Unfitting Absent Emotion

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This is a paper about fitting (or "merited") emotion. The question of whether an emotion is fitting is distinct from the questions of whether it is prudent, morally virtuous, or all-things-considered good to feel. A fitting emotion *matches its object* in a certain way.[1] To bring out the sort of match in question, contrast two episodes of jealousy. Imagine, first, that I feel jealousy because I hear that my best friend has found a new friend that he prefers to me. Then, imagine that I feel residual jealousy toward my friend even after I learn that my initial evidence was misleading; as it turns out, my friend has not replaced me in any sense. Even if we suppose that jealousy is always imprudent or immoral to feel, we can still hold that the former episode of jealousy is appropriate in a way that the latter is not.[2] This is the sort of appropriateness at stake in discussions of fitting emotion.

The world provides more opportunities for fitting emotion than a limited individual can take. As I take a drive and listen to the news, I could feel fitting anger toward the unjust social policy mentioned by the newscaster, delight toward the unseasonably warm weather, amusement toward the newscaster's funny-sounding voice, disgust toward the roadkill that I've just passed, worry about the likelihood of traffic ahead, and so on. Some of these fitting emotions are going to go unfelt. What do standards of fitting emotion say about these missed opportunities?

This question about absent emotion is importantly analogous to a better-known question about absent doxastic states. Just as we have an enormous array of opportunities for fitting emotions, we have an enormous array of opportunities for well-justified belief. What do epistemic norms say about our inevitable failures to have all of these beliefs? Epistemologists have engaged carefully with this question. Some offer epistemic norms that are *never* violated by the absence of belief—even belief in well-supported propositions (Nelson 2010, Whiting 2012; see also Eder 2020). Others hold that we *always* violate epistemic norms by failing to believe well-supported propositions (Kelly 2003, 2007). Others defend norms that require

[1] For introductions to fittingness, see D'Arms and Jacobson (2000) and Howard (2018). It's notoriously difficult to define or analyze fittingness, which partly accounts for the recent popularity of a "fittingness-first" approach to normativity (Chappell 2012, McHugh and Way 2016, Howard 2019).

[2] This case-pair involves only *subjectively* fitting (or "warranted") emotion, and no *objectively* fitting emotion. More on this in section 1.

us to believe only the well-supported propositions we *consider* (Wedgwood 2002) or norms whose requirements depend on our *interests* (Harman 1986). It's high time to give absent emotion the nuanced treatment that absent doxastic states have already received.

In what follows, I defend a *severe* view of the standards of fitting emotion. On my view, it's very frequently unfitting to lack an emotion—so frequently, in fact, that unfitting absent emotion may even be unavoidable for limited creatures like us. On my view, then, an entirely fitting emotional life is at best a remote ideal, not a goal that ordinary agents should aim to achieve. Many will be tempted toward more *lenient* pictures, on which reacting entirely fittingly to complex scenarios is a more easily-attainable goal. In what follows, I argue that the search for a plausible lenient view of this sort is doomed to failure. The most principled, attractive approach to standards of fitting emotion consigns a host of ordinary agents to lives replete with unfitting absent emotion.

Section 1: An Embarrassment of Riches

The question I've raised concerns a phenomenon that I'll call our *embarrassment of riches*: the world provides us with more opportunities for fitting emotion than any cognitively limited agent actually takes. It's worth pausing to emphasize just how robust this embarrassment-of-riches phenomenon is.

No one's emotions fit *every* feature of the world. There are countless objects outside my ken that merit an emotional response—a host of tragic deaths I will never learn of, amusing jokes I will never hear, and disgusting odors that I will never smell. I have no emotions directed toward any of these objects.[3] If all these unknown objects constitute opportunities for me to have fitting emotions, then my opportunities for fitting emotion wildly outstrip my cognitive limits. The same goes for any non-omniscient agent.

But there is more to say here, because there are multiple sensible questions to be asked about the 'fit' between an agent's emotions and the world. In some contexts, we want to know not whether an agent's emotions fit the world as a whole, but instead whether the agent's emotions fit, roughly speaking, the world *as seen from her point of view.* For this reason, many discussions of fitting emotion distinguish between the *objective* fittingness of emotion and the *subjective* fittingness of emotion (or between an emotion's being *fitting* and its being *warranted*).[4] In what follows, I'll focus on the latter property. When I ask questions about the fittingness

[3] Some (like Sinhababu 2015) claim that directed emotions are always directed toward *propositions*; others (like Grzankowski 2015 and Montague 2007) object. I remain neutral here, using the term 'object' as a theory-neutral placeholder for the entity toward which directed emotions are directed.

[4] "Subjective fittingness" appears in Chappell (2012, 689n10); "warrant" appears in D'Arms and Jacobson (2000, 78) and Scarantino and De Sousa (2018, sec. 10.1).

or unfittingness of emotion, I'll be asking whether an emotion fits the world as represented by some subject's epistemic position, not whether the emotion fits the world as it actually is. In doing so, I do not commit myself to the view that subjective fittingness is a theoretically significant property, or one that deserves to be the primary focus of investigations into fittingness. My choice here is a purely dialectical one; since my opponents aim to put the standards of fitting emotion squarely within reach of ordinary agents, their best hope is to defend a view on which the fittingness of an emotion for an agent is sensitive, in at least some way, to that agent's epistemic limitations. If this best hope fails, then any lenient view of *objectively* fitting emotion fails as well.

Let's focus, then, on the question of whether an agent's emotions fit the *epistemically accessible* part of the world. Now, there are many ways to make this epistemic-accessibility relation precise. We might ask, for instance, whether an agent's emotions fit the part of the world that she has *knowledge* of, the world as her *evidence* presents it, the world as she *believes* it to be, or the part of the world that she *attends* to. The list goes on. There are important differences between these formulations, we can safely ignore them; no matter how we make the epistemic-accessibility relation precise, the embarrassment-of-riches phenomenon remains in force.

