Les ateliers de l'éthique
The Ethics Forum

Being Ambitious About Emotions in Value Epistemology

Michael Milona

Volume 18, numéro 2, 2024

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1118206ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1118206ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Centre de recherche en éthique (CRÉ)

ISSN

1718-9977 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Milona, M. (2024). Being Ambitious About Emotions in Value Epistemology. *Les ateliers de l'éthique / The Ethics Forum*, *18*(2), 34–39. https://doi.org/10.7202/1118206ar

Résumé de l'article

Ce commentaire examine la thèse centrale du chapitre 7 selon laquelle les émotions peuvent être une source de justification immédiate des croyances évaluatives. Je me concentre sur deux défis clés de cette thèse, l'un ancré dans le manque de fiabilité présumé des émotions et l'autre dans leur propre susceptibilité à la justification. Mon objectif est de renforcer les réponses du chapitre à ces défis, en traçant des pistes prometteuses.

BEING AMBITIOUS ABOUT EMOTIONS IN VALUE EPISTEMOLOGY

MICHAEL MILONA
TORONTO METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT:

This commentary investigates chapter 7's central thesis that emotions can be a source of immediate justification for evaluative beliefs. I focus on two key challenges to this thesis, one rooted in the purported unreliability of emotions and another in their own susceptibility to justification. My aim is to buttress the chapter's responses to these challenges, charting promising avenues forward.

RÉSUMÉ :

Ce commentaire examine la thèse centrale du chapitre 7 selon laquelle les émotions peuvent être une source de justification immédiate des croyances évaluatives. Je me concentre sur deux défis clés de cette thèse, l'un ancré dans le manque de fiabilité présumé des émotions et l'autre dans leur propre susceptibilité à la justification. Mon objectif est de renforcer les réponses du chapitre à ces défis, en traçant des pistes prometteuses.

THE JUSTIFICATION THESIS AND BEYOND

This commentary explores chapter 7 of Christine Tappolet's *Philosophy of Emotion: A Contemporary Introduction*. The chapter, "Emotions and Theoretical Rationality," asks to what extent emotions play a role in justifying evaluative beliefs. Given Tappolet's broadly perceptualist theory, it isn't surprising that she has high hopes for emotions in value epistemology. A perceptualist, after all, analyzes emotions as appearances of value; these appearances incline one to form corresponding evaluative beliefs. This looks broadly similar to the way in which sensory experiences tend to produce corresponding beliefs about colours, shapes, and so on. With sensory experiences, there is moreover a normative connection: they can justify the corresponding empirical beliefs that they cause. They arguably do so *immediately*, independently of anything else we believe. The idea that emotions can do the same is what Tappolet calls the *justification thesis* (p. 121).

This thesis should be distinguished from the implausible view that emotions provide indefeasible justification. For example, if Luka fears the spider on his arm, then the justification thesis says he has *prima facie* reason to believe it is dangerous; but if his trusted arachnologist friend says that it isn't dangerous, he shouldn't rely on his fear to judge otherwise. The same goes for sensory experience. For example, if Whitney visually experiences a ball as red, she plausibly has immediate justification to believe that it is. But her justification is only *prima facie*; if she rightly believes that a red light is illuminating the room, she shouldn't believe that the ball is red on the basis of her experience.

Tappolet observes that advocates of the justification thesis tend to also accept the *epistemic indispensability* thesis (p. 122). As the label suggests, the idea is that we cannot acquire evaluative knowledge without emotion. This treats the relationship between emotion and value analogously to that between visual experience and colour. This doesn't mean that every justified belief about value or colour requires a corresponding experience. For example, I might learn from a trusted friend that their new car is red, or that some historical dictator I've never heard of is evil. But if I've never had a sensory experience of redness or an emotional experience of evil, I arguably wouldn't have the conceptual resources to form those beliefs at all.

In evaluating the indispensability thesis, I think it is helpful to distinguish weak and strong interpretations. *Weak indispensability*, as I construe it, says that we need emotions to know about some but not all values. For example, perhaps emotions are essential for learning about sentimental values such as the shameful, the amusing, and so on, while others such as goodness/badness *simpliciter* and moral right/wrong are known by other means. *Strong indispensability*, by contrast, says that we need emotions to know about all values. Strong indispensability is a theoretically exciting prospect; it sets the stage for the development of a unified epistemology of value rooted in emotion, one on which emotions supply the initial appearances of value from which evaluative thought

and reflection can proceed.[1] But while the prospects for different versions of the indispensability thesis are important for any systematic epistemology of value, they are beyond the purview of this commentary. I turn instead to what comprises the bulk of chapter 7: challenges to the justification thesis.

