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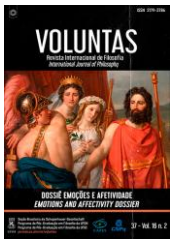

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Articles

What are *The Emotions*?

O que são as emoções?

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ABSTRACT

Philosophers and cognitive scientists frequently construe emotional experience in terms of discrete episodes or states that can be individuated, enumerated, and assigned to different types. In this paper, I address (a) the source and status of this broad conception of *the emotions*, and (b) the extent to which it succeeds in accommodating the structure and variety of human emotional experiences. I argue that *the emotions* are a selective abstraction from the much richer phenomenology of emotional life. This abstraction originates neither in an everyday, commonsense picture of emotion nor in emotion theory. Instead, it is a chimerical hybrid of the two, which risks eclipsing the complexity, diversity, and nuances of human emotional life. I conclude by sketching a philosophical perspective that emphasizes the dynamic, temporally extended structure of emotional experience more so than individuation, enumeration, and classification.

Keywords: Commonsense; Emotional episodes; Emotional experience; Literature; Narrative; Phenomenology

RESUMO

Filósofos e cientistas cognitivos frequentemente interpretam a experiência emocional em termos de episódios ou estados discretos que podem ser individuados, enumerados e atribuídos a diferentes tipos. Neste artigo, abordo (a) a origem e o status dessa concepção ampla das emoções e (b) até que ponto ela consegue acomodar a estrutura e a variedade das experiências emocionais humanas. Argumento que as emoções são uma abstração seletiva da fenomenologia muito mais rica da vida emocional. Essa abstração não se origina nem de uma imagem cotidiana e de senso comum da emoção, nem da teoria da emoção. Em vez disso, é um híbrido quimérico dos dois, que corre o risco de eclipsar a complexidade, a diversidade e as nuances da vida emocional humana. Concluo esboçando uma perspectiva filosófica que enfatiza a estrutura dinâmica e temporalmente estendida da experiência emocional mais do que a individuação, a enumeração e a classificação.

Palavras-chave: Senso comum; Episódios emocionais; Experiencia emocional; Literatura; Narrativa; Fenomenologia

1 INTRODUCTION

In the philosophy and cognitive science of emotion, it is commonplace to first introduce the topic of *emotion* and then move swiftly onto a consideration of *the emotions*.[1] This might seem like an innocuous move, one that leaves all of the important philosophical questions completely open. What do emotions consist of? How many emotion-types are there? Are there importantly different kinds of emotions? What roles do emotions play in our lives? Do conceptions and experiences of emotion vary historically and cross-culturally? It can be added that thinking in terms of *the emotions* need not imply that *all* emotional experience is to be understood in such a way. Moreover, our conception of emotional experience could be further enriched by supplementing the emotions with a host of other affective phenomena. For instance, we could include the likes of vitality affects or "forms of vitality" (Stern, 2010), "self-feeling" (Rzesnitzek, 2014; Kreuch, 2019), and "existential feeling" (Ratcliffe, 2005; 2008). Nevertheless, moving straight from *emotion* and *emotional experience* to discussion of *the emotions* disposes us from the outset to construe human emotional life in a certain way—as amenable to individuation, enumeration, and categorisation. In addition, it lends itself to a conception of emotionality as extricable from the larger structure of experience; we sometimes experience an emotion and sometimes do not.

There are many other instances where switching from singular to plural involves a shift in meaning. Consider the following: What is smoke? What are smokes? What is life? What are lives? What is time? What are times? What is consciousness? What are consciousnesses? As a rule of thumb, this applies wherever a singular, seemingly concrete noun is sometimes but not always countable, and not always preceded by the definite or indefinite article. In the case of *emotion*, I am increasingly of the view that construing emotion as a count noun and then assigning emotions to however many types is not an innocent move at all. In fact, it is artificially restrictive and potentially misleading.

[1] For instance, Tappolet's introductory text on philosophy of *emotion* moves immediately into a discussion of *philosophy of emotions* (Tappolet, 2022).

By analogy, imagine someone standing on a mountain, above a layer of cloud that eclipses the valleys below. All they can see is a series of other peaks protruding above the clouds. These belong to different types—there are the white, grey, and green ones, the tree-covered ones, the smooth ones, the jagged ones, and the conjoined ones. This selective conception of the surrounding environment is not outright false. Even so, it is incomplete and misleading in (a) omitting many other features of the landscape, and (b) not placing the features that are documented in their proper place—they do not float in thin air. I think something akin to this is at play in emotion theory. To develop my case, I will proceed by asking where this broad conception of *the emotions* originated. The answer, I will suggest, is that it is neither a product of theory nor of everyday, commonsense thought and talk about emotion. Instead, it is a hybrid of the two—a selective abstraction from everyday language, thought, and experience that is frequently adopted uncritically as an explanandum, thus eclipsing the much richer, more dynamic, and more diverse realities of emotional life.

