

## No Reason to Focus on Emotional Episodes

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Volume 18, Number 2, 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1118203ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1118203ar>

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Publisher(s)

Centre de recherche en éthique (CRÉ)

ISSN

1718-9977 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Díaz, R. (2024). No Reason to Focus on Emotional Episodes. *Les ateliers de l'éthique / The Ethics Forum*, 18(2), 19–23. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1118203ar>

Article abstract

Christine Tappolet's book *Philosophy of Emotion: A Contemporary Introduction*, like many other works in emotion theory, focuses primarily on emotional episodes at the expense of so-called "emotional dispositions." I argue that there is no reason for theories of emotion to focus on emotional episodes or to reserve the term "emotion" for them.



# NO REASON TO FOCUS ON EMOTIONAL EPISODES

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## ABSTRACT:

Christine Tappolet's book *Philosophy of Emotion: A Contemporary Introduction*, like many other works in emotion theory, focuses primarily on emotional episodes at the expense of so-called "emotional dispositions." I argue that there is no reason for theories of emotion to focus on emotional episodes or to reserve the term "emotion" for them.

## RÉSUMÉ :

L'ouvrage de Christine Tappolet, *Philosophy of Emotion: A Contemporary Introduction*, comme de nombreux autres ouvrages sur la théorie des émotions, se concentre principalement sur les épisodes émotionnels au détriment de ce que l'on appelle les « dispositions émotionnelles ». Je soutiens qu'il n'y a aucune raison pour que les théories de l'émotion se concentrent sur les épisodes émotionnels ou réservent le terme « émotion » à ceux-ci.

In this comment, I will problematize a theoretical move made at the outset of *Philosophy of Emotion: A Contemporary Introduction* (Tappolet, 2023) and many other works in emotion theory.<sup>1</sup> This move comprises two steps: (step 1) distinguishing between emotional episodes and emotional dispositions, and (step 2) focusing primarily on emotional episodes at the expense of emotional dispositions.

Let's first examine the distinction between emotional episodes and emotional dispositions. Emotion terms can be used to refer to two different things. When I say, "I have been afraid of my neighbour since 2020," I am referring to something that persists over time. But when I say, "I'm afraid of my neighbour now," I am referring to something that happens at some point. Tappolet and others call the thing that persists a *fear disposition*, and the thing that happens a *fear episode*.

Step 1 is already questionable. The fact that my fear of my neighbour has persisted since 2020 doesn't entail that it is a mere disposition to fear. The fact that something persists over time doesn't necessarily mean it is a disposition to something else. My fear of my neighbour since 2020 might be better described as a "standing fear."<sup>2</sup> Referring to it as a "fear disposition" implies that it is not fear, because a disposition to fear is not fear. Thus, by labeling emotions that persist as "emotion dispositions", step 1 anticipates step 2.

For the sake of the argument, I'll temporarily accept a dichotomy between fear dispositions and fear episodes (step 1) to assess Tappolet's reported reason for focusing primarily on emotional episodes (step 2). Note that "focusing primarily on emotional episodes" means considering just emotional episodes (and not emotional dispositions) when developing theories of emotion—that is, when trying to elucidate whether emotions are social constructs; whether emotions are feelings, motivations, or evaluations; and so on.

In chapter 2 of the book, Tappolet claims:

It is often thought that because emotional dispositions can at least in part be understood in terms of emotional episodes, emotional episodes should be the primary focus of philosophers. This is not to say, of course, that emotional dispositions are not interesting in their own right, particularly because changing them is fundamental to changes in our emotional responses (see Chapter 12). In any case, it is very common to use the term "emotion" to refer to emotional episodes, and this is also how I will use the term. (Tappolet, 2022, p. 32)

Here, Tappolet mentions a reason for focusing primarily on emotional episodes and reserving the term "emotion" for them. The reason is that emotional dispositions can be (partly) understood in terms of emotional episodes. Using fear of one's neighbour as an example, we can reconstruct the argument as follows:

