

## Chapter One

# Emotion and Understanding

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Emotions share important cognitive functions with perceptions and beliefs. Like perceptions, they afford epistemic access to a range of response-dependent properties, such as being admirable or contemptible, and provide evidence of response-independent properties that trigger them. Fear is evidence of danger; trust is evidence of reliability. Like beliefs, emotions provide orientations that render particular facets of things salient. In the grip of an emotion, we notice things we would otherwise miss. The variability and volatility of emotional deliverances might seem to undermine their claim to epistemic standing. I argue that variability and volatility can be epistemic assets, keying the subject to multiple, quickly changing features of things. Emotions, like other modes of epistemic access, are subject to refinement to increase their epistemic yield. The arts provide opportunities for such refinement.

### 1. The Claim to Epistemic Standing

‘Reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions,’ Hume maintains ([1739/40], 415). Others reverse the relationship, contending that to reason well requires subduing, dominating or discounting the passions. Either way, reason and passion are antithetical. To be under the sway of emotion is to be irrational. To be rational is to be cool, calm, and deliberate; that is, to be unaffected by emotion. Let us call this the standard view. I think it is a mistake. Rather than being opposed to reason, I suggest, emotion is a facet of reason. It is an avenue of epistemic access, hence a contributor to the advancement of understanding.

Emotional deliverances are representations conveyed through emotional channels. A representation of frogs as dangerous that presents itself via fear of frogs is a deliverance of that fear. If the standard view is correct, emotional deliverances are at best epistemically inert, there being no reason to trust them. At worst, they are deleterious; there is reason to distrust them. Either way, insofar as our goals are cognitive, if we cannot subdue or silence the passions, we should ignore or discount their deliverances.

In contending that the standard view is mistaken, I do not mean that every emotional deliverance, as it stands, is epistemically acceptable. Rather, I believe that emotions provide resources that serve epistemic ends. But just as natural resources like iron ore need to be processed to yield material we value, so do emotional deliverances.

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We need to know how to recognize the epistemically valuable insights that emotions afford and how to use them effectively. The goal of this chapter is twofold: first, to show that emotions afford such resources; and second, to say something about how to refine the raw materials and increase their epistemic yield.

Elsewhere I have argued that an understanding is a system of cognitive commitments in reflective equilibrium. The individual commitments that comprise such a system must be reasonable in light of one another, and the system as a whole must be at least as reasonable as any available alternative in light of relevant antecedent commitments (Elgin 1996). A system's equilibrium derives from the mutual supportiveness of the components. Its answering to antecedent commitments at least as well as available alternatives insures that the equilibrium is one that on reflection we can accept. Not all the cognitive commitments that comprise such a system are truth bearers: perspectives, vocabularies, methods and standards are as integral to an understanding as beliefs. Nor need the truth bearers in a tenable system always be true. A rudimentary science that contains only rough approximations can provide some understanding of its subject. That is why it is worth taking seriously. Finally, understanding is holistic. No commitment is fully tenable in isolation.

A systematic, interconnected network of utterly untenable commitments would not yield an understanding of the phenomena it bears on. Coherence alone does not suffice for tenability. The tie to antecedent considerations is crucial. Unless some considerations have some initial tenability prior to systematization, warrant cannot be generated. But this is not our situation.

At any given time, a person has a cluster of cognitive commitments. These include her beliefs, perceptual takings, and emotional deliverances. They also include the methods, perspectives, and sources she tends to trust, as well as the epistemic priorities and weighting factors she endorses. All such commitments are initially tenable. Their being held gives them a slight claim on epistemic allegiance. But initial tenability is not full tenability. No commitment, however firmly held, is fully warranted in isolation. Epistemic warrant accrues through systematization – the development of an integrated network of mutually supportive cognitive commitments.

Systematization requires revising as well as conjoining and augmenting, for a person's initially tenable commitments can, and often do, clash. They are apt to be incompatible, non-cotenable or implausible in light of one another. So to arrive at an acceptable system, we need to revise and/or reject some of our initial commitments and to adopt others that we previously did not hold. A tenable system thus need not incorporate all the antecedent commitments it answers to. But if it does not, it should show why the commitments it rejects seemed reasonable when they did. It might, for example, reveal that they owed their previous plausibility to limited evidence or unsophisticated models. An individual commitment is warranted by its place in a tenable system of thought.

The crucial point is this: To say that emotional deliverances are initially tenable is to assign them only a weak and precarious epistemological status. They have that status because an agent, in the grip of an emotion, has a tendency to credit its deliverances. To experience a frisson as a fear of frogs, is to take that frisson to embed the idea that frogs are dangerous.

To credit emotional deliverances with initial tenability might seem trifling. The epistemic status of emotions turns not on whether their deliverances are initially tenable, but on whether they are fully tenable. If such deliverances are immediately and decisively overridden, then the fact that they start out with some measure of initial tenability seems insignificant. This concern has merit. For there is a clash. The standard view that emotional deliverances are unreliable is in tension with the opinions emotions embed. But the standard view is not unfounded. Emotions at least sometimes distort or derail reason. The challenge facing me is to show that the best way to alleviate the tension is to reject or revise the standard view. This does not require saying that all emotions under all circumstances are epistemically estimable, or that the deliverances of those that are must be taken at face value. It requires only showing that systems that integrate emotional deliverances are sometimes more tenable than rivals that exclude them.

