Natural Meaning in Art

W. Stephen Croddy
West Chest University of Pennsylvania

I. Portraying Feelings

Part of what is valuable about art is that it can bring about an affective response.[1] A common method for causing this kind of reaction is the portrayal of emotional experiences.[2] However, when we consider the depiction of feelings, we are not perceiving the individuals themselves undergoing them. Furthermore, usually these experiences never occurred. Thus how do we recognize depicted emotions, particularly when they are fictional? A work will successfully portray feelings provided that they can be recognized. Therefore the question of what are the means we employ to identify them is central to any art that uses emotions to engage the viewer.

It is through certain dimensions of a work that feelings are portrayed and thereby recognized. They are those components, either verbal or nonverbal, that are informative of an emotional experience. Often they are concerned with an individual's behavior or the circumstances surrounding it. Examples are depictions of facial expressions, gestures, and postures. I will call the kind of entity being depicted an "emotion cue."[3]

An emotion cue is any event or state of affairs that carries information about a person's feelings.[4] We use them in everyday life to comprehend another's experience. I will establish that this ability provides our means for identifying feelings that are portrayed. I will propose an analysis of these cues and bring out the importance of the distinction between a token of a cue and its corresponding type. We will find that the concept of a type of emotion cue is particularly relevant.[5] My analysis will show how we employ information about them to recognize portrayed feelings. The following discussion will thereby increase our understanding of our affective response to art.

II. Emotion cues: natural meaning

Emotion cues often occur in an individual's behavior. An example would be John crossing his arms; (1) is a claim about this cue's information:

(1) That John crossed his arms provided some evidence that he was tense.

Note that in order for this statement to be true it is necessary that John crossed his arms. However, it is not necessary that he was tense. Thus (1) requires that its left member "John crossed his arms" be true but not that its right member "he was tense."

(1) mentions an emotion cue that gives some indication of a person's feeling. In addition, there can be a set of one or more cues whose information is sufficient to justify the belief that an individual had a certain emotion. When a cue's information constitutes justifying evidence, the cue means that the individual experienced the feeling. Thus we can recognize a person's emotion if there is a set of one or more cues that mean that they experienced it.

(2) is a statement of this kind of meaning: That John asserted enthusiastically "I won" meant (m) that he was pleased. Following Paul Grice, I will call it "natural," i.e., meaning (mm). It is to be distinguished from non-natural meaning, i.e., meaning (mm).[6] Examples of this latter kind are supposed to occur in statements about the linguistic meaning of words, e.g., "John is a bachelor" means (mm) "John is an unmarried, adult male."

III. Tokens of emotion cues

(2) is a statement as to the natural meaning of a token of an emotion cue, namely, John's asserting enthusiastically "I won." In order for (2) to be true, it is necessary both that John asserted enthusiastically "I won" and that he was pleased. Thus unlike (1), (2) requires not only that its left member be true but also that its right member.[7]

One reason it requires that both members be true is that it is equivalent to a claim of justification that has this requirement. The claim is "That John asserted enthusiastically 'I won' justifies the belief that he was pleased." Note that like (2) in order for this statement to be true not only must John have made the assertion, it is also necessary that he was pleased.

Consider, however, the linguistic meanings of (2)'s members. They are non-natural. According to this kind of meaning it is possible for John to have asserted enthusiastically "I won" and yet he not be pleased. This possibility in conjunction with the fact that (2) is equivalent to a claim of justification are what make the meaning mentioned in the statement natural.

We have been concerned with an individual's actions and their kind of meaning about his or her feelings. In contrast is what someone means in performing an action. Grice considers this kind of meaning to be non-natural.[8] (3) is an example:

(3) In asserting enthusiastically "I won" John meant (mm) that he was pleased.

While it requires its left member, it does not require its right.[9] Therefore the statement is not equivalent to a claim of justification. It follows from the preceding analysis that this is a reason the meaning in (3) is not natural. Thus we must distinguish between what a person meant by their behavior and what their behavior meant, in particular about their feelings.[10]

IV. Types of emotion cues

Some works of art are non-fictional. The feelings they portray occurred. Thus the tokens of emotion cues depicted were the case. It follows from my analysis that these cues meant that the individual experienced the feelings.