CONFRONTING KEY OBJECTIONS

The justification thesis faces serious objections. While the chapter considers several, I focus on just two here. The first is the *objection from reliability*, according to which emotions are not reliable enough to be a source of justification for evaluative beliefs (pp. 123-125). Here Tappolet emphasizes the worry that emotions distort reasoning by leading us to focus on considerations that confirm our emotions rather than debunk them. For example, in fearing we arguably "tend to focus on information that justifies our fear, leaving aside what could prove us wrong in our assumption that there is danger" (p. 123).

We might be tempted to reject reliability as a requirement for justification. But as Tappolet indicates, this at best leads to a pyrrhic victory. An attractive response instead speaks to the reliability of emotions. Tappolet makes several helpful observations on this front. First, evolutionary considerations arguably favour the reliability of some emotions. For instance, if fear is sensitive to danger, this will help us to survive; if anger is sensitive to slights, this will help us to cooperate. But appealing to evolution isn't sufficient, Tappolet observes, because our current environment is very different from that of our evolutionary ancestors. Second, emotions might be unreliable in certain contexts but reliable in others. Anger might be reliable for tracking offences against honour, for instance, but not reliable about all wrongings and injustices. Lastly, at least with respect to certain values, it isn't clear how we can get started thinking about the reliability of emotions without granting that they are defeasible starting points. Here she mentions amusingness, disgustingness, and offensiveness.

These observations strike me as reasonable. But as I'm guessing Tappolet would agree, the book is programmatic in answering the reliability challenge. It would be desirable to have a detailed and systematic response. In view of this larger project, the following points are crucial:

1. We need an understanding of how we come to learn about defeaters for our emotions. This is especially important if we hope to pair the justification thesis with the indispensability thesis. It won't do, for example, to claim that we can check on when emotions tend to be accurate through emotion-independent reasoning (Milona, 2016). To avoid that kind of picture, we might look to emotions that are about other emotions (see Hutton, forthcoming). In feeling intense anger, for example, I might have unease—another emotion—about that very experience of anger. This unease might serve as a defeater, but not one that I learn about independently of emotion.

2. Certain ways in which emotions are unreliable appear irrelevant. Advocates of the justification thesis think that each emotion purports to tell us

about some specific value. This means that when we're evaluating whether an emotion is reliable, we need to get clear about the value for which it would provide immediate, *prima facie* justification. It is crucial, in particular, to set aside what I'll call *epistemic abuses* of emotional experience whereby we rely on an emotion to form a belief that isn't the one that the emotion itself represents and thus purports to tell us about. For example, Tappolet mentions experiments in which participants appeared to be making unreliable moral condemnations on the basis of their disgust. But if disgust doesn't even represent wrongness, advocates of the justification thesis can ignore such cases. By way of analogy, it doesn't impugn the reliability of our triangle experiences if people sometimes use them to insist that certain things are square. The real question is whether triangle experiences are reliable with respect to triangles. But *do* people epistemically abuse their emotions? I suspect so; some people may, for self-interested reasons, treat emotions that don't have direct moral purport (e.g., arguably disgust) as if they did.[2] But I won't argue this here.

3. We should keep in mind our overall goals in value epistemology. These include not only accounting for the evaluative justification we have, but also explaining the difficulty of some questions. In this way, if emotions are discovered to be unreliable with respect to the hard questions about which we are reasonably uncertain, this is congenial for advocates of the justification thesis. For example, when thinking about complex moral problems involving cross-cultural conflict, we may not be confident in our moral beliefs. If our emotions are similarly erratic and/or conflicting, then this broadly synergizes with the spirit of an emotion-centric approach to value epistemology. Since defenders of such a view need to explain the evaluative justification and knowledge we in fact have, the hope should be for a kind of Goldilocks view—namely, one that allows for just the right amount of reliability.