Although widespread, the conviction that emotions are epistemically inert is a bit odd. Emotions are not spontaneous upwellings of arbitrary feelings. They are reactions to events. So if we can correlate emotional reactions with the events that trigger them, we can use those reactions as sources of information about the environment. Experiencing emotion *a* would be an indication that circumstance *b* obtains. The standard view considers such correlations inherently unreliable. To be sure, the existence of a causal connection between individual emotion and event pairs does not show otherwise. What we need is evidence that emotional reactions are reliably correlated with events. If an arbitrary subject were as likely to feel joy, dismay, revulsion or amusement, regardless of the trigger, then from the occurrence of a particular emotion, nothing would follow about the nature of its source. The question then is whether suitably reliable correlations can be found.

Our views about the informativeness of emotions waver. In the grip of an emotion, one normally believes its deliverances. When I am frightened, I think that the situation is dangerous. When I am infatuated, I think that my beloved is wonderful. Nor, at the time, do I consider the connection between my occurrent emotions and beliefs accidental. I am frightened, I believe, *because* the situation is dangerous. I adore him, I believe, *because* he is wonderful. In cooler moments, I may think differently. I recognize that many of my fears have proven unwarranted. I concede that I have not been drawn unerringly to wonderful men. Such failures might persuade us that suitably reliable correlations are not to be had. Then whatever we think or feel in the heat of the moment, it might be wise to defer to our cooler judgement that emotional deliverances are not trustworthy sources of information. Still, we go too quickly, I think, if we dismiss them.

One reason is biological (de Sousa 1987). The limbic system, the seat of emotion, is a product of evolution. Although evolution yields some by-products that lack survival value, the fact that a trait or complex of traits is a product of evolution is evidence that it promotes fitness. Emotions might promote fitness by being indicators of significant features of the environment. If fear is triggered by danger and is a sufficiently reliable indicator of danger, then developing and exercising the capacity for fear would be conducive to survival. If having their father present enhances the survival prospects of young humans, then a mother's eliciting the love of someone she can live with promotes her reproductive success.

Such evolutionary arguments are weak. The evolutionary lineage of emotions is compatible with their having no survival value at all. They could be ‘free riders’ on genes whose contribution to fitness lies elsewhere. At most, the evolutionary argument shows that there is some presumption that the capacity to experience emotions is adaptive. It does not show that the capacity to experience *each* emotion is adaptive. Nor does it show that if that capacity is adaptive, its adaptiveness lies in a correlation between emotions and circumstances. Perhaps the deliverances of emotions, like the contents of dreams, are independent of the circumstances in which they occur. The biological contribution of emotions might then lie in something like their expending excess neural energy or in making and breaking covalent bonds in the amygdala, not in anything that affords epistemic access to the circumstances in which they occur. Nevertheless, it is not unreasonable to think that fear promotes fitness by sensitizing to danger or that affection between parents promotes fitness by fostering living conditions that increase the likelihood that offspring will survive. The fact that emotions evolved affords some presumption that their deliverances vary with circumstances. Given that presumption, it is not unreasonable to think that they are keyed to circumstances in such a way that if we can discover the key, we can use the occurrence of particular emotions as sources of information about the circumstances in which they occur. All the evolutionary argument contends is that it is not unreasonable to suppose that emotions are capable of affording epistemic access to their objects. Weak, though it is, the argument is strong enough to do that.

## **2. Response Dependence**

Some properties – such as being contemptible, or admirable, or amusing, or depressing – dovetail with emotions in such a way that without those emotions, the properties would not exist. These properties are response-dependent (Johnston 1989). They are genuine properties of the objects that possess them, but they owe their identities to responses they evoke. If contemptibility is the property it is because of the contempt it is apt to evoke, it would be astonishing if feelings of contempt did not afford epistemic access to contemptibility. This is not, of course, to say that my contempt for Karl demonstrates that he is contemptible. My contempt could be misplaced. But if the property of being contemptible depends for its identity on evoking feelings of contempt, then at least some evokings of contempt and perhaps other related emotions should be evidence of contemptibility. Indeed, emotional responses seem to afford our most direct access to such properties.

The foregoing considerations suggest parallels to perception. Perception is both triggered by and indicative of aspects of the environment. Perceptual systems evolved and endure because their deliverances promote fitness. Being able to see, or hear, or smell a predator, like feeling instinctively afraid of it, enhances an animal’s prospects of evading it. Perception manifestly affords epistemic access to useful information about the environment.

Secondary qualities, such as colours, tones, and odours, are response-dependent. They are known by perception, and perhaps cannot be fully known without perception (Jackson 1982). Still, mistakes are possible. Something’s looking blue to me does

not establish that it is blue. An isolated colour perception is not epistemically acceptable on its own. But something's looking blue is ordinarily evidence that it is blue. If the analogy holds, emotional deliverances are indicators, but not always accurate indicators of aspects of their objects. Just as my experiencing something as blue is evidence, but not conclusive evidence, that it is blue, my being frightened of something is evidence, but not conclusive evidence, that it is dangerous.

