signified by a term.

⁴ Plantin (1999) defines a noun of emotion (French "*nom d'émotion*") as a noun that enters into such contexts as 'a feeling of [...]' or 'Pierre experiences / feels [...]' The emotion terms of a language consist of its emotion nouns and their morphological derivatives. By this definition, four of the 24 concepts investigated by Jackson et al. (2019) are not emotion concepts: bad, like, love, and good. On the other hand, Jackson et al. omit one of the six emotions that are universally recognizable from people's facial expressions: disgust.

Summary

I have drawn the reader's attention to a hitherto uninvestigated class of arguments: arguments supporting an expression of emotion or attacking an emotion. I have provided 12 realistic examples of such arguments, one for and one against each of the six emotions that can be universally recognized from people's facial expressions. The usual analysis of conclusions of arguments as statements of propositions or attitudes for or against a proposition does not apply to these arguments. Their conclusions are expressions of emotion, not statements that someone has or should have an emotion. Reconstructing them as arguments for or against such statements in fact distorts their meaning. One should rather analyze them as what they seem to be, arguments for or against an illocutionary act, specifically the kind of act that Searle (1975) calls an expressive.

Since expressions of emotion are neither true nor false, standard conceptions of consequence and refutation in terms of truth and falsity do not apply to this class of arguments. One needs broader conceptions, for which I propose the concepts of transmission of acceptability and transmission of what one might call "rejectability." On these broader conceptions, an expression of emotion follows from the description of a situation if and only if features of the description establish the generic condition for the legitimacy of the emotion (unexpectedness for surprise, injustice for anger, danger for fear, and so on). And the description of a situation refutes an emotion if and only if features of the description are incompatible with the generic condition for the emotion's legitimacy (not unexpected for surprise, not unjust for anger, not dangerous for fear, and so on).

Declaration

I, David Hitchcock, declare that I am the sole author of the present article, "Arguments for and against Emotions."

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