To see this, consider a particularly restrictive understanding of epistemic accessibility: suppose that we ask only whether an agent's emotions fit the objects of her attention. Even this seriously restricted set of objects frequently provides a host of opportunities for fitting emotion. A realistic agent might, within the span of just a few seconds, attend to all the objects mentioned in the introduction: the unjust policy mentioned on the radio, the disgusting roadkill, the unseasonably warm weather, and so on. But most agents would not respond to each of these objects. This is not the claim that it's impossible for ordinary agents to do so; the claim I'm defending is more modest.[5] Even if it's possible in principle to be fully emotionally responsive to all the objects that flit through one's field of attention, many of us will in fact fail to do so. Even on this restrictive understanding of what constitutes an opportunity for fitting emotion, then, our opportunities for fitting emotion constitute an embarrassment of riches.

(Could we avoid this result by claiming that many emotions involve only *dispositional* states, and therefore that coming to have an emotion need not be a cognitively taxing process?[6] I think not. I grant that dispositions are important parts of the ontology of emotion. But it's not true that, for every object-directed emotion, my being disposed to have some response to the object suffices for me to currently

[5] Some understandings of epistemic accessibility *do* make this task impossible for limited agents, but they are not the most promising ones for my opponents.

[6] For discussion, and rejection, of dispositional theories of standing emotion, see Chan (1999). Feldman (2000: 679) mentions, but does not defend, the view that a highly dispositional account of belief can help us to manage our epistemic embarrassment of riches.

have the emotion. That simple view makes no room for the distinction between having a standing emotion and being disposed to come to have an emotion.[7] And everyone should grant that this is a distinction that matters. I can be disposed to laugh at a joke before I've heard it, or disposed to panic in the face of frightening news before I've learned of it. But these dispositions would not suffice to make me *already amused* by the joke or *already panicked* by the news. Since having an emotion involves more than merely being disposed to react, we should not be optimistic that actual agents will frequently have all the emotions—even in standing or non-occurrent form—merited by the objects of their attention.)

No matter how narrowly we construe epistemic accessibility, then, the epistemically accessible world frequently offers an enormous array of opportunities for fitting emotion. Failures to take these opportunities are legion. What should we say about these extremely common failures? I take a hard line; I say that they are very frequently unfitting. There's a sense, then, in which my view is unforgiving; it assigns a negative label to a ubiquitous, and often totally blameless, feature of our emotional life.

This is not an absurd or paradoxical result. There are, after all, some kinds of negative labels that are very difficult to avoid. (*Imperfection,* for instance.) But some will prefer a more humane approach; they will prefer a view that makes it easier for limited agents like us to avoid unfittingness. I'll call views of this latter sort—views that aim to limit the amount of unfitting absent emotion—*lenient* views, and I'll call my own view—which is not similarly concerned to limit the amount of unfitting absent emotion—a *severe* view.[8] My goal will be to make a case for the severe view by showcasing the shortcomings of more lenient views.

Section 2: No Emotion, No Problem?

One natural response to our embarrassment of emotional riches is to deny the possibility of unfitting absent emotion. I call this the *radically lenient* view. In a slogan, the radically lenient view says, "No emotion, no problem." This section considers and rejects the radically lenient view. Along the way, we'll learn a lesson that helps to build the case for my severe view. The lesson is this: whenever an emotional reaction to an object can be unfittingly weak, the absence of any emotional reaction to that object can also be unfitting, and in just the same way.

There are at least two considerations that might make the radically lenient approach seem attractive. First, calling the *absence* of a mental state unfitting might strike

[7] Compare this to the distinction between having a dispositional belief and being disposed to have a belief (Audi 1994, Smithies 2019: 134). Thanks to Andrew Moon for discussion.

[8] I purposefully avoid talk of *demandingness*, *permissiveness*, and *requirement* when labeling these views; I remain neutral on the question of whether fittingness can be understood in deontic terms. (For reasons to think it cannot, see Berker 2022.)

some as a category mistake. Fittingness is often glossed as a kind of match between a propositional attitude and its object. But the absence of a propositional attitude doesn't have an object. So it might seem confused to pose questions about whether absent emotions are fitting or unfitting. This first consideration, however, is not compelling. It assumes that we can only intelligibly ask questions about the 'fit' between emotions and the world by starting with a given set of (actually existing) emotions, and then asking whether they fit their objects. But that assumption is unmotivated. It's entirely intelligible to frame questions about the 'fit' between emotions and the world the other way around: by starting with the world (or at least some epistemically accessible part of it), and then asking whether a person's emotions match that part of the world. The question of which of these framings to adopt should be kept open until we've had a closer look at radically lenient views.

Let's move on to a second, more compelling line of reasoning. The radically lenient view, unlike my severe view, is nicely humane toward agents who blamelessly miss opportunities for fitting emotion. Suppose that, since I'm caught up in indignation about the unjust governmental policy I'm hearing about, I fail to feel fitting disgust toward the beautiful weather and fitting disgust toward the roadkill. The radically lenient view gives me a pass: even though I've missed some opportunities for fitting emotion, nothing about my reaction is unfitting.

Indeed, it's striking that appeals to an embarrassment of riches have been used to motivate structurally similar views in both epistemology and aesthetics. Mark Nelson (2010), noting that we have infinite opportunities for well-justified belief, concludes that the mere lack of belief can never be epistemically problematic—in his terminology, we have no "positive epistemic duties." (Whiting 2012 and Eder 2020 offer similar conclusions.) And Daniel Whiting, noting that we are constantly surrounded by candidate objects for aesthetic appreciation, concludes that the mere absence of an aesthetic response is never problematic (2021, 408). These views allow limited agents to faultlessly navigate an ocean of opportunities for well-supported attitudes. They do so by claiming, roughly, that you can't go wrong simply by forming no attitude at all. A similar approach to fitting emotion might seem initially tempting for just the same reason.