According to a familiar criterion for colours, something is blue just in case it would look blue to a normal observer under normal conditions. Conditions often are normal and most of us are normal colour perceivers. So in the absence of contraindications, one reasonably takes it that something's looking blue to her is reason to believe that it is blue. But the criterion for secondary qualities is not always the response of the normal perceiver. In assessing whether a bassoon is in tune, the criterion is not how it would sound to a normal perceiver, but how it would sound to a perceiver with perfect pitch. Unless I believe myself to have perfect pitch, I assign considerably less weight to my judgement that a bassoon is in tune than I do to my judgement that the bassoonist is wearing a blue shirt. If the analogy with emotions holds, the criterion for some cases could be what a normal subject would feel in normal circumstances (with both occurrences of 'normal' spelt out in an informative way), while in other cases it could be what a suitably sensitive subject would feel in specified circumstances. Like perceptions, emotions might key to circumstances in any of several different ways.

The capacity to distinguish among secondary qualities is neither uniform nor fixed. One perceiver might consider two colours or tones identical, while another readily distinguishes between them. A single person's capacity to discriminate may vary over time and with circumstances. Colours that look indistinguishable against one background are often easily distinguished against another. Moreover, perceptual abilities are subject to refinement. We can develop an ability to distinguish between properties that we previously could not tell apart. At a wine tasting, for example, one learns to taste the difference between wines that initially tasted the same.

Although secondary qualities are more tightly linked to perception than other perceptible properties, the same variability, fallibility and sensitivity to circumstances is characteristic of perception in general. Some people can identify the makes of American cars on sight; others cannot. Some can distinguish between deciduous trees in full leaf, but not when the limbs are bare. Skiers learn to differentiate qualities of snow on the basis of the way the snow looks and feels, even though originally snow seemed to them to be just one, undifferentiated sort of stuff.

Despite this variability, fallibility and sensitivity to circumstances, we readily concede that perceptual deliverances afford epistemic access to their objects. So the fact that emotional deliverances are similarly variable, fallible, and sensitive does not disqualify them from epistemic standing. Rather, the epistemic yield of emotions, like the epistemic yield of perceptions depends not on taking all deliverances at face value, but on a sophisticated understanding of when and to what extent they are trustworthy.

Our practice of assessing the appropriateness of various emotions reflects such an understanding. Phobias are irrational fears. Our ability to distinguish between phobias and other fears shows that we have a lien on which fears are rational. It is

hard to see what the basis for the distinction would be, if it were not that rational fears are ones that align with genuine dangers. To recognize a fear as rational is to recognize that the belief that its object is dangerous is at least *prima facie* rational as well. We also make more local assessments, for example, when we charge people with overreacting. We say that Harry is insanely jealous, indicating that his jealousy is far greater than it should be. This is quite different from saying that he has no basis for jealousy. We say that Fred is excessively angry, indicating that some lesser level of anger would be appropriate. We think that Sam should be proud of himself, indicating that were he to feel pride, his doing so would be reasonable. Our propensity for charging people with over- or underreacting indicates that we take ourselves to be in a position to tell when people's emotions are apt. That is, we take ourselves to be able to reliably correlate emotions with circumstances. The robustness of our practice is evidence that we are right.

### **3. Is Instability a Problem?**

Despite these parallels to perception, one might argue, the deliverances of emotions are untrustworthy, because emotions are far more volatile than perceptions. To investigate this charge, we need to examine two questions: (1) whether emotions are volatile and (2) whether volatility is epistemically incapacitating.

As Hume notes, not all passions are volatile (Hume [1739/40], 276). Calm passions, such as fondness for a lifelong friend, are steady, enduring, and unexciting. Nor need more violent passions be volatile. Some people carry a grudge for decades, without in the least moderating their attitude toward its object. Although some emotions may be volatile, volatility is not an invariable property of emotions. If volatility is an epistemic disqualifier then, only some emotions and their deliverances are disqualified.

But it is not clear that volatility should be a disqualifier. The question is whether emotions are, and can be known to be, so tied to circumstances that from the occurrence of an emotion we can glean information about the circumstances. There is no obvious reason why a volatile emotion should not be so tied. Suppose, for example, that fury is a volatile emotion, which normally arises only when exceedingly objectionable events occur and which ebbs quickly when objectionability wanes. In that case, if objectionability quickly waxes and wanes, fury's volatility is simply a responsiveness to rapidly changing circumstances. This would be an epistemic asset rather than a defect. Evidently, neither the violence nor the volatility of an emotion undermines its epistemic qualifications. To do that would require showing that the emotions vary independently of circumstances – that, for example, fury arises or endures regardless of the objectionability of the object.

This might be the case. Emotional reactions seem to vary considerably from one person to another. The same object can anger one person, mildly irritate a second, sadden a third and amuse a fourth. That being so, one might think, an emotional deliverance could not possibly afford reliable information about its object. Such wide variation might suggest that emotional deliverances are entirely subjective.

Pretty much anything, it seems, could trigger any emotion; so from the occurrence of an emotion, nothing can be gleaned about the nature of the object.

