



## Self-referential emotions

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine a special subgroup of emotion: self-referential emotions such as shame, pride and guilt. Self-referential emotions are usually conceptualized as (i) essentially involving the subject herself and as (ii) having complex conditions such as the capacity to represent others' thoughts. I will show that rather than depending on a fully fledged 'theory of mind' and an explicit language-based self-representation, (i) pre-forms of self-referential emotions appear at early developmental stages already exhibiting their characteristic structure of the intentional object of the emotion being identical with or intricately related to the subject experiencing the emotional state and that (ii) they precede and substantially contribute to the development of more complex representations and to the development of a self-concept, to social interaction and to ways of understanding of other minds.

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### 1. Self-referential emotions

Self-referential emotions have never been at the center of philosophical or psychological accounts of emotion (but they have gained some attention by e.g., Darwin, 1872; Hume, 1739; Satre, 1931–1939).<sup>1</sup> They are nevertheless particularly interesting and informative emotional states, as they are essentially affective evaluations of the individual herself that stand at the intersection between self-consciousness and emotion. I will argue that self-referential emotions as affective evaluations essentially contribute to self-consciousness.

#### 1.1. Structure

Self-referential emotions constitute a subgroup of emotions that have specific functions and a special structure. Generally, emotions provide evaluative information about the objects towards which they are directed in the world. They constitute an appraisal of the significance of the objects in the environment for the cognitive system (see Scherer, Schorr, & Johnstone, 2001). But all emotions are also about the cognitive system itself: in every emotional self-representation, the subject herself is involved at least as the subject of the emotional experience and evaluation in relation to the conditions of the environment, i.e., the state of the subject is always involved in the emotional event and the emotional evaluation is an evaluation of the environment for the cognitive system. Self-referential emotions, in particular, can be thought of as being genuinely about the subject herself: they constitute an essential emotional self-representation and -evaluation. Typical self-referential emotions are pride, shame, embarrassment, humiliation, hubris and guilt. E.g., when I feel ashamed, I

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<sup>1</sup> Self-referential emotions that are emotions essentially about the subject herself (and as such can involve feelings in the phenomenology) should be distinguished from what has been introduced as "Selbstgefühl" (self-feeling) in the literature (see Frank 2002) or has been discussed as existential feelings (see Slaby & Stephan, 2008). These are phenomenal states of a subject but not genuinely self-referential emotions.

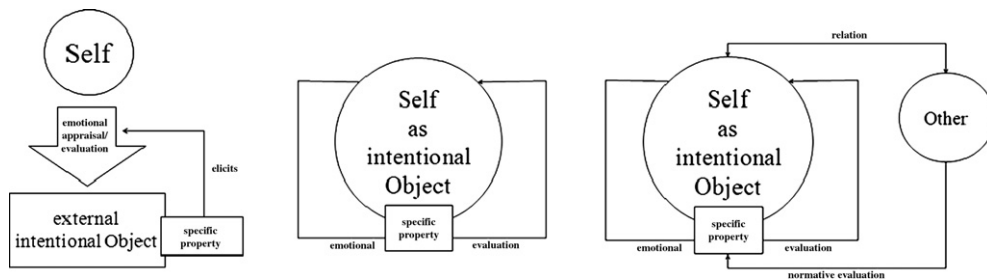


Fig. 1. Structure of non-self-referential and genuinely self-referential emotion.

evaluate myself as behaving inappropriately, therefore, experiencing the emotion of shame which directly points to myself as what my emotion is about. This difference between self-referential and non-self-referential emotions is reflected in their characteristic structures: for (i) non-self-referential emotions, the subject stands in an evaluative relation to an intentional object in the environment that is evaluated either *per se* or specifically in terms of a certain property that is notable for the subject. For example, I am happy about the pretty red flowers on the balcony. I am happy about them as such or specifically in virtue of their property of being red and pretty which is notable for me, because I generally really like the color red. Yet, no essential relation between the intentional object and the subject herself is relevant for the emotion, even if the emotion supplies information about the state of the subject.<sup>2</sup> For (ii) self-referential emotions, however, the subject emotionally evaluates herself (again in terms of a specific property or *per se*), i.e., the subject and intentional object of the emotion are *identical*. In the case of pride, I am proud of myself because of my being an honest person, and because I believe this to be a valuable trait of character. It is, of course, also conceivable that I can be proud of myself *per se*, i.e., of myself without regarding any specific property that is relevant and notable but as a person as such.

As already called to attention by Darwin's, 1872 observation that "the thinking about others thinking of us [...] excites a blush" (p.325), there is at least one further individual involved (or represented) in the evaluative process taking place for self-referential emotion (this individual does not need to be present in person, it suffices, if she is represented in the subject's mind). Human individuals are parts of social groups and always stand in interrelations with other individuals. This is important in the case of self-referential emotions as the subject will also consider the evaluations of his properties and actions by (significant) others. Say, I am quite proud of myself because I can burp very loudly and I subsequently notice that my social environment consisting of my favorite aunt and my mother is not fond of this at all, I might change the evaluation of my behavior to comply with their expectations. There is an intricate relation between the external evaluations given by close social contacts and the internal evaluations that an individual will make of herself. So instead of being proud of my super burp, I may become ashamed of it and change my future behavior to try to avoid them from happening again. For an overview of the difference between the structures of genuinely self-referential emotion and non-self-referential emotion, see Fig. 1.

There is a further subclass of self-referential emotions (which are not genuinely self-referential): One can also be proud of an external object, e.g., one's daughter, because of a specific property (e.g., she accomplished something really notable) and also just as a person as such. For the structure of this kind of self-referential emotion, an essential relation between the intentional object and the subject, through which an indirect evaluation of the subject herself takes place, is relevant and constitutive. In the example, this is the close family tie between subject (mother) and the intentional object (daughter).<sup>3</sup> This need not be a relation of kin but anything non-trivially close to the subject and the other can constitute this connection, e.g., shared values.

## 1.2. Specific properties

Self-referential emotions are different from basic emotions such as fear, anger, joy or sadness in two important ways: (i) they do not involve discrete universal facial expressions that can be clearly discriminated (see Ekman, 1972; Ekman, 1999;

<sup>2</sup> There is a special case of structure of a non-self-referential emotion in which the subject has an emotion towards some intentional object (e.g., I love my mother) because of a special and notable property (her liveliness), in which case the property is distinguished especially as a property that the *subject has herself*. So, in this example, I love my mother because of a property we both share. Here, there is a self-reference: the mother becomes the intentional object of the love because of being intricately related to the subject of the emotion by a certain property that she values highly in herself. Yet, it remains a case of non-self-referential emotion as the emotion remains directed toward the external object.

<sup>3</sup> Hume (1739) is one of the few philosophers who give an analysis of the structure of these cases of self-referential emotion. He reflects and discusses a few limitations that actually serve to define them more accurately. One is "[...] that everything related to us, which produces pleasure or pain, produces likewise pride or humility. There is not only a relation required but a close one, and a closer than is required to joy." (Section 6.3). He calls these objects the causes of the emotion which is not directed towards the causes themselves but towards the subject. As in my analysis, these causes are such because of a specific property, which he calls *quality*. And they are either part of the subjects or they are something closely related: these are traits of character ("the good and bad qualities of our actions or our manners constitute virtue or vice", (Section 5.2)) or of external properties associated with us ("tis the beauty or deformity of our person, houses, equipage, or furniture" (Section 5.2)).

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