- P1. If *being afraid of one's neighbour since 2020* can be partly understood as a disposition to *be momentarily afraid of them*, the latter should be the primary focus of study.
- P2. Something can be understood as a disposition to manifestation *M* when condition *C* obtains, iff it would make its bearer *M* if it were the case that *C*.<sup>3</sup>
- P3. *Being afraid of one's neighbour since 2020* makes it the case that one would *be momentarily afraid of them* if it were the case that *one sees them*.
- C1. *Being afraid of one's neighbour since 2020* can be understood as a disposition to *be momentarily afraid of them* when *one sees them*. (by P2 & P3)
- C2. *Being momentarily afraid of one's neighbour* should be the primary focus of study for research on emotion. (by P1 & C1)

In this argument, “being afraid of one’s neighbour since 2020” refers to a fear disposition, and “being momentarily afraid of one’s neighbour” refers to a fear episode, but the argument is meant to generalize to all emotions. I use a particular example to show the intuitive force of the argument and in way in which this intuitive force disappears when we apply the same reasoning to other examples. Take seasickness. By the same reasoning, we obtain the following argument:

- P1\*. If *being seasick* can be partly understood as a disposition to *vomit*, the latter should be the primary focus of study.
- P2. Something can be understood as a disposition to manifestation *M* when condition *C* obtains, iff it would make its bearer *M* if it were the case that *C*.
- P3\*. *Being seasick* makes it the case that one would *vomit* if it were the case that *one is on the sea*.
- C1\*. *Being seasick* can be understood as a disposition to *vomit* when *one is on the sea*. (by P2 & P3)
- C2.\* *Vomiting* should be the primary focus of study for research on seasickness. (by P1 & C1)

This second argument mirrors the previous one but substitutes its key elements: the disposition (“being seasick” instead of “being afraid of one’s neighbour since 2020”), the manifestation (“vomit” instead of “be momentarily afraid of them [one’s neighbour]”) and the eliciting conditions (“is on the sea” instead of “sees one’s neighbour”). However, in contrast to the previous argument, its conclusion (C2\*) seems absurd. Why would that be? One could argue that seasickness is not the right comparison (but see Lyons, 1980, p. 56). Let’s consider an example of a mental state more similar to emotion: desire. Using a desire for chocolate as the example, we get the following argument:

- P1\*\*. If *wanting chocolate* can be partly understood as a disposition to *feel pleasure*, the latter should be the primary focus of study.

- P2. Something can be understood as a disposition to manifestation *M* when condition *C* obtains, iff it would make its bearer *M* if it were the case that *C*.
- P3\*\*. *Wanting chocolate* makes it the case that one would *feel pleasure* if it were the case that one *eats chocolate*.
- C1\*\*. *Wanting chocolate* can be understood as a disposition to *feel pleasure* when one *eats chocolate*. (by P2 & P3)
- C2\*\*. *Feelings of pleasure* should be the primary focus of study for research on desire. (by P1 & C1)

Again, the conclusion (C2\*\*) seems absurd. This should make us question our premises. P2 and P3\*\* seem relatively uncontroversial. Thus, we might question P1\*\*. And we might question it, not only in the case of desire (P1\*\*), but also in the cases of seasickness (P1\*) and emotion (P1). More generally, it seems like the possibility of something being partly understood as a disposition to something else is not a good reason to focus primarily on that something else. If so, Tappolet's reported argument fails because it builds on a false premise.

In this commentary, I argued that there is no reason for theories of emotion to focus on emotional episodes or to reserve the term "emotion" for them. If this is true, we should perhaps refer to "emotional dispositions" as "standing emotions" to avoid suggesting that they are ontologically subordinate. Indeed, the essence of emotions might lie in standing emotions and not in emotional episodes (see Díaz, 2023; Stout, 2022; Naar, 2022).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Ben-Ze'ev (2010, p. 55), Colombetti (2013, p. 25), Deonna and Teroni (2012, p. 13), Döring (2003, p. 223), Lazarus (1991, p. 46), Mitchell (2020, p. 1241), Montague (2009, p. 172), Prinz (2004, p. 180), Roberts and Krueger (2021, p. 190), Rossi and Tappolet (2019, p. 545), Scherer (2005, p. 699), Shargel (2014, p. 64), and Zamuner (2015, p. 22).
- <sup>2</sup> See Bartlett (2018) for an extended discussion of this issue.
- <sup>3</sup> This premise builds on the so-called Simple Conditional Analysis of dispositions (see Choi and Fara 2021 for alternative characterizations of dispositions).

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