Throughout, I will limit the scope of my enquiry to English language discussions of emotion. Of course, when referring to an everyday, commonsense, or folk conception of emotional experience, there are methodological concerns about restricting oneself to a specific language, culture, period, or social group and consequently providing an account that is parochial and incomplete. However, if I am right about the shortcomings of this conception in the English language case, there is every reason to think that my points also apply more widely. What I really want to emphasize here is that we do not need to look very far at all, in order to see that something is lacking.

EVERYDAY EMOTIONS

The task of identifying an everyday conception of emotion, as reflected in our everyday talk, is less straightforward than one might think. A clear-cut distinction cannot be drawn between theoretical and *commonsense* or *folk* conceptions of emotion. Furthermore, the various lists of emotions that serve as starting points for emotion

theory incorporate aspects of both. In my view, what is frequently taken to be a pre-theoretical understanding is more plausibly a selective abstraction from everyday practice. I will focus on two steps that are widespread and seemingly innocuous—first pluralizing the term *emotion* and then assigning emotional episodes or states to however many distinct types. The result is often construed as a pre-theoretical understanding of emotion, which it is the task of theory to revise, refine, and/or elaborate upon. In practice, however, people talk and think about emotion in ways that are far more nuanced, wide-ranging, and creative, and less reliant on categorisation. Furthermore, I will suggest that this complexity better reflects the richness and diversity of human emotional experience. (For current purposes, I will employ the terms "emotion" and "emotional experience" interchangeably, given that everyday talk of emotion is generally concerned with something that we experience. However, this is not to suggest that emotion, as commonly construed, is *exhausted* by its phenomenology).

Many philosophical approaches share the assumption that our emotional repertoire consists largely of discrete, short-lived episodes. Tappolet (2022, pp.29-30) calls this the "temporality" thesis, adding that it is endorsed widely by philosophers and psychologists.[2] It is also assumed that emotional episodes (whatever they might consist of) belong to a finite number of distinct types. Together, these assumptions are often taken to reflect everyday language and thought regarding emotion, as exemplified by this passage from an introduction to the philosophy of emotion(s):

> The philosophy of emotions seeks to develop a systematic theory of the phenomena we refer to by terms such as 'fear', 'envy', 'anger', 'sadness', 'joy', 'embarrassment', 'shame', 'jealousy', 'remorse', 'boredom', 'nostalgia', 'pride', 'regret', 'admiration', 'compassion', 'disgust', 'amusement', 'indignation', 'hope', which fall under the

[2] For example, Scherer (2005, p.697) defines an emotion as "*an episode of interrelated, synchronized changes*". As Majeed (2025, p.218) puts it, much of the empirical research on emotion "operationalizes emotion as a coordinated pattern of expressive, physiological, behavioral, cognitive, and phenomenological responses, triggered by an object or event of personal significance". This pattern is taken to last for a short period—seconds or at most minutes. It can be added that differences between patterns are construed as belonging to however many types. See also Izard (2010) for discussion of different conceptions of emotion explicitly endorsed by emotion scientists, all of which share the assumption that emotions are episodes belonging to distinct types.

> generic label of 'emotions'. We know it when we are undergoing emotions, often we know which emotion we have, and we know how to ascribe them to others and why we ascribe them. (Deonna and Teroni, 2012, p.1)

But who exactly is the "we" that already thinks of emotions in this way? It might seem that assignment of emotional episodes to these and other categories amounts to a *commonsense* or *folk* view of emotion, manifest in our experience, thought, activity, and talk. Thus, describing it involves no more than identifying a preliminary subject matter for philosophical and/or scientific enquiry. Having done so, we can then ask whether emotions in general comprise a unitary category, whether any emotions are basic (according to whichever conception of "basic"), how many types of emotions there are, what emotions consist of and what roles they play in our lives, whether and how emotional experiences and their expression are historically/culturally variable, and so forth. As so many questions can be asked, and so many points of disagreement established, this field of enquiry might seem very open.[3] However, there is a wider philosophical habit of first proclaiming what "we" happen to think and then discovering an intriguing problem or potential confusion at the heart of what we have supposedly accepted naively. And, when little effort is dedicated to establishing that we do indeed think what we are said to think, this is a bad habit. Emotion theory—I increasingly suspect—is a case in point. When we pause to reflect on everyday emotion talk and what it refers to, what is offered up as an everyday understanding, as reflected in vernacular language, increasingly looks like a selective abstraction. Contestable assumptions are surreptitiously imposed upon our subject matter from the start.

