One does not have to share William Connolly’s vitalist affiliations in order to have serious reservations about Ruth Leys’s essay and response.1 Simple phenomenological concerns will do to make one suspicious of her core claim:

From my perspective, intentionality involves concept-possession; the term *intentionality* carries with it the idea that thoughts and feelings are directed to conceptually and cognitively appraised and meaningful objects in the world. The general aim of my paper is to propose that affective neuroscientists and the new affect theorists are thus making a mistake when they suggest that emotion or affect can be defined in nonconceptual or nonintentional terms.2

I worry about the difficulty of defining the boundaries of a notion like conceptual, especially since on the next page Leys claims an equivalence between cognition and signification. There seems at least a tendency toward tautology in equating “nonconceptual” with “nonintentional,” as if one could be used to define the other. But then signification enters the

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picture, although criteria for signification involve simple recognition and do not implicate the awareness of logical connectives that seem necessary for conceptual and cognitive appraisal. And the Wittgenstein in me worries even more why Leys thinks that intentionality should be confined to only one set of traits despite the fact that a great variety of language games depend on something like intentional awareness.

So, in opposition to Leys, I will argue that there are diverse and valuable forms of nonconceptual emotions and that these are present in moods and in esthetic experiences. Let me offer two concrete examples of situations where there is indubitable presence of affect and, I think, of intentionality, although these situations seem not to meet Leys’s criteria for intentionality. At stake ultimately is the intelligibility and force of a range of expressive states, including much of the arts, which depend on the possibility of recognizing intentional states that are not bound by concept and any even moderately strict notion of cognition. (Both come from my book *The Particulars of Rapture*.)

Consider first the question of mood. What kind of intentionality can one attribute to moods, given the fact that they alter our sense of agency? Moods typically are imperialistic; moods do not compete, but only one dominates at any given time because they are without boundaries. Moods are total because they set affective atmospheres and color all that the atmosphere contains. And moods seem a strange combination of passive and active. There is a thinning of the powers of agency because agents become the participants in this shaping totality and come to feel that powers of action seem distant and not particularly relevant. Moods also seem particularly resistant to concepts, especially if one recognizes that there are two possible states of the agent here. One can simply be aware of the world as filtered through the mood. Or one can be aware of oneself as being shaped by the mood. Only the second is at all conceptual. And even then the concept that one is in a mood covers very little of what is going on for an intending agent. Even when one identifies the mood one need not take any practical orientation toward it. In fact one can wonder at the gap between this limited cognition and the scope the mood claims for the psyche.


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Rather than debate how much cognition is required before something counts as an intentional state, it seems more accurate and more practical to admit that consciousness within a mood and self-consciousness about a mood are simply different modes by which agents take up positions in a world. After all, the mind can dwell within these affective conditions—deepening the atmosphere and sharpening connections between observations without any visible irritable reaching after conceptual structures.

Then there is the question of whether anything like the concept of basic emotions suffices for the active components of affective life. I think we have at least to distinguish between emotions and feelings. Emotions lead agents to shape experience in terms of plots with points of incitement leading to projected action. When I identify as angry it follows that I identify a cause and desire to perform certain actions in relation to that cause. When I identify as fearful or joyful there will be other practical orientations. But is this the case when I suddenly recognize how a bird dips its wings or a color comes alive in relation to another color, as long as I attend to the concrete interplay among visual phenomena? And what about the possibility that I just watch a sunset, with no conceptual agenda at all? We can give the name feelings to states of sensation that involve the imagination but that do not enter into the structure of cause and consequence because the state of attention becomes an end in itself. In such a situation I am not even sure there is signification for all that occupies my awareness.

Probably the most radical case for competing models of intentionality takes place when artists evoke feelings that depend on what we might call the counter-conceptual use of signification, quintessentially in surrealist art. But we need not use such radical examples. In many of his landscapes in the 1890s Paul Cézanne makes rocks virtually balloons that have no weight or mass. Then he has trees serve the counter-intuitive role of providing stability for the painting while insisting that this logic holds only because painting can define modes of vision to which we are blind in practical life. I submit that these trees and rocks elicit powerful feelings precisely because the stance of the painter and eventually the stance of the viewer recognize what cannot be coherently conceptualized except insofar as one honors the logic of the painting itself. And that logic is insistently particular in the sense that it holds only insofar as we see the painting as a distinctive event with qualities that depend on imagination rather than cognition.

My claims do not lead to vitalism, and they do not depend on mysterious half-second lags. They lead only to respecting the mind’s many ways of working in and on the world. Leys’s “homilies” on the powers of science and logic put that variety at risk. In the name of lucidity she offers justifi-
cations for a blindness to what are substantial sources of pleasure and significance for many people who want to take seriously the intention simply to feel the powers of their own capacities of attention and care. It would be very strange if there were only one kind of intentionality or one version of cognition capable of including the range of states that begins with simple awareness and extends to the mind’s preparation for action.