However, generally the particular experiences that art portrays are fictional. Thus the tokens of emotion cues depicted never occurred. Consequently these depictions are not of cues that have natural meaning. Nevertheless, these depictions perform a function important to the success of a work. They direct us to what does have natural meaning with regard to fiction. These are the types of emotion cues of which the work's cues are tokens.[11] The kinds of feelings that the work portrays are those meant by these types. We will see that the concept of an emotion cue type and its natural meaning are central to accounting for how art depicts feelings. Thus they are significant for explaining how we recognize emotions that are fictional.[12]

(4) is an example of a statement of the natural meaning of a type of emotion cue, e.g., someone asserting enthusiastically "I won":

(4) Someone asserting enthusiastically "I won" means (m) that he or she is pleased.

It shares certain essential features with (2). It is equivalent to a claim

of justification, namely, "Someone asserting enthusiastically 'I won' justifies believing that he or she is pleased." Furthermore, it follows from the linguistic meanings of the two members that it is possible for the first member to be true and the second to be false. As with (2), these two features together are the reason that the meaning in (4) is natural.

However, there is an important respect in which (4) differs from (2): as a claim about a type of emotion cue, (4) does not require that either member be true, specifically that someone is asserting enthusiastically "I won" or that someone is pleased.[13]

This characteristic brings out two dimensions of statements of the natural meaning of emotion cue types that are significant for identifying artistic emotions. One is that the feeling that these statements mention is a type. The other is that the statements can be true with respect to a work of fiction. As a result they can give us information about the types of feelings the work portrays. I will show why these dimensions are relevant for explaining how we recognize depicted emotions.

V. A relationship between the meanings of types and their tokens

We saw that the natural meaning of emotion cues is to be distinguished from the linguistic and thereby non-natural meaning of words. However there is a feature which emotion cues and words share that is especially relevant for our analysis. For just as there are tokens of emotion cues and their types, there are tokens of words and their types. A token of a word and its type have the relationship that the meaning of a token is whatever the type means.[14] For example, consider the meaning of the tokens of "pleased" in (2), (3), and (4). It is the meaning of the type "pleased." Thus, we recognize the meaning of a token of a word as a result of knowing the meaning of its type.

There is an analogous relationship between a token of an emotion cue and its type. The kind of feeling that a token means is the one the type means. Consequently with emotion cues as well, we recognize the kind of feeling that a token means by using our knowledge of the meaning of its type.[15]

Assume that a particular work of art is supposed to portray certain feelings. This requires that we be able to identify them. It follows that the work must contain depictions of tokens of emotion cues whose types mean these feelings. These depictions, then, direct us to the types and thereby to

our knowledge of their meaning. This information enables us to identify the feelings portrayed.

VI. Art's use of information about types of feelings

The preceding analysis of the natural meaning of emotion cues explains how we can recognize the kinds of feelings in a portrayal of a fictional emotional experience and thereby respond affectively. In conjunction with the depicted tokens of cues, we identify these feelings by using our information about the meanings of the tokens' types. The feelings these types naturally mean are the kinds the work portrays.

We noted that since statements of the meaning of types of cues do not require either member to be true, they can be true with regard to a work of fiction. Thus they can provide information about the types of feelings portrayed. They tell us what these feelings are when the work depicts tokens of cues whose types are mentioned in the statements. The work's depictions in conjunction with these statements are information we can employ to identify the types of emotions the work portrays. This explains a manner in which fictional art can be informative of feelings as well as the kind of evidence it provides.[16]

Our recognition of the types of feelings portrayed can be sufficient to cause an affective response. For example, the thought of someone being highly depressed can make us feel sad. Note that this kind of emotional reaction to a work of fiction does not raise the much discussed paradox.[17] Our response is not to tokens of feelings, much less to ones that we believe never took place. Instead, we are reacting to types of feelings that we know.[18]

As in the case of a paradox, a work of fiction is causally contributing to our response. However unlike with the paradox, our reaction does not require any beliefs that we do not accept. Thus there is no antinomy.[19] The result is a process by which art employs emotion cues to bring about an affective response through our recognition of fictional feelings.