As Widen and Russell (2010, p.77) observe, "the word *emotion* names both an everyday concept and a scientific one". As such, it differs from electrons, DNA, gardens, and pets, which fall on one or the other side. This observation extends to more specific

[3] However, not all philosophers think of emotion like this. For instance, in contrast to the usual distinction drawn between emotional episodes that essentially involve experience and emotional dispositions towards those episodes, Naar (2025) proposes that emotions are non-phenomenological states closely associated with but not identical to occurrent experiences. My discussion here is concerned with those approaches that *do* conceive of emotions as episodic and experiential.

emotion-types, such as fear, sadness, and anger, which span a range of theoretical and practical contexts. To what extent can these discourses be distinguished? The situation can be construed in terms of Wilfrid Sellars' famous distinction between the "scientific" and "manifest" images of ourselves "in-the-world" (Sellars, 1963, Ch. 1, p.5). For Sellars, an "image" incorporates a largely integrated conception of the world and our place within in. Philosophy, he says, is concerned with "knowing our way around", something that involves tying different conceptions together in coherent ways. But let us suppose that philosophical and scientific thought also muddle them up on occasion—that what we regard as a naïve or everyday conception imports elements from current or historical philosophical and scientific thinking. In this way, a supposedly *manifest* image could turn out be a scientifically or philosophically motivated image of the manifest image.

What Sellars calls "images" are themselves complex and dynamic. So, given a long history of interactions between scientific and everyday perspectives, it is unlikely that a clear-cut distinction can be drawn. In addition, both scientific and manifest images are plausibly heterogeneous and context-dependent, making it even harder to separate them. However, despite this messiness, scientific and manifest images of a phenomenon can continue to differ in certain respects. And, in the case of emotion, I want to suggest that philosophical/scientific presentations of the everyday view are artificially constrained by a way of thinking that they impose upon it.

Whatever the origins of everyday emotion typologies might be, it is implausible that they are products of pure, unadulterated first-person access to emotion. An emotional experience does not dictate exactly how it is to be conceptualized. Returning again to Sellars, a comparison can be drawn here with what philosophers and cognitive scientists have since termed *belief-desire psychology*. According to Sellars (1963, Ch.5), although it may seem that we have direct, unadulterated access to the nature of our own mental states, such intuitions are questionable. Sellars sets out an alternative scenario, involving the "myth" of our "Rylean ancestors". Imagine a society of behaviourists, who share our linguistic abilities but do not account for one another's

behaviour in terms of internal mental states. Then along comes a folk genius called Jones, who "develops a *theory* according to which overt utterances are but the culmination of a process which begins with certain inner episodes" (Sellars, 1963, p.186). Jones labels these postulated episodes "thoughts". The theory is subsequently elaborated and adopted more widely, not just as a way of explaining others' behaviour but also of accounting for one's own. In time, the initial theoretical achievement is forgotten and it seems obvious to all that actions emanate from inner thoughts, a truth that is seemingly grasped through direct access to one's mental states.

Granted, pluralizing the term "emotion", emphasizing discrete episodes with circumscribed contents, and categorizing them as belonging to a finite number of types may not amount to a full-blown *theory* (depending on one's criteria for theory-hood). Nevertheless, it does at least involve a largely integrated conception of emotion/s, employed amongst other things to describe and explain behaviour. So, consider an analogous story where "Emotional Jones" sets out a conceptual framework involving emotional episodes belonging to various types. I think the right tale to tell here is one involving confusion between images. Emotional Jones was not a folk genius but a theorist of some persuasion, who sought to manage the diversity, richness, nuances, and complex narrative structure of everyday thought and talk concerning emotional experience by simplifying matters considerably. Emotional Smith then inherited this practice from Emotional Jones but forgot where it came from, instead conflating it with the context of practice from which it was abstracted. This led to an enduring conflation of *images*, a starting point for theory that combined features of both. Human emotional life was thereafter interpreted through the lens of an abstract and selective conceptual framework. *The End.*