Again it is worth considering the analogy with perception. Similarly situated observers viewing the same scene may see different things because of differences in background knowledge and interests. A paediatrician sees a case of measles, when a parent just sees her child's rash. A linguist hears a Texas accent, while a reporter hears a political speech, and the audience hears a call to arms. A critical grandmother sees crude, ill-mannered behaviour in her granddaughter, whereas a doting grandmother sees the same behaviour as refreshingly spontaneous (Murdoch 1970, 17–18). If the rash is a case of measles, both the parent and the paediatrician are right. If the political speech is a call to arms issued in a Texas accent, all three auditors are right. If the granddaughter's behaviour lies at the intersection of 'crude and ill mannered' and 'refreshingly spontaneous', both grandmothers are right. The mere fact that different observers perceive the same situation differently does not show that any of them is wrong, or that perception is not reliable.

Many events are both infuriating and depressing, so the fact that some people experience anger and others sadness in response to the same event does not show that the responses do not track features of the world. But, we are apt to think, if it is infuriating, it is *not* amusing. So the fact that the same event infuriates some people while amusing others seems strong evidence of the subjectivity, hence untrustworthiness, of emotional deliverances. This need not be so. It might be evidence that emotions are perspectival. A Red Sox fan sees the game winning play while a Yankees fan sees the game losing play. They are looking at exactly the same play. And they are discerning properties that the play genuinely has. The play that wins the game for one team loses it for the other. The spectators, given their diverging allegiances, simply orient themselves to different aspects of the play. One group see it in terms of its consequences for the Yankees; the other, in terms of its consequences for the Red Sox. Analogously, the subject who is amused or elated by the event that others find sad or infuriating may have a different perspective on it, one that discloses aspects of the event that the others are insensitive to. That the Red Sox fan is happy and the Yankees fan is sad is no surprise. From the Red Sox fan's point of view, the outcome is pleasing; from the Yankees fan's point of view, it is displeasing. A single situation can have multiple emotion-sensitive aspects. The diversity of responses can be due to the fact that different respondents are sensitive to different aspects.

Such variability would show, not that emotions are epistemically inert, but that reactions require calibration along at least three dimensions: the perspective the subject adopts, how sensitive a subject is, and which emotions dominate in the subject. Maasai tribesmen inure themselves to pain. Middle class Americans do not. Hence a Maasai's wince evinces approximately the same intensity of pain as an American's groan. So a physician who is attempting to determine the level of her patient's pain needs to know whether her patient is exhibiting American or Maasai pain behaviour. If analogously, a highly emotional person's elation is approximately equivalent to a stolid person's mild pleasure as evidence of joyousness, then to figure out how joyous an event is, we need to factor in the responsiveness of the responder. We also need to know about the subject's responsiveness to different

emotion-triggering properties: If a person encounters something that is both funny and sad, is she likely to be amused, saddened or both? Attempting to address the issue at this level of generality is of course much too crude. For emotional responses are highly sensitive to context and history. We need to know a good deal about the respondent, including her recent history and her relationships to and attitudes regarding the object. Her response to someone's acute embarrassment might depend on whether that person is someone she loves or loathes. If the former, she is apt to feel pity or sympathy. If the latter, she may feel *schadenfreude*.

Even if emotional deliverances are less reliable than perceptual deliverances, it does not follow that they are epistemically inert. In neither case are deliverances creditable in isolation. Perceptions that cohere with other things we believe or endorse easily integrate into a tenable system of thought. Those that do not require more support in order to be tenable. Often that support is available, so the fact that a perceptual deliverance is suspect does not utterly disqualify it. Moreover, we learn which perceptions are trustworthy, and in what circumstances. We do not, for example, trust our colour perceptions at dusk or our judgements about delicate distinctions in flavour immediately after eating a jalapeño pepper. So if emotional deliverances are less reliable than perceptual deliverances, they need more collateral support in order to be tenable. For they start out with less initial tenability. But to have less initial tenability is not to have none. The very fact that they present themselves as indicators of how things stand gives them some degree of initial tenability.

Moreover, no more than perceptual deliverances are emotional deliverances on a par. As we learn more about the world and our emotional attunement to it, we can assign different degrees of initial tenability to different deliverances. Having learnt that peripheral vision is not as accurate as focal vision, we assign less weight to what we see out of the corner of the eye than we do to what we see at the centre of the visual field. Having learnt that I am prone to overreacting to offences against my child, I take my feelings of outrage as evidence not of the outrageousness of the situation, but of its having some, perhaps small, measure of objectionability.

To make the case that emotions afford epistemic access to aspects of their objects, we need not establish correlations for every emotion. It suffices if we can identify some recognizable subset whose members are reliable indicators. Their deliverances are epistemically estimable even if the deliverances of other emotions were not. Moreover, the correlations can be different for different subjects and/or against different backgrounds. The upshot is this: Emotional deliverances, like perceptual deliverances, afford epistemic access to their objects, but not in every case. Nor does a given emotion have the same correlate, regardless of subject or circumstances. So rather than saying that emotional deliverance *d* indicates the presence of property *p*, it may be better to say that in circumstances *c*, subject *a*'s emotional deliverance *d* indicates property *p*.