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[1] Susan Feagin and Kendall Walton, for example, have argued for this view. Feagin points out that responding with feeling to a work is an important part of appreciating it. See her *Reading with Feeling: The Aes-*

thetics of Appreciation (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), 1; and Walton's "Fearing Fictions", *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. LXXV, no. 1 (January 1978), 6. An historically significant antecedent of this interpretation is found in the claim by Jean-Baptiste Du Bos in the early eighteenth century that the first goal of poetry and painting is to move us (*Le premier but de la poésie et de la peinture est de nous toucher*). Du Bos' thesis influenced extensively the developments in eighteenth century French art that led to the emergence of modernism in the nineteenth. Three hundred years earlier in De Pictura, Alberti maintained a similar interpretation for history painting. Du Bos argues for his thesis in his *Réflexions critique sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (1719), introduction by Dominique Désirat (Paris: École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 1993), esp. 276f. René Démoris' insightfully discusses Du Bos' influence in his *Chardin, la chair et l'objet*, (Paris: Éditions Adam Biro, 1991), 21-28.

[2] Alois Riegl discusses the point that "Recognizing emotion in a work of art presupposes a higher degree of subjectivity (inner experience) in the viewer." See his *The Group Portraiture of Holland*, Evelyn M. Kain and David Britt, trans. (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 1999), 75f.

[3] I am following a usage common in the psychological literature. See, for example, Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen, "Head and Body Cues in the Judgment of Emotion: a Reformulation," *Perception and Motor Skills*, vol. 25 (June, 1967): 711-724; the essays in *Empathy and Its Development*, Nancy Eisenberg and Janet Strayer, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987) as well as Martin Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[4] For a discussion of the concept of one entity carrying information about another, see Jon Barwise and Jerry Seligman, *Information Flow: The Logic of Distributed Systems* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), esp. section 1.4 "The Grammar of Information Flow," 12f.

[5] A question in the ontology of art is whether types are eternal. My analysis does not depend upon a resolution of this issue. As I will show, all it requires is that when a viewer experiences a work of art he or she has

available at that time information about those types of emotion cues whose tokens are depicted. See Julian Dodd, "Defending Musical Platonism," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 42, no. 4 (October 2002): 380-402 and works referred to therein for discussions pertaining to answering the above question.

Dodd (ibid., 381f.) and others take the identity of a type to be determined by the set of one or more properties that a token must have in order to instantiate that type. I accept this interpretation with the provision that not all properties identify a type. Certain ones must be excluded. An example is the property "being a type that is not a token of itself." If it were used to identify a type, a Russellian paradox would be the consequence. For, let T be the type all of whose tokens satisfy this property. The result is the contradiction that T is not token of itself and thus satisfies the property if and only if it is a token of itself. Thus perhaps all types are identified by properties, but not all properties identify types. See W. V. Quine's discussions of Russell's paradox for set theory, in particular "New Foundations for Mathematical Logic," in *From a Logical Point of View*, 2d ed., (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 80-101.

[6] Grice introduced the distinction between these two kinds of meaning in his article "Meaning," *The Philosophical Review*, LXVI, no. 3 (1957), 377-388; reprinted in his *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 213-223.

In "Meaning Revisited" Grice speaks of what I am calling emotion cues as "special cases of natural meaning." They are "the initial natural case." His analogous examples are "forms of behavior: things like groans, screeches, and so on, which mean, or normally mean, that someone is in pain or some other state." (See *Studies in the Way of Words*, 292)

My purpose is to show how the concept of the natural meaning of emotion cues can be used to explain the means by which we identify artistic feelings. I am not proposing a critical analysis of Grice's theory, particularly of his interpretation of natural meaning. That is the subject of a forthcoming article. Furthermore my discussion will not include

what Grice takes to be the natural meaning in statements of the form "A means (meant) to do so-and-so (by x)," where A is a human agent. Steven Davis analyzes the type of meaning in such a statement in "Grice on Natural and Non-Natural Meaning," *Philosophia*, vol. 26, nos. 3-4 (March 1998): 405-419.

7 A statement of natural meaning requiring its right member as well as its left is the characteristic Grice calls "factive." See *Studies in the Way of Words*, 291 and 349.

My analysis of statements of the natural meaning of a token of an emotion cue draws from Fred Dretske's interpretation of a signal and its information. See his *Knowledge and the Flow of Information* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1983), particularly chapter 2, "Communication and Information"; as well as other works such as Précis of "Knowledge and the Flow of Information," *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, vol. 6, no. 1 (March 1983): 55-63; and Perception, Knowledge, and Belief (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

8 "Meaning," *Studies in the Way of Words*, 214. For an analysis of the acceptability of Grice's original interpretation of the concept of what someone meant in performing an action, see my "Meaning and Intention," *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 12 (1988): 1-11.

9 More specifically, (3) requires that John asserted enthusiastically "I won." However, it does not require that he was pleased, i.e., what he meant.