A story along these lines need not limit itself to philosophical conceptions of emotion; it can also be applied to certain work in psychology and neuroscience. For instance, Cottingham (2024, p.6) points to something like this in addressing Ekman's influential work on basic emotions and facial expressions: "faces isolated from both bodies and social context are more artifacts of psychological methods than indicative

of how social actors come to understand their own and others' emotions in context".[4] More generally, I propose, what serves as a starting point for enquiry is often shaped by widespread but questionable assumptions.[5] Philosophical discussions are replete with examples of the form "X has emotion A with object *p*". For instance, Deonna and Teroni (2012, p.3) mention the likes of "Bernard fears that his life is in danger", "Mary hopes that the economy will improve", and "Alison regrets that Jacob did not come to the party". Along with emotional episodes like these (and others that are not couched in explicitly propositional terms), they note that we also ascribe longer-term moods, which are not so clearly intentional in structure (Deonna and Teroni, 2012, pp. 3-4).

Now, I do not want to claim for a moment that any of this is strictly *false*. We can identify emotions like these throughout the course of everyday life, track them reliably, interpret others as doing so, investigate the associated neurobiology, address functional roles, enquire about experiential content, and so forth.[6] There is nothing to stop us playing the emotion-game in this way, and only this way, for as long as we like. Indeed, such an approach might seem thoroughly compelling if we restrict our considerations to swift and fleeting emotional responses to circumscribed and episodically salient stimuli, as with disappointment when the final whistle blows, fear of

[4] At the same time, Cottingham's positive thesis itself exemplifies the kind of thinking I seek to challenge here. The proposal is that established lists of emotions are supplemented by "neo-emotions", including the likes of eco-grief, doomscrolling, flight-shame, and Black joy, which operate in ways that are inextricable from dynamic, shared practices. However, this assumes from the outset an artificially restricted conception of our established emotion vocabulary, one that emphasizes naming. It similarly construes novel emotion talk in an impoverished way, in terms of new emotion labels (Cottingham, 2024).

[5] In fact, this concern also applies to talk of "folk psychology", construed as the ascription of beliefs and desires in order to predict and explain behaviour. If anything, this characterisation is a sparse abstraction from the richness of everyday social practices (Ratcliffe, 2007). Furthermore, it is unclear how it might accommodate emotion. We could maintain that all emotions are just belief-desire combinations, making their integration into belief-desire psychology straightforward. However, the growing consensus among philosophers is that emotions cannot be reduced to beliefs and desires. Furthermore, emotions relate to one another and to our actions in organized, plausibly *rational* ways (Helm, 2001; 2009). If emotions guided our actions in ways that were wholly separate from belief-desire psychology, there would be two distinct networks of psychological causes operating independently of one another, resulting in psychological and behavioural chaos. So, emotions must instead be largely integrated with belief-desire psychology. But this then complicates the relationships between beliefs, desires, and actions quite considerably, as those relations further depend in structured ways on a plethora of different emotions (as well as other emotional phenomena that I consider in this paper). It follows that *belief-desire psychology* does not capture how we understand one another during the course of everyday life.

[6] See also Rorty (2004) for the point that our everyday discourse and thought concerning emotion are complex and nuanced, such that competing approaches to emotion each pick out aspects of it while failing to accommodate everything. Thus, what might be taken as an account of everyday practice also owes something to one's theoretical perspective.

the falling rocks, and joy at the unexpected arrival of an old friend. However, overemphasizing such cases promotes a wider tendency towards individuation and abstraction, which obfuscates the richness, variety, and phenomenological structure of emotional experience in general. Hence, a certain *way* of thinking about human emotional life is importantly lacking.

INDIVIDUATION TROUBLE

At least some philosophers have pointed out that overemphasizing lists of established emotions leads to an impoverished picture of human emotional life. For instance, Campbell (1997, p.3) observes that everyday language "only sometimes" employs labels such as fear, joy, guilt, and relief to express emotion. What should be said about other ways of conveying emotion linguistically, and how they might relate to those experiences that we do assign to established categories? One might respond by maintaining that the term *emotion* was only ever intended to identify a subset of phenomena within the broader family of *affects*. We can thus address any lacunae by introducing additional categories. However, a consistent distinction between emotion and affect is not itself part of everyday practice but imposed upon it. So, if we seek to capture what is present in everyday understanding and discourse, such moves should be rejected. A more promising start involves refraining from what Fiske (2020) terms the "lexical fallacy", an unreflective tendency to reify everyday emotion terms from the outset. To assume that *emotion* identifies a thing called *an emotion* and that different ways of describing emotions identify different types of things is, according to Fiske, to risk promoting a distorted conception based on superficial features of one language (almost always English):