The radically lenient view, then, has some initial appeal. But, at least when it comes to emotion, the view also suffers from a fatal flaw. To see this flaw, notice a distinction, drawn by Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, between two ways in which an emotional state can be unfitting. On the one hand, an emotion can be unfitting in virtue of having the wrong *shape*; that is, it can be the wrong *sort* of emotion for its object (2000, 73). If I feel irrational fear upon seeing a totally harmless spider, for instance, my fear is unfitting in virtue of having the wrong shape for its object. On the other hand, an emotion can be unfitting in virtue of having the wrong *size*; that is, it can be an overreaction or an underreaction to the object in question (2000, 74). If I find a lollipop and react with passionate, manic glee, then (absent some special

story about the lollipop's significance), my glee is unfitting in virtue of having the wrong size.

It's highly plausible that, in a wide range of cases, emotions can unfittingly weak; to use D'Arms's and Jacobson's metaphor, they can have a size that's too small. This forces the radically lenient view into an awkward conclusion. An example will help to bring the awkwardness out. Suppose that my attention is entirely occupied by a news report telling me that a hurricane is about to wipe out my hometown, likely killing many of my closest friends and family members in the process. Suppose further that I react to the news calmly, feeling only the tiniest twinge of fear. This reaction would be unfittingly weak.[9] And the radically lenient view can explain why: I have an emotion, and it fails to match its object. But now imagine a slightly different version of the case: suppose that, with my attention firmly trained on the horrifying news of the hurricane, I have no emotional reaction at all. This reaction, on the face of it, is unfitting for just the same reason that a weak one would be: my situation calls for an intense reaction, and my actual reaction falls short of that intensity. But the radically lenient view cannot agree with this second point; it claims, after all, that the mere lack of an emotional reaction is never unfitting. The radically lenient view, then, treats the gap between feeling a tiny iota of emotion and feeling no emotion at all as an enormously significant one. This is an unattractive result. If it would be unfitting for me to feel only a tiny twinge of fear about the hurricane, then surely I cannot escape this sort of unfittingness by feeling nothing about the hurricane.[10]

We can bring out the problem even more clearly by comparing the radically lenient view to an analogous rule that purports to govern the epistemic rationality of credences. Suppose that, given my epistemic situation, it's epistemically rational for me to have a credence of roughly 0.8 in some proposition, *p*. And suppose that our purported rule for epistemic rationality considers me to be more and more epistemically irrational as my credence moves further and further away from 0.8. So far, so sensible. But now suppose that the proposed rule has an interesting caveat. If I move from having the minimal psychologically-possible non-zero credence in *p*—the maximally inaccurate, and so maximally irrational, non-zero credence for someone in my epistemic position—to having credence 0 in *p*, our proposed rule says that my credence in *p* is no longer epistemically irrational.[11]

This is a bizarre, deeply unattractive rule. And it's crucial to see that the radically lenient view about emotion has a similarly bizarre structure. Credence zero is weaker than credence 0.01 in just the same way that credence 0.01 is weaker than credence 0.5. In other words, all of these responses can be arranged on a single axis.

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[9] I do not claim that this twinge of fear would be unfittingly weak for *any* agent; see section 3 for discussion of interpersonal emotional difference.

[10] I also discuss this problem for the radically lenient view in my "Fitting Anxiety and Prudent Anxiety" (2021).

[11] Thanks to Zoë Johnson King for this comparison.

The same goes for emotions: the total lack of fear is a weaker response than is a tiny iota of fear, in just the same way that a tiny iota of fear is a weaker response than a strong feeling of fear. The radically lenient view says that weakening an emotional response along some axis can (in some situations) make that emotional response more and more aggressively unfitting.[12] But the radically lenient view also says that the final possible weakening of the emotional response, along the *very same axis,* takes away unfittingness altogether. This is just as bizarre as the rule for credences that we've just considered.

The problem for the radically lenient view, in a nutshell, is that it posits an implausible disunity between the normative status of very weak emotion and the normative status of absent emotion. Its failure teaches us an important lesson: whenever an emotional response to an object can be unfittingly weak, the absence of emotion toward that object can also be unfitting, and for just the same reasons.

Section 2.1: Different Kinds of Absent Emotion

In order to avoid these problems, a lenient theorist might retreat from the radically lenient view to a more moderate position. On the moderate position, there are multiple importantly different ways of lacking emotion. Unlike the radically lenient view, this moderate approach claims that at least some varieties of absent emotion can be unfitting, in just the same way that weak emotion can. But it also insists that there is at least one kind of absent emotion which cannot.

Some distinction of this sort seems crucial for those, like Nelson (2010), who claim that one can never be irrational merely in virtue of lacking a doxastic state. When we say that a person lacks any degree of belief that *p*, one thing that we might mean is that the person is maximally confident that *p* is false. "Lacking any degree of belief," in that sense, can surely be irrational. But we might, instead, mean that the person has no doxastic states toward *p* ; perhaps she has never considered the proposition. It's much less clear that a person can be irrational for "lacking any degree of belief" in this latter sense. Theorists like Nelson should insist on a distinction of this sort, and only adopt a lenient approach to the latter mental state.[13]

Lenient theorists should, similarly, insist on a distinction between different ways of lacking emotion. They might distinguish, for instance, between a positive state of neutrality toward *p*, which can be unfitting, and the kind of neutrality toward *p* that's involved in having no attitude toward *p* at all, which cannot be unfitting. I'll refer to

[12] Some, like Maguire (2018: 791-2), claim that fittingness does not come in degrees; a similar claim about unfittingness may be tempting. But even if no unfitting attitude is more unfitting than any other, the bizarre structure I've pointed to remains: the radically lenient view claims that, although some weak responses are unfitting precisely because they are too weak, an even weaker responses is not unfitting at all.