The payoff so far may seem slight. I have been speaking of emotional deliverances as though each deliverance takes the form of a particular judgement: 'that is dangerous'; 'this is delightful'; 'that is repulsive', and so on. I mentioned that there are response-dependent properties of things, where the responses on which they depend are emotional. Although our emotions are not utterly reliable indicators of the presence of such properties, we can often tell which emotional reactions



reflect the presence of emotional response-dependent properties. So under certain recognizable circumstances, an emotional reaction affords epistemic access to such properties.

#### **4. Complexities of Response Dependence**

Even if this were the whole story, it would not be trivial. A response-dependent property is not just a brute propensity to trigger a given response. The property is identified by reference to its ability to trigger a response, but the property is not just the bald capacity to trigger that response. In fact, response-dependent properties are often highly complex. Something's being blue, for example, involves its having a complex capacity to reflect and absorb light. Moreover, in perceiving something as blue, we do more than just react differentially to an instantaneous stimulus. The perception orients us to the past and the future. We count the current deliverance as of a new colour if it differs from its immediate predecessor. We stand ready to judge immediately subsequent colour perceptions as the same as the current one only if they are as of blue. We are surprised or unsurprised, depending on whether the item that presents itself as blue is the sort of thing we would expect to see and the sort of thing we would expect to be blue, and so on. We license ourselves to draw inferences about ourselves and the situation that would be ungrounded had our current perceptual experience been different.

Emotional response-dependent properties are also complex. A situation is blameworthy only if it is unfortunate and a subject is somehow responsible for its occurrence. Remorse is an emotion triggered by a sense of blameworthiness. It may be felt as a stab of distress, but it is more than that. It orients its subject to the past and the future in ways that other stabs of distress, such as feelings of regret, do not. To the past, because it embeds a feeling that something she did or refrained from doing contributed to the misfortune. To the future, because her sense of blameworthiness colours her feelings about her obligations and opportunities, and her sense of herself as a moral agent with on-going relations to other moral agents. Indeed, as stabs of distress, regret and remorse may feel exactly the same. Then their difference lies in the orientations that they supply. A destructive tsunami is terrible, hence highly regrettable. It is not blameworthy, since no one causes it and no one can prevent it. Tragic though it is, no one should feel remorse over its occurrence.

Response-dependent properties vary in that some are more normative than others. Something is visible only if it can be seen. Being visible seems to be a dispositional property having little if any normativity. Being blue involves a norm: something is blue only if it would be perceived as blue by a normal perceiver under normal circumstances. Being in tune involves an ideal. Something is in tune only if it would be perceived as in tune by someone with perfect pitch. Emotionally response-dependent properties show similar variability. Something is enjoyable only if it is capable of being enjoyed. Something is indecent only if it would offend a normal subject in normal circumstances. Something is admirable only if it ought to be admired and despicable only if it ought to be despised. Perhaps the norms to which normal agents respond can be identified purely sociologically. But the conditions

for the application of the more evaluative emotional response-dependent concepts cannot. Such concepts are what Bernard Williams calls 'thick concepts'. They fuse descriptive and evaluative elements (Williams 1985, 129).

Trust is the emotion that tracks the response-dependent property of trustworthiness. Truthfulness is (at least a major component of) trustworthiness of an informant. Williams's account of truthfulness affords insights into trustworthiness and trust, and indirectly into the complexity of other thick emotional concepts.

Williams explicates the thick concept of truthfulness in terms of accuracy and sincerity (Williams 2002). Trusting an informant, he maintains, is taking her utterance to be accurate and sincere. Both accuracy and sincerity require explication. It might seem that someone is sincere just in case she says what she believes. Then she is not lying. But a person can be untruthful without lying, for truthfulness is a matter of conveying what one takes to be true, not of stating what one takes to be true. One can convey false beliefs by expressing misleading truths. So, perhaps truthfulness requires that one neither lie nor mislead. Williams considers this too simple. For truthfulness is a virtue. Since not all lies, evasions, obfuscations and omissions are morally objectionable, an agent is not morally obliged to refrain from conveying all untruths. One aspect of the virtue of truthfulness is a sensitivity to when truthfulness is called for. Some information is private. Your interlocutor may have no right to know the details of your love life or your trade secrets or your investment strategy. If refusing to answer unduly intrusive questions is unfeasible, Williams maintains, evasion is permissible. Your interlocutor should recognize that in relentlessly pursuing such questions, she may transgress the boundaries within which truthfulness is required. Adversarial exchanges may involve an obligation to tell the truth, but no obligation to be entirely open. Parties to such exchanges know this, so they expect omissions and carefully crafted assertions. The obligation to be truthful is thus fine-tuned to cultural circumstances. Where and when evasions are permissible depend on aspects of the culture, including what is considered private, what exchanges are adversarial, and who deserves to know what. If Williams is right, then feeling that someone is sincere requires attunement to circumstances. We need to be sensitive to the sort of exchange we are in, the sort of information our interlocutor considers private, whether she considers our interest intrusive, and if so, whether she takes us to belong to a class whose members are entitled to such intrusive information.

Sincerity does not insure accuracy. Saying what one believes does not guarantee that one utters a truth. Being reflective, we monitor our truth seeking efforts in order to improve our accuracy. As we learn more about things we learn more about what methods of inquiry yield reliable results. We devise and refine our methodologies and control our belief formation accordingly. The methodologies are public and are institutionally grounded. But they are not just an additional layer of assessment perched atop antecedently formulated beliefs. For investigators who belong to an intellectual community committed to the values that its methodologies embody internalize those values and form their own beliefs accordingly. To some extent, this is because of the education they receive. They come to understand that the methodologies of their intellectual community are effective means for forming beliefs that are, and that the community will recognize as, accurate.