A second objection to the justification thesis is what Tappolet calls *the objection from why-questions* (pp. 125-130) The objection starts from the observation that we treat emotions as themselves capable of being justified. For example, the question "Why are you afraid?" can be understood not only causally but also normatively. If my fear is rooted in an irrational belief, I may be able to causally explain my fear but not justify it. This might be thought to suggest that emotions aren't *sources* of justification. Instead, the sources of evaluative justification are whatever mental states justify the emotions. There is apparently a contrast here with sensory experiences, for which questions of justification seem misplaced. Asking normative why-questions about visual and auditory experiences, for example, makes no sense (at least according to the objection).

Tappolet doesn't find this objection from why-questions decisive. She identifies multiple strategies, but the main line of response seems to proceed as follows. She begins by granting that emotions can be justified or not. But they enjoy a kind of *default* justification. Furthermore, as she puts it, "What is sufficient for justification by default for an emotion is, in all likelihood, very differ-

ent from what is necessary for the justification of evaluative beliefs" (p. 129). This is important since it means that an emotion's justifiers won't necessarily be able to provide emotion-independent justification for a relevant evaluative belief.

This line of response is intriguing. However, I wonder whether we can't adopt a more straightforward strategy (cf. Cowan, 2018, pp. 229-231). I suggest building from the following insight: whatever confers justification on emotions falls short of what would be needed to justify corresponding evaluative beliefs. The default justification proposal fits with this insight, but there are alternatives. One tempting alternative says that emotions are ordinarily justified by states that lack evaluative content, but evaluative beliefs cannot be justified by states lacking in evaluative content. For example, anger at a friend for lying might be justified by a set of mental states none of which represent having been wronged. Instead, it is justified by non-evaluative representations about what the friend said, what their intentions were, and so on. By contrast, no constellation of non-evaluative representations would be sufficient on its own to justify a *belief* that one was wronged. For that, one would need some representation linking the lying to wrongness, whether that be a direct experience of the lying as wrong, or a background belief that lying is wrong, from which they can infer that lying is wrong in this case. Of course, this raises a question about *why* emotional representations of value don't require evaluative representations to be justified, while evaluative beliefs do. One avenue worth exploring, which I only gesture at here, begins from the thought that anger is the most primitive way of representing wrongness; there is no other mode of representing wrongness available to serve as a necessary ingredient in anger's justification. Such a view may seem natural in light of the analogy with sensory experience, as well as in light of Tappolet's proposal (chapter 6) that emotions have nonconceptual content. On this view, emotions do not require evaluative representations for their justification because they are where evaluative representation begins.

NOTES

[1] If part of strong indispensability's attraction is its promise of epistemological unity, then arguably its advocates should seek to explain not only knowledge of values, in a narrow sense, but also reasons for action. Otherwise, one should stand ready to explain why a bifurcated epistemology is appropriate here. For stories about how emotions might provide insight into practical reasons, see Tappolet (2016, ch. 5) and Milona (2022).

[2] Kumar (2017) maintains that there is an attitude of *moral* disgust distinct from *pathogen* disgust. But see Bollard (2022) for doubts about genuinely moral disgust.

REFERENCES

Bollard, Mara, "Is There Such a Thing as Genuinely Moral Disgust?," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, vol. 13 , 2022, pp. 501-522.

Cowan, Robert, "Epistemic Sentimentalism and Epistemic Reason-Responsiveness," in Anna Bergqvist and Robert Cowan (eds.), *Evaluative Perception*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 219-236.

Hutton, James, “Unreliable Emotions and Ethical Knowledge,”*Philosophical Quarterly*, forthcoming.
Kumar, Victor, “Foul Behavior.” *Philosophers’ Imprint*, vol. 17, no. 15, 2017, pp. 1-17.
Milona, Michael, “Taking the Perceptual Analogy Seriously,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2016, pp. 897-915.
———, “What ‘Values’ Are Emotions About?” in Julien Deonna, Christine Tappolet, and Fabrice Teroni (eds.), *A Tribute to Ronald de Sousa*, 2022. URL: https://www.unige.ch/cisa/related-sites/ronald-de-sousa/assets/pdf/Milona_Paper.pdf
Tappolet, Christine, *Emotions, Value, and Agency*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.
———, *Philosophy of Emotion: A Contemporary Introduction*, New York, Routledge, 2023.