[13] For some recent work that provides helpful distinctions between types of epistemic neutrality, see McGrath (2021).

the former mental state, whatever it might be, as *apathy,* and to the latter as *mere emotionlessness.*

I'm happy to grant that a distinction can be drawn between apathy and mere emotionlessness. And I'm also happy to grant that mere emotionlessness can never be unfitting. But on any of a variety of ways of drawing this distinction, it fails to vindicate the lenient theorist's ambitions; it fails, that is, dramatically reduce the amount of unfitting absent emotion.

To see why, consider two of the most promising ways to understand the distinction between apathy and mere emotionlessness. On one proposal, apathy toward *p* involves attending to (or having attended to) *p,* whereas mere emotionlessness toward *p* does not. This first proposal fails to vindicate a lenient response to our embarrassment of riches. As we've already seen, the embarrassment-of-riches phenomenon arises even within the bounds of attention; sometimes, we attend to a wide variety of objects that merit emotion. So, on this proposal, any time we lack emotion toward one of those objects, we are *apathetic*, which is unfitting.

On a second proposal, apathy toward *p* involves a kind of *commitment* to the evaluative insignificance of *p*, whereas merely absent emotion does not. (There are a variety of ways of making this talk of 'commitment' more precise; more on this in a moment.) According to this second proposal, if my lack of emotion toward the hurricane involves a commitment to its not being fearsome, then I am apathetic toward it, which is unfitting. But if I remain more robustly neutral about the hurricane—taking up no commitment whatsoever about whether it is fearsome—then I am merely emotionless, which cannot be unfitting.

For this second proposal to vindicate the radically lenient view's ambitions, it must posit a kind of commitment that is plausibly present both in all cases of unfittingly weak emotion, and also in cases of apathy. Recall our primary lesson from the hurricane example: failing to feel any fear can, in at least some cases, be unfitting in the *same way* that a mere twinge of fear is unfitting. We want a unified story about the facts in virtue of which both states are unfitting. This means that the second proposal will have to claim that, when I feel only a twinge of fear about the hurricane, I thereby take up a commitment to the hurricane's being only slightly fearsome rather than seriously fearsome. This claim does not look very plausible. Certainly I could feel surprisingly weak fear without *believing* or *judging* that the hurricane is only-slightly-fearsome.

A natural move for the lenient theorist, at this point, is to appeal to a thinner or more obscure notion of commitment than the one involved in belief or judgment. Some theorists, for instance, argue that emotion always involves a kind of evaluative *perceptual state* or evaluative *construal*.[14] Now, I am not sure these theories can

[14] For accounts of emotion given in terms of perception, see Deonna (2006) and Tappolet (2012). For an account that appeals to construal, see Roberts (1988).

make progress in offering a plausible explanation of the unfittingness of weak emotion. When I feel unfittingly weak fear about the hurricane, is it really plausible that I *must* thereby perceive it, or construe it, as only-slightly-fearsome? I'm not sure what to say here. (This certainly looks less plausible than the more familiar, and much weaker, claim that fear involves construing an object as fearsome.) But I'll leave that question aside; we needn't settle it.[15] The crucial point is this: to the extent that it's plausible that some thin sort of commitment is involved in any very weak emotion, it's no less plausible that the very same sort of commitment also arises in many everyday cases of absent emotion.

To see this, return to the driving example we considered at the outset of this paper. Suppose that I'm so taken with the lovely weather that, even though I attend to news of a deeply unjust governmental policy, I simply can't muster any indignation toward it. Is my lack of indignation a way of *perceiving* or *construing* the policy as totally emotionally insignificant? Again, I'm not sure how to answer this question. But I see no reason to approach the case any differently than the case in which I react only very weakly to the hurricane. The weakness of my distress about the hurricane, we've already noted, need not reflect my considered evaluative judgment about the hurricane's significance. Nor must it reflect anything deep about my true self or my evaluative sensibility; to the contrary, I might, through no fault of my own, just happen to be feeling tired or spent in a way that dulls my fear. A very similar story can be told to explain my lack of indignation toward the unjust government policy. Those who embrace the surprising view that unfittingly weak emotion always involves commitment (to an object's meriting only a weak response), then, have no obvious way to resist the conclusion that everyday absent emotion often also comes along with commitment (to the object's only meriting no response at all).

This is a problem for the lenient view, which aims to avoid the verdict that ordinary agents are constantly reacting unfittingly to everyday scenarios. If it turns out that ordinary absences of emotion very frequently come along with a kind of commitment to objects being insignificant, then a great deal of everyday absent emotion will turn out to be *apathy*, and so apt to be considered unfitting. The most plausible stories about emotion and commitment do not provide the lenient theorist with a principled way of denying this result.

It's tempting at first to think that, by isolating a type of emotional neutrality that simply cannot be unfitting, we can straightforwardly vindicate a lenient approach to absent emotion. But this approach faces a serious problem; it fails to account for the continuity between too-weak emotion and everyday cases of absent emotion. Lenient theorists have good reason to investigate other, subtler strategies.

[15] For arguments against the view that emotions always involve evaluative perception or construal, see Brady (2009), D'Arms and Jacobson (2003), and Grzankowski (2020).