To trust an informant is to believe that her utterance is accurate and sincere. The utterance could be true by being a lucky guess. But when we trust an informant, it is not because we consider her a lucky guesser, but because we consider her a responsible epistemic agent. So the feeling of trust is keyed to norms of accuracy. We also think she is sincere. This, as we saw, involves a culturally variable sensitivity to matters of privacy. In trusting her, we take her to be respecting what we take, and take her to take, to be appropriate norms.

I went into this example in some detail in order to highlight exactly how cognitively complicated and evaluatively loaded emotions can be. Trust is an emotion. Because a feeling of trust can be experienced at an instant, we are apt to overlook how richly textured its conditions are, how much we had to learn and internalize in order to be in a position for the deliverance to be a deliverance of that emotion.

The same is true of perceptions. We see mountains and football games, microscopes and DVD players, ballots and Torah scrolls.<sup>1</sup> We also see sleazy actions and generous ones, brilliant manoeuvres and clumsy ones. Obviously we need to know a lot to be able to see such things. But we do know a lot, and given that we have the requisite knowledge, we directly and immediately see a vast array of different sorts of things. Emotions, I suggest, function similarly. In suitable circumstances, trustworthiness affords epistemic access to honesty and intellectual integrity. A speaker's honesty and intellectual integrity are evidence of her reliability. So feeling that an informant is trustworthy is evidence that she is reliable, that her report is true, and that, as she says, the Krebs cycle occurs in mitochondria. The epistemic creditability of an emotional deliverance thus figures in our grounds for believing a matter of scientific fact.

## 5. Salience

Epistemologists often proceed as though information is hard to come by. But actually our problem is the opposite. We are prey to massive information overload. Inputs flood our sense organs. Infinitely many obvious consequences follow from every belief. To know, understand, perceive or discern anything requires overlooking a lot. The question is: what should be overlooked?

Some aspects of a situation are salient, others are not. Salient aspects command attention, overshadowing other epistemically accessible factors. If a factor is salient it is, or at least presents itself as being, presumptively significant or relevant (Hookway 2000, 67–70). Emotions are sources of salience. They fix patterns of attention, highlighting certain features of a domain and obscuring others. Compare the following scenarios:

Walking along a familiar street late at night, I suddenly hear footsteps approaching from behind. I am afraid. My fear does not just deliver the information that I feel I am in danger. It also orients me to my surroundings, highlighting aspects I otherwise overlook. I notice that aside from my pursuer, there is no one around, that the shops are all closed and barred, that no cars are on the road. I realize that the cobblestone sidewalk is uneven,

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1 The example of the Torah Scrolls is Sydney Morgenbesser's.

so it would be hard to run, that my high heeled shoes hobble me, that I am so out of shape that neither fight nor flight is an attractive option.

Alternatively:

Walking along a familiar street late at night, I suddenly hear footsteps approaching from behind. Recognizing them as those of a friendly, local dog walker, I relax. Feeling serene, I notice the warm, gentle breeze, the slight scent of flowers, the attractive displays in the shop windows, the brightness of the moon, and the absence of crowds on the normally bustling street, with its charming cobblestone sidewalks. It is a lovely night for a leisurely stroll.

All of the individual facts adduced in both scenarios obtain. Under the sway of two emotions, I notice different ones. The effect of the one is not just to downplay the significance of the facts that the other makes salient. Although those facts are in principle epistemically accessible, some of them simply do not register. (If I think I am about to be mugged, I am hardly going to notice gentle breezes!) My emotion may do more than merely highlight discrete facts, like the scent of flowers or the absence of police officers. It may enable me to discern a pattern in what I would otherwise take as separate facts. The isolation, lack of light, uneven sidewalks and so on make the street dangerous for pedestrians late at night. By wearing shoes in which I can barely walk, rarely exercising, and strolling down a dangerous street, I put myself at risk. Even though the individual facts were readily known, the orientation the emotion supplies may be crucial to discerning the pattern they constitute (Elgin 1996, 149–56).

Emotions direct attention. They reveal certain aspects of a domain as worthy of notice. Fear is a frame of mind that prompts me to look at a situation in ways that would reveal evidence of danger and opportunities to avoid it. Childlike enthusiasm prompts me to look at the situation in terms of opportunities for fun. Such emotions may enable us to draw distinctions we otherwise would lack the resources to draw. For they supply focused incentives to refine our sensibilities. I have two students who regularly turn their work in late. One irritates me; the other worries me. If I disregard my emotions, their behaviour seems the same. But the fact that they occasion different emotions is evidence that what initially looks like one phenomenon is actually two. I dimly sense that the students are displaying different academic difficulties. My having different responses does not demonstrate that this is so. But it does provide grounds for suspicion. Hence it puts me in a position to seek further evidence and gives me an incentive to do so.