> ...many psychologists, philosophers, neuroscientists and others have been beguiled by their language, often reifying vernacular emotion lexemes by taking it for granted that they correspond one-to-one with affective states. (Fiske, 2020, p.98)

Fiske adds that emotion words are not used in stable, consistent ways and instead serve a range of purposes. Furthermore, we do not always describe, communicate, and express emotions by naming them. Indeed, some forms of emotional experience are "not marked by discrete lexemes" at all (Fiske, 2020, p.106). Although we might convey and express such experiences using a variety of words, there need be no single, consistent way of doing so, and the emphasis is not on *naming* something. As Fiske suggests, we also draw on other features of language such as tone, stress, and syntax, as well as non-linguistic activities and expressions.[7] Hence, there is much more to the language of emotion than naming, and there is also considerable diversity among languages. Fiske therefore recommends establishing technical terms for research-purposes, which avoid confusing vernacular and scientific categories.

These reflections set the scene for posing the question of *how we do talk and think about emotional experience*. As noted, a potential problem with presentations of our everyday views is not looking carefully enough. With this comes the risk of promoting a simplified, distorted image of the relevant phenomena. So, if we seek to acknowledge the complexity and variety of everyday understandings (and experiences) of emotion, where and how should we start looking? There is no simple answer to that question—we could draw on many different disciplines and methods in order to explore further, and it is far from clear where to begin. Moreover, even within a specific cultural context, we could consider a variety of situations, from office environments to sporting contests to informal interactions among family members to drunken pub-conversations. Nevertheless, we do not have to *complete* the task in order to at least illustrate the shortcomings of construing emotions as isolable episodes belonging to single-word categories; all we need to do is start looking *somewhere*.

There is a simple demonstration, which involves the identification of emotions in literature. Of course, emotion theorists often turn to literature for compelling illustrations of standard emotions, which are easy enough to come by. As Rorty (2004, p.274) remarks, "Achilles became wrathful", "Othello became suspicious and then

[7] See also Majid (2012) for discussion of how emotions are conveyed through multiple dimensions of language.

jealous and then enraged", and "Creon was threatened by Antigone's defiance" culminating in a "self-destructive rage". But picking out choice examples is a very different exercise from *exhaustively* documenting all those instances in a given text where emotion is at play. So, try instead picking up a good novel, starting at the beginning, identifying *every* point in the narrative that describes or refers to an emotion, and then categorizing that emotion. The first thing you are likely to find is that a substantial proportion of seemingly emotional experiences are not conveyed via established labels. Furthermore, it is unclear how some of these experiences even *could* be conveyed in those terms or which terms would be appropriate. There will also be other points where it is unclear whether what is being described, conveyed, alluded to, or evoked should be classified as *an emotion*. Then, usually after only a few pages, the exercise starts to break down. The boundary between what is and is not emotional becomes so fuzzy and difficult to draw that one cannot continue with any confidence.

I tried this just now with Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* and only made it to page 7. The novel concerns a wedding night and the couple's conflicting feelings over what awaits them. While Edward has performance anxieties, Florence feels visceral disgust at the prospect of sexual intercourse. The first few pages include some straightforward emotion labels: "they were nervous" and "separately worried about the moment". Other emotion terms that feature explicitly include dread, disgust, anxiety, and disappointment. However, there are also passages like these:

> ...they had so many plans, giddy plans, heaped up before them in the misty future, as richly tangled as the summer flora of the Dorset coast, and as beautiful. (pp.5-6)
>
> Almost strangers, they stood, strangely together, on a new pinnacle of existence. (p.6)
>
> From these new heights they could see clearly, but they could not describe to each other certain contradictory feelings.... (p.6)

Does having “giddy plans” residing in a “misty future” involve an emotional experience? I would say yes, but it is unclear which emotion label or combination of labels it falls under. Nor is it clear how invoking such labels might further illuminate what has already been eloquently described.

Also spread over these first seven pages of the novel are various other experiences, activities, and attitudes, where it is difficult to say whether *an emotion* is involved. For instance, is Edward’s being “mesmerised” an emotion? What about being “troubled” by something “unutterable”? Granted, being troubled indicates a form of emotional experience, although perhaps not a specific type. But does the unutterability of the emotion’s object render that experience distinctive, or is the type of emotion involved only contingently associated with something unutterable? Is managing to “ignore” a “stain” on one’s “happiness” an emotional response to something, the avoidance of an emotional response, or the modification of an already present emotional experience or mood? What about being “proud and protective”? Pride is surely an emotional episode or state, at least sometimes, but how does it relate to being protective? And do one, the other, or both identify something emotional here? What about being “desperate for the waiters to leave”? Is this an emotional experience of a shared situation, or a broader evaluation of that situation, accompanied by emotional or non-emotional desire?