Section 3: An Incomplete Case for the Severe View

Our look at the radically lenient approach taught us an important lesson: in situations where an emotional reaction to a given object can be unfittingly weak, the absence of any emotion toward that object can also be unfitting. This lesson takes us a long way toward vindicating my severe view. After all, emotional reactions toward an enormous host of objects can be unfittingly weak. Tepid amusement can be an unfittingly weak response to a fairly-funny joke; mild displeasure can be an unfittingly weak response to a nasty insult to one's friends.[16] But there are an enormous number of epistemically-accessible objects that are at least as emotionally significant as fairly-funny jokes and nasty insults. (And this remains true no matter how narrowly we construe epistemic accessibility.) This provides us with *prima facie* support for my severe view: the view that, in an enormous range of everyday cases, failures to take up fitting emotions are themselves unfitting.

I'll pause here to offer two clarifications about the sense in which my view is severe, and the senses in which it is not. First, I do not claim that *every* absence of a fitting emotion is unfitting. I leave open the possibility that there are some cases in which no degree of a particular fitting emotion would be too weak; in those cases, we face no pressure to say that the absence of the fitting emotion would be too weak.[17] Second, I do not assume that the same standards for fitting responses apply to all agents. There's a great deal of interpersonal variation in emotional dispositions and sensibilities; different people relate emotionally to the world in different ways. Perhaps standards of fittingness are responsive to this kind of diversity; I leave open the possibility that, simply in virtue of differences in their emotional sensibilities or capabilities, two people faced with just the same situation could fittingly have wildly different emotional responses. The severity of my view, then, does not emerge from a substantive privileging of certain emotional sensibilities or capabilities above others. It emerges, instead, from structural considerations. No matter how you engineer a standard of fittingness against which to measure your emotions, that standard will have to take a particular shape: namely, wherever it calls weak emotion unfitting, it must also call absent emotion unfitting.[18]

I've drawn on these structural considerations, and on the observation that emotion can be unfittingly weak in an enormous range of cases, to offer a *prima facie* case for the severe view. But that *prima facie* case is not yet an *ultima facie* case; it needs further support. To see why, imagine a case. Suppose that Reza hears an amusing joke immediately after learning that a beloved relative has passed away. And

[16] I do not claim that these reactions would be unfittingly weak for everyone; see below.
[17] My (forthcoming) defends the view that there are some cases of this sort.
[18] If the fittingness-standard for your emotions calls almost no responses to objects unfittingly weak, then, my argument leaves open the possibility that absences of your emotion are, for similar reasons, very rarely unfitting. This means that there may be some special individuals who escape the severity of my conclusion. But this sort of exception does not vindicate a general sort of lenience in the face of our embarrassment of riches; for most people, a wide range of emotional reactions toward everyday objects can be unfittingly weak.

suppose that, overwhelmed by grief, Reza is only very slightly amused by the joke. Some will respond to this case by saying that, even if his degree of amusement toward the joke would be unfittingly weak in *other* circumstances, Reza's reaction to the joke *in these special circumstances* is not unfitting. Some might go even further; they might say that, in a scenario like this, it would be *unfitting* for Reza to be amused by the joke.

The availability of these responses reveals that there's work left to be done in supporting the severe view. The fact that my emotional reaction to a given object is unfittingly weak in *some* scenarios does not mean that my giving that same reaction to the same object would be unfittingly weak in *any* scenario. So we should not infer, from the fact that responses to a great many objects can in *some* scenarios be unfittingly weak, that we ever face a *single* scenario wherein responses to a great many objects can each, individually, be unfittingly weak. The way to block this inference is to propose that complex cases like Reza's—that is, cases in which we are confronted with multiple opportunities for fitting emotion at the same time—tend to make a difference to the responses that 'fit' objects.

Of course, for this strategy to vindicate a lenient response to the embarrassment-of-riches phenomenon, it will have to be made suitably general. Its defenders cannot rest easy with the existential claim that there are at least *some* scenarios that render otherwise-unfitting emotion fitting. Instead, they will have to make a case for a picture on which the range of responses that it's fitting to take toward one object (like a funny joke) tend quite generally to change in contexts where other emotionally-significant objects (like the death of a beloved relative) are epistemically accessible.[19]

In what remains, I'll consider the three most promising ways to develop such a picture, and I'll show that each faces serious problems. We should be pessimistic, then, about the notion that standards of fitting emotion tend, in any general way, to become more lenient in complex scenarios. That's bad news for lenient views. As I've mentioned, it can be unfitting to lack emotion toward an enormous range of objects—fairly-funny jokes, nasty insults, and so on—when they arise in isolation. And lenient theorists have no plausible way to deny that these absences remain unfitting even when many such objects become epistemically accessible at the same time.

[19] Is any such proposal doomed, since it allows fittingness to depend on "reasons of the wrong kind"? Arguably not; the lenient theorist might claim that, even though my entering a complex context is not a *reason* to lack any particular attitude, it is a *background condition* that explains why other facts—reasons of the "right kind"—favor a different range of responses than usual. (See Na'aman 2021: 251-2 for more on background conditions for fitting responses.)

Section 4: Emotional Clutter

We're in search of a plausible view on which the standards of fitting emotion shift in complex scenarios. Let's start with a bold proposal—one that I'll call the "emotional clutter" approach. This label pays homage to a related proposal made by Gilbert Harman (1986). Harman considers our embarrassment of *epistemic* riches: each of us, he notes, has many opportunities for well-justified belief. Which well-justified propositions ought we believe? Harman offers, as a partial answer to this question, a principle of "clutter avoidance": "One should not clutter one's mind with trivialities" (1986, 12).

There are a number of interesting questions about how to interpret Harman's proposal.[20] But I'll set those interpretive questions aside. The core ideas that I want to borrow from Harman's proposal are twofold. First, there is a distinction to be drawn between propositions of interest and "clutter" propositions. And second, we not only may but *ought to* avoid belief in propositions of the latter sort. I want to ask whether insights like these might help to address our core question: when, if ever, is absent emotion unfitting?

