

## No reason to focus on emotional episodes

Rodrigo Díaz, Institute of Philosophy, CSIC

**Abstract:** Christine Tappolet's book *Philosophy of Emotion: A contemporary introduction*, and many other works in emotion theory, focus primarily on emotional episodes at the expense of so-called "emotional dispositions." I argue that there are no reasons for theories of emotion to focus on emotional episodes, or to reserve the term "emotion" for emotional episodes.

In this comment, I will problematize a theoretical move made at the outset of *Philosophy of Emotion: A contemporary introduction* (Tappolet 2022) 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 neighbor since 2020", I refer to something that persists over time. But when I say "I'm afraid of my neighbor now", I refer 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 neighbor 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 neighbor since 2020 might be better described as "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. In doing so, step 1 anticipates step 2.

---

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Ben-Ze'ev (2010, p. 14), Colombetti (2013, p. 25), Deonna & 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 & Tappolet (2018, p. 2), Scherer (2005, p. 699), Shargel (2014, p. 64), Zamuner (2015, p. 22)

<sup>2</sup> See Bartlett (2018) for an extended discussion of this issue.

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: 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 neighbor as an example, we can reconstruct the argument as follows:

- P1. If being afraid of one's neighbor since 2020 can be partly understood as a disposition to be momentarily afraid of them, being momentarily afraid of them should be the primary focus of study.
- P2. Something can be understood as a disposition to [manifestation] when [condition] iff it would make its bearer [manifestation] if it were the case that [condition].
- P3. Being afraid of one's neighbor 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 neighbor 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 neighbor should be the primary focus of study for research on emotion. (by P1 & C1)

In this argument, "being afraid of one's neighbor since 2020" refers to a fear disposition, and "being momentarily afraid of one's neighbor" 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 how 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] when [condition] iff it would make its bearer [manifestation] if it were the case that [condition].

P3\*. *Being seasick* makes it the case that one would *vomit* if it were the case that *one is in the sea*.

C1\*. *Being seasick* can be understood as a disposition to *vomit* when *one is in 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 neighbor since 2020”), the manifestation (“vomit” instead of “be momentarily afraid”) and the eliciting conditions (“is in the sea” instead of “sees one’s neighbor”). 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] when [condition] iff it would make its bearer [manifestation] if it were the case that [condition].

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.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we might question P1\*\*. And we might question it, not only in the case of desire (P1\*\*), but also 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 for focusing primarily on emotional episodes 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 emotional episodes. 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 emotional episodes (see Díaz 2023; Stout 2022; Naar 2022).

## References

- Bartlett, Gary. 2018. "Occurrent States." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 48 (1): 102–19.
- Ben-Ze'ev, Aaron. 2010. "The Thing Called Emotion." In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*, edited by Peter Goldie, 1–23. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199235018.003.0003>.
- Choi, Sungho, and Michael Fara. 2021. "Dispositions." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/implicit-bias/>.
- Colombetti, Giovanna. 2013. *The Feeling Body*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Deonna, Julien, and Fabrice Teroni. 2012. *The Emotions: A Philosophical Introduction*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-415956-3.00001-4>.
- Díaz, Rodrigo. 2023. "Against Emotions as Feelings: Towards an Attitudinal Profile of Emotion." *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 30 (7–8): 223–45. <https://doi.org/10.53765/20512201.30.7.223>.
- Döring, Sabine A. 2003. "Explaining Action by Emotion." *Philosophical Quarterly* 53 (211): 214–30. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9213.00307>.

---

<sup>3</sup> But see Choi and Fara (2021) for ways of characterizing dispositions other than P2.

- Lazarus, Richard S. 1991. *Emotion and Adaptation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lyons, William. 1980. *Emotion*. Camb: Cambridge University Press.
- Mitchell, Jonathan. 2020. "The Irreducibility of Emotional Phenomenology." *Erkenntnis* 85 (5): 1241–68. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-018-0075-8>.
- Montague, Michelle. 2009. "The Logic, Intentionality, and Phenomenology of Emotion." *Philosophical Studies* 145 (2): 171–92. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-008-9218-0>.
- Naar, Hichem. 2022. "Emotions As States." *Inquiry*, 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2022.2126151>.
- Prinz, Jesse. 2004. *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Roberts, Tom, and Joel Krueger. 2021. "Loneliness and the Emotional Experience of Absence." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 59 (2): 185–204. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjp.12387>.
- Rossi, Mauro, and Christine Tappolet. 2018. "What Kind of Evaluative States Are Emotions? The Attitudinal Theory vs. the Perceptual Theory of Emotions." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 00 (00): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.2018.1472516>.
- Scherer, Klaus R. 2005. "What Are Emotions? And How Can They Be Measured?" *Social Science Information* 44 (4): 695–729. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018405058216>.
- Shargel, Daniel. 2014. "Constitutively Embodied Emotions." CUNY Academic Works.
- Stout, Rowland. 2022. "Dormant and Active Emotional States." *Synthese* 200 (161). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-022-03652-8>.
- Tappolet, Christine. 2022. *Philosophy of Emotion: A Contemporary Introduction*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2019.1627305>.
- Zamuner, Edoardo. 2015. "Emotions as Psychological Reactions." *Mind and Language* 30 (1): 22–43. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mila.12070>.