We could go on and on, writing page after page in order to document and differentiate the many interpretive options available to us. But none of this really enhances our appreciation of the text or what it conveys and evokes. The narrative as a whole is just not suggestive of a series of emotional atoms ripe for labelling. Emotionality pervades the interpersonal situation as described and how that situation unfolds, rather than residing at specific points where circumscribed, easily categorizable emotional episodes occur.

Hang on, you might say! We should not take the first few pages of a sophisticated literary narrative as representative of everyday language and understanding. However, there are no principled criteria for distinguishing what should and should not count as

part of a *folk* or *everyday* view of emotion.[8] Furthermore, it may not even be something singular that is reflected in some situations and not others, but instead something that operates differently across a number of overlapping contexts. And we should not simply proceed by arbitrarily excluding anything that does not fit our pre-established conception.

It can be added that the same exercise is similarly effective for a much wider range of written narratives. Having finished with *On Chesil Beach*, I picked up a copy of the *Sunday Times* (5th January 2025), a UK newspaper that was sitting on my table at the time of writing. I turned to the first article in the magazine section with an identifiably emotional content. In this piece, entitled "Teenage Breakdown", a mother and daughter relate their respective experiences of the daughter's mental health problems. Again, there are familiar emotion categories, such as enthusiasm, joy, and worry. However, other first- and third-person characterizations of emotional experience are not so amenable to categorization: "our mental health felt fragile"; "the air fizzed with possibilities"; "without a care in the world"; "feeling like the wind". Emotion is also conveyed via different emphases—on appearance, behaviour, desire, and one's unfolding relationship to a current, imagined, or anticipated situation: "She laughed but her face looked tearful, as if her insides and outsides no longer matched. Her body was tense and her fists clenched"; "she did want to jump on a train to Brighton, go to the beach and die there, be absorbed by the sand until nothingness".

Of course, a few pages from a novel and a magazine are not fully representative of everyday thought and talk. Nevertheless, many different sources could lead us to the same place. It is not just that certain emotional experiences fall outside of established categories or, at least, are not described in those terms. Instead, our efforts to individuate and categorize emotions seem ill-adapted to our subject matter; we are eventually frustrated in our efforts and come to recognise—or perhaps *feel*—that it is

[8] Indeed, Strawson (1985, p.56) refers disparagingly to philosophers' characterizations of commonsense or folk psychology as concerning "the ordinary explanatory terms employed by diarists, novelists, biographers, historians, journalists, and gossips, when they deliver their accounts of human behavior and human experience – the terms employed by such simple folk as Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Proust and Henry James".

not something we can get right or wrong. The point extends to the spoken word too. Try listening to a telephone conversation on a train or a group of people talking loudly in a bar, with a view to individuating and categorizing *all* of the emotional episodes conveyed and expressed. The problem is not merely that emotion is conveyed less frequently by established labels than we might have anticipated or that certain emotional experiences are not accommodated by such labels. Much of our talk is just not amenable to that way of thinking.

FROM EPISODES TO MOVEMENT

If emotion talk encompasses so much more than single-word categories, where did the current emphasis originate? In his famous 1884 article on emotion, William James distinguishes between "standard emotions" and more subtle forms of emotional experience, indicating that this way of thinking was in place by then.[9] However, it has been argued that "emotion" was only established as a theoretical term during the nineteenth century, not so long before James himself was writing. According to Dixon (2012), my "Emotional Jones" turns out to be Thomas Brown in 1820, with subsequent input from Charles Bell. Before this, "emotion" did not operate as a psychological category. Instead, there were appeals to passions, appetites, desires, sentiments, and so forth. By implication, we could not have assigned episodes of the general psychological type "emotion" to more specific psychological categories until then. The suggestion is not that emotion or recognizable types of emotions came out of nowhere in the nineteenth century. It is of course easy enough to identify both in much earlier writings. Instead, the claim is that they did not acquire a certain theoretical status until that point. That is when we started to think of human emotional life in a particular way, which is now taken for granted by much of emotion theory but remains historically contingent and also contentious. For Dixon (2012), "emotion" remains a problematic

[9] That said, much of James's own work is preoccupied with experiences that do not belong to these "standard" lists, including multiple inchoate feelings that underlie and motivate explicit philosophical positions (Ratcliffe, 2008).

term, which was not defined properly to begin with and has since acquired a variety of connotations in different contexts.