Start with Harman's first core idea: the distinction between propositions of interest and "clutter" propositions. Perhaps a similar distinction can be drawn in the realm of emotion. Return to Reza's example: he has a chance to grieve a beloved relative, and also a chance to be amused by a funny joke. The former seems, in a variety of respects, more important than the latter. The death of the relative is of greater *moral* significance than the joke, it's more deeply connected to the things that *matter to Reza*, it's more *attention-grabbing*, it calls for a more *intense* emotional reaction—the list goes on. (There will be difficult questions about precisely which of these features makes an emotion "clutter," but we can leave those questions to those who want to develop this proposal.) One could draw on these differences to argue that, at least in this context, amusement toward the joke is "clutter"—that is, a mere distraction from more significant fitting emotions. The "emotional clutter" strategy aims to label a great many of our emotions "clutter," thereby making the claims of fitting emotion more modest and easily attainable.

The second of the two ideas I've drawn from Harman is the idea that we *should not believe* well-supported clutter propositions. In order to frame this insight in a way that's clearly relevant to the fittingness of absent emotion, and not some adjacent normative property, it will have to be adapted into different language.[21] (There are some who defend tight relationships between claims about fitting emotion and deontic claims about which emotions a person *should feel,* but I remain neutral

[20] For useful discussion, see Friedman (2018).

[21] In the course of adaptation, we lose the ability to draw a crucial distinction: the distinction between whether a proposition is *well-supported* and whether it *should be believed*. But this does not mean that we've landed on the wrong way to translate Harman's view into the debate at hand; instead, it simply means that (given the problems I go on to identify) Harman's view does not have a viable analogue in this particular debate.

about that question.) I'll therefore say that, on the emotional-clutter view, it is *unfitting* for one to have any emotion that is "clutter" in one's context. (For an alternative approach, which claims instead that it's fitting either to have or to lack clutter emotions, see section 5.)

The emotional-clutter approach faces serious problems. For one, it offers implausibly harsh verdicts on occasions when a person manages to be extraordinarily emotionally responsive to the world. To see why, note that, in order to help support a lenient approach to our embarrassment of riches, emotional clutter will have to crop up quite often. In complex scenarios like our driving example, at least some emotions will have to be labeled "clutter". This means that those emotions will be unfitting. As a result, an agent who manages to fully respond to all the nuances of a complex situation will be (in at least one respect) reacting unfittingly, even though, if she'd simply ignored some of those nuances, she'd have had a fully fitting reaction.[22] This seems like overkill; in an attempt to avoid treating *ordinary* emotional sensitivity as a shortcoming, we've ended up treating *extraordinary* emotional sensitivity as a shortcoming.

The emotional-clutter approach also faces a second problem: it cannot account for certain evaluative differences between objects toward which emotion would be "clutter." To make this point more concrete, imagine a modification to Reza's case: suppose that, after learning of his relative's death, he hears *two* jokes. Now, it seems conceivable that one of these jokes could be funnier than the other—not in the sense that it *actually does* or *is likely to* produce more amusement, but in the sense that it makes more amusement *fitting*. But the defender of emotional clutter seems committed to calling this impossible: since amusement toward either joke would be a clutter emotion, neither joke makes fitting any amount of amusement, and so neither is funny to any degree. This is an unattractive conclusion. On the face of it, Reza could, even while overwhelmed by grief and feeling no amusement at all, consider both jokes and come to the conclusion that one is funnier than the other. And, on the face of it, he could be entirely right about that.

The problem here generalizes beyond amusement. Even in contexts where there are much more important emotions to have than annoyance, some noises remain more annoying than others; even in contexts where there are much more important emotions to have than envy, some accomplishments remain more enviable than others. Again, these are not claims about what happens to actually produce annoyance or envy, or what's statistically likely to produce annoyance or envy. The most promising way to understand all these claims is, instead, through appeal to

[22] Cases of this sort would be impossible if responding to all non-clutter emotions necessarily exhausted one's emotional resources. But, since this view would fail to absolve us of unfittingness in any case where we have any emotional resources left, it's difficult to square with the motivations for a genuinely lenient approach.

facts about the *fittingness* of annoyance or envy.[23] The emotional-clutter approach forecloses that option.

There's a natural retreat for defenders of emotional clutter at this point. They can say that, even if neither of two jokes makes amusement fitting, there's still a respectable sense in which we can call one funnier than the other: one *would* make more amusement fitting than the other would *if* both jokes were considered in different, less-tragic contexts. But this appeal to counterfactual scenarios cannot be the right way to determine whether an emotion is fitting. Some funny occurrences simply cannot arise outside an emotionally-fraught context: perhaps what's funny is precisely an incongruous and bungled delivery of horrifying news. And the same goes for other emotions too: sometimes a person is admirable precisely because they consider others' needs even after facing serious personal tragedy. We cannot sensibly ask whether these less-significant emotions would be fitting if their objects arose in isolation, because their objects cannot arise in isolation.

The emotional-clutter approach, then, has at least two serious defects: it offers an implausibly harsh verdict about extraordinary emotional sensitivity, and it fails to capture important facts about less-significant objects in complex scenarios. Let's move on to consider a less extreme approach that avoids these problems.

Section 5: Expanding Targets

5.1 A First Pass at the Expanding-Target Proposal

I introduced the emotional-clutter approach as an attempt to vindicate the following proposal: standards of fittingness for emotion tends to become more lenient when we enter complex scenarios. The emotional-clutter approach allowed for this possibility, but did so at unacceptable cost. But there are other, less extreme proposals that allow standards of fittingness to shift in complex scenarios.