10 Grice discusses this distinction in "Meaning Revisited." He notes that what an individual meant by his action can be voluntary; whereas what his action meant cannot. (See *Studies in the Way of Words*, 292.)

11 For every token there is a corresponding type. This relationship of correspondence is determined by the earlier mentioned (fn. 5) set of one or more properties that a token must have in order to instantiate the type. The set and the resulting relationship enable the token to direct us to its type.

12 In the late seventeenth century (1688) Charles Le Brun proposed an influential analysis of different types of facial emotion cues in his *L'expression des passions et autres conférences; Correspondance*, introduction by Julien Philipe (Paris: Editions Dédale; Maisonneuve et

Larose, 1994). Philipe suggests that in Le Brun's lectures there is a meeting between painting and philosophy ("*une rencontre entre la peinture et la philosophie*" (ibid., 8). Jennifer Montagu discusses the historical significance of Le Brun's analysis in The Expression of the Passions: *The Origin and Influence of Charles Le Brun's Conférence sur l'expression générale et particuliére* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). An example of contemporary work on types of facial emotion cues is found in *Emotion in the Human Face*, Paul Ekman, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982, 2nd. ed.).

[13] Two grammatical differences between (2) and (4) are a necessary part of my analysis in which (2) is a statement about a token whereas (4) is one about a type.

(2) That John asserted enthusiastically "I won" meant (m) that he was pleased.

(4) Someone asserting enthusiastically "I won" means (m) that he or she is pleased. One difference is between their nominal expressions "That John asserted enthusiastically 'I won'" and "Someone asserting enthusiastically 'I won.'" The former is a derived nominal and thereby refers to a specific event. The latter is a gerundive nominal. This kind of noun phrase can refer to either a type of event or a token of it. (4)'s gerundive nominal is expressed in a general form (along with "means" and "is" in the tenseless present) to insure that its reference is to a type (see Noam Chomsky's discussion of these kinds of nominal expressions in "Remarks on Nominalization," *Readings in English Transformational Grammar*, Roderick Jacobs and Peter Rosenbaum, eds. (Waltham, Mass.: Ginn and Company, 1970), 184-221).

The second difference is the contrasting roles between the pronouns that correspond to the above nominals. Since (2) is a statement about a token event involving John, "he" refers back to him. It is an example of what P.T. Geach called a pronoun of "laziness." On the other hand as part of the description of the natural meaning of a type, "he" and "she" in (4) do not refer to any specific individual, i.e. a token. Thus they are not pronouns of laziness. Rather, they are examples of pronominalization with non-referential indefinite antecedents. See Geach's *Ref-*

erence and Generality (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), 151f; as well as Barbara Hall Partee's discussion in "Opacity, Coreference, and Pronouns," *Semantics of Natural Language*, Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harman, eds. (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1972), 415-441.

[14] This relationship is perhaps what Grice has in mind when he speaks of linguistic meaning as "timeless." (See "Utterer's Meaning and Intentions," 89f., "Utterer's Meaning, Sentence-Meaning, and Word-Meaning," 119f., and "Meaning," 217, all in *Studies in the Way of Words*. Jon Barwise and John Perry propose a theory of how linguistic tokens receive meaning from their corresponding types in *Situations and Attitudes* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983).

[15] Barwise gives a more extensive argument for this thesis in terms of types of situations in his "Logic and Information," *The Situation in Logic* (Stanford, CA: Center for the Study of Language and Information, 1989), 37-57.

[16] James J. Gibson discusses other aspects of the information art provides in "The Information Available in Pictures," Leonardo, vol. 4 (1971): 27-35, reprinted in *Reasons for Realism: Selected Essays of James J. Gibson*, Edward Reed and Rebecca Jones, eds. (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1982).

[17] See, for example, the introduction and several discussions of the paradox of fiction in *Emotion and the Arts*, Mette Hjort and Sue Laver, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[18] More specifically, we are responding to our concept or thought of what the types of feelings are like. Our reactions to feeling types supports the thesis of *Thought Theory* that "thought contents can be the cause of emotions" and that "thought contents can generate genuine emotion." See respectively Peter Lamarque, "How Can We Fear and Pity Fictions?" in *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 21, no. 4 (Autumn 1981): 296, and Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 81.

[19] For a discussion of "paradox," "antinomy," and other related concepts, see Quine's *The Ways of Paradox and other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1966).