The boundaries between theoretical and vernacular language are not clear-cut, with movement occurring in both directions. Even so, we might still wonder whether the *majority* of our everyday discourse has become regimented in ways that align with theoretical discussions. And my answer is that it has not. So, how might we begin to develop a more encompassing, discerning approach to everyday emotion talk and the conception/s of emotion suggested by it? One option would be to keep expanding our inventories of emotions. Roberts (2003, p.181) lists 160 words that "in at least one of their senses actually refer to emotions", and we could doubtless add plenty more. Although this enhances discriminative ability, what is missing cannot be captured solely by adding more and more, or by adding further categories of affective state to supplement our lists of emotions. A different perspective is needed, one that situates such emotional episodes within their larger phenomenological context.

One might worry that many written narratives, such as those I have drawn upon here, are not representative of how we actually experience, understand, and talk about emotions. Narratives are constructed for various purposes and employ techniques that are not designed merely to capture the realities of emotional experience. Although it is important to keep such concerns in mind, I suggest that literary narratives do succeed in conveying certain ubiquitous but neglected *aspects* of emotional experience. Furthermore, they do so in ways that most philosophical prose styles do not or perhaps even cannot.[10] In particular, the structures and contents of literary narratives convey the intricate, dynamic, temporally extended organisation of emotional experience. Narratives also illustrate how emotionality often has a diffuse quality, rather than involving neatly defined episodes with determinate contents. Importantly, we find a consistent emphasis on the *movement* of emotional experience—how it unfolds over

[10] See also Nussbaum (1990) for the position that literature conveys aspects of emotional life that philosophical prose does not capture.

time and is poised to unfold. Episodic emotions with specific, momentary contents are selective abstractions from this, the peaks in a richer landscape that is in constant flux.

I will conclude by briefly outlining a broad conception of emotionality that captures this dynamism, in a way that can accommodate much of our everyday emotion talk. When we encounter and interact with our surroundings, we experience things as *mattering* or as *significant* to us in a variety of ways. For the most part, this does not involve our first experiencing a neutral scene and then projecting significance upon it. Entities, situations, and events, as experienced pre-reflectively, are imbued with different kinds of significant possibilities. Furthermore, these possibilities change in organised, largely anticipated ways as we interact with our surroundings.[11] The significance inherent in our experienced world reflects what might be termed our *evaluative orientation*, the organised set of cares and concerns relative to which things matter to us in the ways they do. This orientation is not homogeneous; it encompasses a host of interconnected, goal-directed projects (some longer-term than others), enduring commitments and values, habits, pastimes, expectations, self-conceptions, established preferences, and self-narratives. Although aspects of an evaluative orientation can be frequent or occasional objects of reflection, much of it is pre-reflective. Phenomenologically speaking, it is—for the most part—a perspective *through which* we encounter things as significant and engage with situations, rather than an object of experience or reflective thought.[12]

Importantly, certain degrees and kinds of significance that we experience emotionally do not concern how things matter relative to a pre-established, unwavering evaluative orientation. Instead, they involve some sense of how events have altered, will alter, or could alter the structure of that orientation. Gauging how something matters often involves an appreciation of its actual or potential impact upon us,

[11] This is a consistent theme in the phenomenological tradition, which emphasizes how we experience our surroundings as imbued with possibilities of various kinds. For further discussion and development of that position, see Ratcliffe (2008; 2015; 2017; 2022).

[12] See also Helm (e.g., 2001; 2009) for discussion of how emotional evaluations presuppose a background evaluative perspective. Glas (2017), amongst others, points out that much of this perspective is pre-reflective in nature. Hence, our emotional responses can also *reveal* what we care about and—with this—something of the self.

including how it stands to transform the very perspective through which it is experienced and evaluated. Many of the phenomena we think of as emotional can be situated within this dynamic. Indeed, even seemingly episodic emotions with specific concrete objects should not be conceptualized in isolation from it. Certain pronounced forms of emotional experience—at least those we might term *deep* or *profound* rather than just *intense*—are a matter of experiencing and engaging with the implications of events for the cares and concerns through which we encounter them. To *feel* the profound significance of a bereavement, the prospect of unemployment, becoming a parent, deciding whether or not to move overseas, one's successes, and one's failures is to appreciate—at least to some extent—their implications for what we care about. This includes the sustainability of projects, relationships, commitments, and so forth that we may even regard as constitutive of *who* we are. The dynamic is not a matter of occasional emotional spikes arising against an otherwise static backdrop. Furthermore, in more subtle ways, our engagement with significant situations involves a continual interplay between how unfolding events matter to us and how our lives are organized and reorganized, between what matters to us and the evaluative orientation in terms of which it matters.