In this respect emotion is like belief. A belief is a propositional attitude, a propensity to take things to be as the belief content says that they are. Ordinarily, philosophers concentrate on the propositional element. They construe the belief that  $p$  as an attitude towards the proposition that  $p$ , a feeling that  $p$  is so. But a belief is not just an attitude towards a proposition. It is an attitude towards the world. The belief that it is raining orients me towards the world in such a way that I reach for an umbrella and cancel the picnic. I mentally and perhaps physically prepare myself to get splashed. I revise my intention to water the lawn. I look for a break in the clouds, listen to the raindrops on the roof, and so on. The belief is not just an

internal affirmation of a propositional content. It involves expectations, states of perceptual readiness, patterns of salience, and dispositions to utter, accept, reject, and investigate matters that I otherwise would have no inclination to consider. The belief that it is raining frames my interpretation of events. A wet spot on the floor intimates a leaky roof, not a spilt drink. Worries about flooding become prominent; worries about drought recede. Believing that  $p$ , is not just an affirmative orientation to the content that  $p$ . It is a complex orientation to those aspects of the world to which the question whether or not  $p$  is relevant.

By rendering previously ignored features and previously unknown patterns salient, emotions provide new insights into a domain. They enrich our cognitive capacities by sensitizing us to likenesses and differences, patterns and discrepancies that we would otherwise overlook. This is so whether the emotion is well founded or not. Even though fear of flying is unwarranted, people who suffer from it often end up knowing a lot more than other travellers about airline safety precautions and their limits. Their fear leads them to pay careful attention to information (about life vests and emergency exits) that other travellers routinely ignore and to seek out additional information (about metal fatigue and engine maintenance) that most travellers have no interest in. Even irrational emotions can be cognitively fruitful. But, one wants to say, insofar as the emotion is irrational, the insights it yields are slightly askew – not in the sense that they are not genuine insights, but in the sense that they do not bear on the subject's situation in the way that she thinks they do. The cognitive predicament is rather like that of someone who, seeking information about London, Ontario, inadvertently looks up information about London, England. Granted, she learns a lot, but not what she wants or needs to know. If an emotion is well founded, however, it properly attunes its subject to her situation. The factors it highlights are relevant and significant. The emotion then is not just a source of information, but a source of information that in the circumstances is worth having.

The more refined the sensibilities, the greater their yield. Consider a subject who can draw no distinctions along the scale of fears. Either he is afraid or he is not. If he is afraid, he is attuned to dangers in his domain and to opportunities to avoid them. If he is not afraid, he is largely insensitive to danger. His fear is indiscriminating. It sensitizes him to all potential dangers, regardless of their cause, their probability or their magnitude. When afraid, he is constantly on guard, for threats of any magnitude could come from any direction at any time. Another subject has the capacity to feel a range of fears from trepidation through terror. Terror, when he feels it, overrides all other concerns. He sees everything through the lens that the prospect of immanent, significant peril provides. But he rarely feels terror. Trepidation is more frequent. It, however, simply makes potential dangers slightly more salient than they otherwise would be. He is aware of them, but they colour but do not dominate his experience. For the most part, he can focus on other things. Clearly the second subject's cognitive situation is preferable to the first subject's.

To be cognitively well placed, it is not enough to have a large number of justified true beliefs. If we are lost in the woods, it would be beneficial to have justified true beliefs about how to get food and water, how to avoid predators and other dangers, how to find our way home. If my companion's overall doxastic system is richer than mine, because he knows a lot more than I do about French symbolist poetry, then

in our current predicament, he is no better off than I am. For his knowledge about poetry is irrelevant. Evidently, to be cognitively well situated, we do not just need justified true beliefs, we need relevant justified true beliefs. But even having an extensive array of relevant justified true beliefs may not be enough. If my extensive justified true beliefs about survival in the woods do not include beliefs about the prevalence of rattlesnakes, the evidence of their presence, and ways to recognize and avoid them, I may be in trouble. If my doxastic system does include such beliefs, but they are not salient, I may also be in trouble. Certain considerations should be salient in certain circumstances. And I am cognitively badly off if they are not.

The critical question then is what determines what should be salient. The answer, it seems, is that something should be salient in given circumstances, if one would want or should want to have epistemic access to it in those circumstances. ‘Would want’ is fairly easily explicated in dispositional terms. If you had epistemic access to  $p$ , would you consider your current epistemic situation for that reason improved? (Roughly, the things we would want epistemic access to are the things for which, were we later to find out about them, we would say, ‘I wish I had known!’) What we should want depends on the situation. Given that situation, would we be epistemically better off with respect to it if we had the information? An orientation or a frame of reference not only renders certain facts salient, but renders certain dimensions salient. So it can reveal worrisome gaps in our doxastic system. It can reveal what it is that we need to know. That is, if the frame is apt. By providing orientations, emotions are sources of salience. Emotions of experts are sources of what should be salient. For experts are apt to be properly tuned to the situation. So the emotions of the experienced, knowledgeable hiker – his fear, concern, complacency, and so on – are likely to cue him to relevant, significant features of the situation, providing him with epistemic access to useful information.

I have identified several ways in which emotions function cognitively. They provide epistemic access to emotional response-dependent properties. They provide epistemic access to other properties that provoke emotional responses. They fix frames of reference that render salient factors that the agent would otherwise overlook. Some of these factors may be ones that should be salient.