The most promising strategy here is what I'll call the *expanding-target* proposal. On this proposal, cases that offer an embarrassment of riches for fitting emotion tend to *expand* the range of responses that 'fit' (at least some) epistemically-accessible objects.[24] When I'm presented with a funny joke in isolation, the range of fitting responses might be fairly constrained. (This respects the datum that responses to objects like funny jokes can sometimes be unfitting in virtue of being too weak.) But when I'm presented with that funny joke directly after hearing tragic news, as happens to poor Reza, the range of fitting responses to that joke expands to include a

[23] The *locus classicus* for this claim is Brandt (1946); for refinement and endorsement of the view, see Berker (2022), D'Arms and Jacobson (2000: 71), and Maguire (2018: 792).

[24] Just like the emotional-clutter approach, this approach could be filled out in a variety of ways: perhaps, for instance, only objects that are relatively *unimportant* in some sense are subject to this expanding-target effect. We can set these details aside; the problem I go on to raise afflicts any version of the expanding-target proposal.

greater array of weaker reactions. Feeling a lot of amusement remains fitting, as it would've been in the simpler case. But, importantly, tepid amusement is now a fitting reaction as well. (Note that the most plausible version of the expanding-target proposal will involve a kind of *asymmetrical* expansion, in which complex situations render fitting a greater range of weaker reactions but not a greater range of stronger reactions.)

If the expanding-target proposal is to help significantly reduce the amount of unfitting *absent* emotion, it will have to be supplemented with an initially-surprising claim: in complex scenarios, the range of fitting responses to an object frequently expands so far that it includes both weak emotion and the total lack of emotion toward that object. This might strike some readers as odd; if a joke is genuinely amusing, then how could the absence of amusement 'match' the joke in just the same way that amusement matches it?[25] But I'll set this worry aside. Even if we grant that it's possible in some cases for a range of fitting attitudes to bridge the gap between emotion and emotionlessness, we have good reason to reject the claim that this happens frequently enough to vindicate a lenient view of fitting emotion.

Here's the problem. In order to vindicate a lenient reaction to any given complex situation, the expanding-target view will have to claim that the lack of emotion is an eligible response to at least some objects accessible in that situation. But, as I argued in section 2, whenever some positive emotional responses to an object are unfittingly weak, absent emotion toward the same object is also unfittingly weak. So the expanding-target view will have to claim that, for at least some objects that merit an emotion, the mere complexity of one's scenario can make it the case that no possible reaction to the object could be too weak.

But this is the wrong result; the fact that an object arises in a complex scenario never suffices to make it the case that no possible reaction to a given object could be too weak. This becomes especially clear when, although I'm presented with many opportunities for fitting emotion, I only take one of those opportunities. Suppose, for instance, that I'm simultaneously presented with: news of a medical scare for a colleague (which merits distress), the sight of my child being bullied (which merits anger), and the sound of a beautiful piece of music (which merits aesthetic enjoyment). But suppose that, since I'm a self-centered jerk, I don't find myself moved at all by concern for my colleagues or the feelings of my child. Now, as sometimes happens even with self-centered jerks, I have refined aesthetic sensibilities; I usually appreciate good music, and frequently respond emotionally to it. But the very impressive song that I hear in this particular situation only moves me a tiny bit; although I listen to it carefully and note its many impressive features, I only feel a tiny twinge of enjoyment.

If the expanding-target proposal is on the right track, then the mere fact that this beautiful song arises in a complex scenario could make my weak response fitting,

[25] I respond to this concern in my (forthcoming).

even though that very same weak response would've been unfitting if I'd heard the song in isolation. But this can't be right. The mere fact that there are other candidate objects to which I could respond makes no difference at all to whether my reaction to the song is unfittingly weak. The same goes—even more clearly—for the other objects in the situation I've sketched. Now, of course, the defender of the expanding-target proposal could deny that the particular example I've sketched is the sort they have in mind when they discuss expanding targets. But that's no problem, because the pattern that this example illustrates is an entirely general one: *merely being presented* with other options for fitting emotion, clearly, is not the sort of thing that could render an otherwise-unfittingly-weak response fitting.[26]

This shortcoming of the expanding-target proposal teach us an important lesson: it's not the mere *availability* of an embarrassment of riches that makes a lenient approach initially attractive. What makes a lenient approach initially attractive is a tacit assumption about *why* many agents lack certain emotions in complex cases: they have limited emotional capacities, and those capacities are engaged elsewhere. But the expanding-target proposal lets agents off the hook for absent emotion *whenever* they face complex scenarios, even when their emotional capacities are *not* engaged elsewhere. That sort of lenience is deeply unattractive.

Section 5.2: The Expanding-Target Proposal Redux

The problem I've identified for the expanding-target proposal suggests a way to revise it. On the revised version, it's not merely *epistemic access* to emotionally significant objects that characteristically expands the range of fitting responses to other objects. Instead, it's *having an emotion* toward an emotionally significant object, within a complex scenario, that characteristically expands the range of fitting emotional responses to other objects. So when I have a strong emotional reaction to one object, the range of fitting responses to (at least some) other accessible objects will tend to expand, and frequently to the point that not only weak emotion but also absent emotion toward those other objects is rendered fitting. This avoids the problem raised in the previous subsection; in the case where I happen not to react emotionally to the distressing medical news or the bullying of my child, the range of fitting aesthetic responses toward the beautiful song does not expand, which explains why my weak aesthetic responses is unfitting.

This revised expanding-target proposal departs in a remarkable way from the other proposals that we've considered: it makes facts about the fitting response to some objects depend, in a highly robust way, on idiosyncratic facts about whether one responds emotionally to other objects. This is, on the face of it, an odd result. It

[26] An exception to this general rule: sometimes, the presence of one object changes the evaluative significance of another object. This sort of exception is not sufficiently common to vindicate the lenient theorist's ambitions.

raises an explanatory burden for defenders of the revised expanding-target proposal. In order to make their view defensible, they'll have to at least gesture at a satisfying explanation for this surprising trend.

