The feeling of having a first impression

Cognitive feelings are often thought to play a role in cognition when we encounter entities and appraise them as familiar or unfamiliar. With respect to these issues, the feeling of familiarity (and more rarely, the feeling of unfamiliarity) has so far been at the center of discussion. Philosophers and psychologists describe the feeling of familiarity as the subjective sense that we have encountered something before, even if we cannot immediately retrieve the information relevant to recognizing that entity. Psychological models construe the feeling of familiarity as a memory signal that arises during a search for a match in memory for a perceived entity, with expectations playing a prominent role (Whittlesea & Williams, 2000). By contrast, when we immediately recognize an entity, we experience recognition, in which case there is little or no feeling of familiarity. The feeling of familiarity is characterized by several features: it is category-dependent (an object may be familiar with respect to one category and unfamiliar with respect to another), it is partially epistemically opaque (we lack access to the entire web of relevant information, even if some information about the entity is available to us), and it is gradable, in the sense that it can be modulated by expectations (Dokic, 2025, Chapter 7).

Cognitive feelings are usually considered metacognitive because they monitor and regulate first-order cognitive processes, such as a memory search in the case of the feeling of familiarity. Metacognitive feelings are used as cues to guide one's mental actions, for instance by prompting one to continue searching for missing information.

This talk focuses on what happens when we encounter entities that are not familiar to us—cases in which we have neither recognition nor a feeling of familiarity. While the most obvious response might be that we experience either an absence of familiarity or perhaps a feeling of unfamiliarity (Dokic, 2025, Chapter 7), I will argue that the feelings involved in these experiences are more complex and more informative than they prima facie appear. More precisely, I will show that there is a richer kind of experience, which is part of our everyday phenomenology but has not yet been explored by philosophers of feelings: *the feeling of having a first impression*. To illustrate with a few examples: we step outside London's St Pancras station for the first time and immediately like the city, or we meet a new colleague and instantly judge her to be nice. These immediate assessments are reflected in everyday talk, where the notion of a "first impression" is used to make sense of our experiences.

There has been some theoretical interest in what happens when we encounter new entities. In such cases, apart from experiencing a feeling of unfamiliarity, as mentioned above, we might experience a feeling of novelty (Weierich et al., 2010), a feeling of curiosity (Goupil & Proust, 2023), or perhaps a feeling of surprise (Reisenzein et al., 2019). However, I contend that these experiences are less frequent than the experience of having a first impression of a newly encountered entity.

My main goal is to offer a positive characterization of the *feeling of having a first impression*. I will argue that this feeling is a complex state composed of metacognitive awareness, an affective

reaction, and a distinctive phenomenological profile. Like the feelings of familiarity and unfamiliarity, the feeling of having a first impression can be category-dependent (we can have a first impression of an entity we already know if we encounter it under a new category), epistemically opaque (in the sense that we do not know which information the feeling is based on), and gradable (in the sense that it is modulated by expectations, which may affect its intensity) (Kind, 2021). However, this feeling is more complex and does not merely track information such as "this entity is new," "unfamiliar," or "unexpected."

I will show that the feeling of having a first impression is best understood in terms of its function in cognitive life. It appears to play a central role in enabling a rapid, valenced, here-and-now assessment of a newly encountered entity, even when little information is available. In this respect, although the feeling of having a first impression may track the subject's first-order cognitive processes (as other cognitive feelings do), it is interpreted (Unkelbach, 2006) as being about the entity in front of the subject. That is, the affective information is used to evaluate the new entity with respect to its importance and relevance to one's current goals (Zadra & Clore, 2011). This suggests that, in some cases, cognitive feelings are outward-directed and function to help us navigate the world around us, rather than only to monitor and control our mental processes (Proust, 2013).

Introducing the *feeling of having a first impression* into the domain of cognitive feelings will hopefully be significant to understanding how the mind deals with novelty.

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