## **6. Expertise**

Although I think this is all true, it is hardly enough. Ideally, we would like to do at least two more things: (1) identify when emotions are reliable indicators, and (2) improve their yield. In fact we can, and regularly do, do both.

We often recognize when people’s emotional reactions are not to be trusted. When we appreciate that Joan is overwrought and that Sam is deliriously happy, we conclude that her verdicts are apt to be excessively negative and his excessively positive. We realize that we should take neither at face value. We also recognize expertise. We take a critic’s enjoyment of a performance as much stronger evidence of its excellence than the enjoyment displayed by the soloist’s dotting mother. We consider the distrust exhibited by someone we regard as a good judge of character to be more telling than the distrust of the well-known cynic. If someone is an expert

in an area, it is likely that the dimensions along which he assesses are the right dimensions and that the assessments are reasonably accurate. An expert likes, admires, enjoys, fears, and worries about the right things in his area of expertise. He knows what deserves to be liked, admired, enjoyed, feared, and worried about and reacts accordingly. Our judgements about such matters are far from infallible. But they are sufficiently better than chance that rather than rejecting them out of hand, or trusting our luck, it is worth considering how we could improve their yield.

At least two strategies are effective. The first is to refine our sensibilities. By attending to and reflecting on our emotional responses, the situations that trigger them, and the orientations they give rise to, and by assessing the opinions they generate, we have resources for developing more nuanced and more accurate responses. As I learn that my fear of frogs is unfounded, I gradually cease to fear frogs. In consequence, my fear better attunes me to danger, since at least this one misattunement has been eliminated. When I learn to distinguish between regret and remorse, my emotions better track my sense of responsibility. To some extent, refinement of the sensibilities is a matter of learning to tell different feelings apart. To a greater extent it is a matter of learning to tell the orientations, deliverances and triggers apart.

Another way to improve the cognitive yield of emotions is through calibration. Some measuring instruments are more sensitive than others. A big change in the pointer position on one voltmeter is equivalent to a small change in the pointer position on another. To know how to read a meter requires knowing how sensitive it is. The same holds for emotional deliverances. A highly emotional subject will experience a big response to a stimulus that triggers only a slight change in a stolid subject. To read the magnitude of the stimulus off the emotional response requires knowing how sensitive the respondent is. This too is something we can discover.

Although we gain some understanding of things through knowledge of the emotional responses of others, much of what each of us gleans from emotions comes from her own case. Self-knowledge enables us to access the information our emotions embed. If we can identify our emotions, assess our level of expertise, and recognize how sensitive we are, we can profit cognitively from their deliverances. Reflective self-awareness pays epistemic dividends.

Suppose I am right. Having emotions affords some measure of epistemic access to the environment. Self-monitoring – attending to our responses and our responses to our responses, assessing appropriateness, learning to discern subtleties that align with circumstances, and so forth – enables us to increase their epistemic yield. Still, even in the interests of advancing knowledge, there are some emotions that we would go far out of our way to avoid. For the circumstances that trigger them are simply terrible.

We might simply concede the point. Experience is limited. If epistemic access to a domain requires experience of a sort you never have, you never gain that epistemic access to the domain. Some emotions are so painful that the benefits are not worth the cost. Some may be so painful that the pain swamps any benefits that could conceivably accrue. So perhaps there are available insights we should willingly forgo.

Instead of writing such emotions off completely, and forgoing the insights they embed, I suggest, we can gain access to them and their deliverances through the arts.

One reason we engage with works of art that elicit negative emotions is that they enable us to experience such emotions in muted forms and to explore, off line, the perspectives and insights they yield. If you are lucky, you will never directly experience the horror of coming to realize that you have actually murdered your father and married your mother. You can, however, experience an attenuated form of that horror through *Oedipus Rex*. Imagining your way into Oedipus' horror, adopting the perspective it provides, and seeing how the world looks from that perspective enriches your life. For you gain the ability to see and feel and discern and respond in ways you previously could not. If emotions afford epistemic access to things, and the arts refine, extend, heighten, and provide opportunities to experience emotions, the arts contribute significantly to cognition. And if we ask why we enjoy tragedies, horror films, and other art forms that elicit negative emotions, the answer is, at least in part, because we enjoy expanding and exercising our abilities, as engagement with such art forms enables us to do.

## 7. Conclusion

I have argued that emotion should be recognized as a facet of reason. Emotional deliverances are in some respects like perceptual deliverances and in some respects like beliefs. Like perceptual deliverances, they typically are responses to environmental triggers. If properly interpreted they provide information about the items that trigger them. Like beliefs, they fix patterns of attention, rendering salient and thereby affording epistemic access to factors that the agent might otherwise overlook. Like both beliefs and perceptions, emotions are educable. We can assess them for reasonableness and can gradually realign them if we find them unreasonable. And like both beliefs and perceptual deliverances, emotional deliverances are fallible. A deliverance, whatever its source, is tenable only if it is integrable into a system of cognitive commitments in reflective equilibrium. No matter how compelling an emotional response may seem, it is not epistemically acceptable on its own. But as a strand interwoven into a tenable system, it may strengthen, deepen, and modulate a person's understanding of herself and the world.

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