Now, there's a natural way for revised expanding-target theorists to try to meet this explanatory burden. They can claim that the responses that are fitting for a person are severely constrained by facts about the person's present cognitive and emotional resources. The constraint will have to take a particular shape in order to avoid some of the pitfalls we've already seen. (We shouldn't claim, for instance, that one's situation *never* makes individually fitting a set of attitudes that one lacks the capacity to take up at the same time, holding fixed one's actual responses. That view implies that no amount of amusement could be fitting for a fully-emotionally-spent version of Reza. And, as we've seen, that proposal loses track of the sense in which the joke that he hears is funny.) The idea will have to be something like this: the range of attitudes that are fitting for you must always be such that there is *at least one* way to react to each accessible object in a way that's individually fitting, without the sum of those reactions over-taxing your current emotional resources. If this were true, it would nicely explain why the range of fitting responses to one object tends to expand when we take up emotions toward other objects; without that expansion, we might not be able (holding fixed our current responses) to avoid unfittingness in our emotional lives.

This background story has some initial appeal.[27] But, on closer reflection, it fails. In fact, it cannot even be made to fit with the revised expanding-target view. To see why, return to our initial driving example. Suppose that I become aware, in quick succession, of a host of emotionally significant objects (the weather, the unjust governmental policy, the roadkill, and so on). But suppose that I'm slow to react; there are a few moments in which I feel no emotion toward any of these objects. What should we say, during that time, about the responses that it's fitting for me to have? Well, recall that the distinctive commitment of the *revised* expanding-target view is that *merely being presented* with a variety of objects cannot suffice to expand the range of fitting responses to each of those objects. Instead, the revised expanding-target view insists that it's our *actual emotional responses* that have the characteristic effect of expanding those targets. But that means that, in the moments before I actually take up any emotional response, the range of fitting responses to each accessible object has not yet expanded. Each object makes individually fitting only a comparatively restricted range of responses. And there is simply no guarantee that there will be a set of intensities within the restricted ranges that could be summed up into a suite of reactions that's psychologically possible given my current emotional resources. In fact, an expanding-target theorist has every reason to think

[27] It will be particularly compelling for those who think of fittingness as a kind of obligation, and think that obligation is subject to an "ought implies can" principle. Whiting (2021, 414n14) uses just such a principle to argue for a conclusion that he glosses in the following way: "an affect's being fitting is a permissive matter, not an obligatory one."

that this sort of summing-up will frequently be impossible. The core motivation for an expanding-target proposal, after all, is the intuition that complex scenarios frequently present us with objects that, absent some special story about shifting standards for fitting emotion, individually call for strong positive responses.

The problem here is not that the revised expanding-target view gets intuitively problematic results about this particular case. The problem has to do, instead, with the explanatory burden for the revised expanding-target view. We've considered a general rule about the aggregation of individual fitting responses that might be thought to meet that burden. But the case that I've just surveyed shows that general rule about aggregation to be false.[28] Since *merely being presented* with emotionally significant objects does not make a difference to the range of fitting responses for other objects, we have every reason to think that there will in fact be some cases in which accessible objects all call for individual responses that could not be summed up without over-taxing one's emotional resources.

The expanding-target proposals we've surveyed have some important virtues. Unlike the radically lenient view, they can treat absent emotion as importantly continuous with too-weak emotion. Unlike the emotional-clutter approach, they can explain why some jokes remain funny, some sounds remain annoying, and so forth, even in complex scenarios. But they suffer from serious vices, too. Neither offers a principled, satisfying lenient approach to everyday cases of absent emotion.

Conclusion

In section 3, I offered an initial case for my severe view. There are a great many objects, I noted, toward which emotional responses can be unfittingly weak. Tepid amusement can be an unfittingly weak reaction to a fairly-funny joke; mild displeasure can be an unfittingly weak reaction to a nasty insult. Given the failure of the radically lenient view, we should think that absent emotion toward the same objects can also be unfitting.

As I noted, however, this was not quite enough to vindicate my severe view. If the standards of fitting emotion characteristically shift to become more lenient in certain scenarios, then tepid responses that are unfitting in *some* contexts might not remain unfitting in *all* contexts. But we've now seen that the standards of fitting emotion do not tend, in any general way, to become more lenient when we face complex scenarios. With this final piece of the argument in place, my severe view

[28] Can a slight variation on this explanation do the trick? One might claim that the aggregation principle that I've sketched holds in general, but that it applies only to cases in which a person already has a non-zero degree of some emotion. But this amendment is both *ad hoc* and unattractive. It offers us targets for fitting emotion that are impossible to jointly meet until the moment we start attempting to meet them; at that point, it becomes necessarily possible to jointly meet those targets. This gerrymandered approach does not satisfyingly discharge the explanatory burden I've noted.

stands vindicated: even when we face complex scenarios, we should expect that absences of emotion will very frequently remain unfitting.

Just how frequently? Well, that depends in part on two questions that I've left partly open for the purposes of this paper.[29] First: which objects are epistemically accessible? And second: toward which objects can an emotion to be unfittingly weak? I've argued that, even on the most restrictive plausible answers to these two questions, most agents will lead lives replete with unfitting absent emotion. But other answers could yield even more dramatic results. If, for instance, a proposition is epistemically accessible whenever an agent is *propositionally justified* to believe it, then it may be that unfitting absent emotion is a totally inescapable phenomenon for most agents. Whatever we say about these questions, however, we should agree that any plausible approach to the unfittingness of absent emotion is a remarkably severe one.

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[29] It also depends on questions about the fitting duration of emotion; see Na'aman (2021).

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