This broad conception accommodates something that is often emphasized in everyday emotion-talk—our being *moved* in different ways by what matters. We are said to be struck by things, hit, swayed, floored, stunned, broken, bowled over, flattened, shaken up, rattled, boosted, trapped, caught up, left reeling, swallowed up, shattered, torn, pulled in, pulled up, picked up, drawn in, sucked in, wrenched away, immersed, lifted up, swept away, caught off balance, unsettled, exposed, thrown, taken aback, captivated, beaten down, dragged under, lost, and overwhelmed. Talk of movement is often employed to convey how we are acted upon, briefly or in the longer-term, by things that matter. In other words, it concerns the differing degrees and ways in which an evaluative orientation can be disturbed, undermined, transformed, or even lost due to currently unfolding events, what happened in our past, and/or what we anticipate from the future. Hence, as Nussbaum (2001) emphasizes, the movement of emotion is

not a mere bodily churning but something that engages with what we value. Reflecting on her own emotional responses to her mother's death, Nussbaum refers to a "terrible tumultuousness", "being at the mercy of currents that swept over me", "being buffeted" as though by "warring winds", and the self being torn or pulled apart by "powerful forces" (Nussbaum, 2001, p.26). In literature too, profound emotional experiences are often conveyed in terms of movement. Consider, for example, this passage from W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*: "The wonderful future he had dreamt of that summer collapsed without a sound like the proverbial house of cards" (Sebald, 1996, pp. 48-9).

We can communicate emotional experiences in terms of movements or extended patterns of movements without assigning them to specific categories. A description of emotion can emphasize any combination of the changing significance of our surroundings, how things look, and how we relate to and engage with situations.[13] In addition, all of this can be couched in terms of emotional *feeling*, which is more often a matter of experiencing and engaging with the unfolding of significant possibilities than of undergoing an experience with an exclusively bodily content (Ratcliffe, 2015; 2017; 2022). There are also varying degrees of particularity in our descriptions of emotion, which often focus on how a specific situation appears and changes, along with how we relate to that situation. In light of this, the questions "what is an emotion?" and "what are the emotions?" start to look misplaced or, at least, potentially misleading. One might as well seek to understand the dynamics of the seas by asking "what is a really big wave?", construed as though moving through a void, and then by enumerating more specific wave-types. Analogously, even our more pronounced emotional experiences are inseparable from a larger sense of our dynamic, ever-changing relationship with a significant world.

Those emotional experiences that affect us profoundly often taken the form of structured, temporally extended processes rather than episodes or disparate

[13] In line with this, Robert Solomon developed, over the course of several years, a rich account of the phenomenology of emotion, construing emotionality in terms of sophisticated, wide-ranging engagements with the world rather than episodes that are adequately construed in terms of propositional attitudes. However, Solomon's emphasis on emotional "judgment" and the consequent labelling of his approach as "cognitivist" distracted somewhat from these insights. For the development of his position, see, for example, the essays collected in Solomon (2003).

sequences of episodes. For instance, grief over the death of a person is experienced *over* time. This is not simply a matter of our having different emotional experiences at different moments. They belong to a larger *pattern* of emotional unfolding, something that is reflected by and arguably inseparable from its narration (Goldie, 2012).[14] The temporal structure involves recognising and engaging with the implications of events for the orientation through which we experience and comprehend the significance of those events (Ratcliffe, 2022). Many other emotional experiences likewise involve temporally extended patterns. Some of these are labelled as individual emotions (as with grief and some instances of guilt), while others include many different identifiable emotions, along with much else that evades our efforts at labelling. This longer-term structure is illustrated by how things are described as *sinking in* emotionally over a prolonged period of time and experienced *as* sinking in (Ratcliffe, 2025).[15] The dynamic phenomenology of emotion is also conveyed by how things are said to *dawn* upon us, to *haunt* us and then *come alive*, and—when the implications of something for the sustenance of our evaluative orientation are grasped swiftly and unexpectedly—to *hit* us. A consistent theme is the continuing alignment, misalignment, and realignment of an evaluative orientation with the realities of one's situation. Emotional experience involves orientation, disorientation, and reorientation, as well as synchronization, desynchronization, and re-synchronization with larger social situations.

Another respect in which descriptions such as "Bob is afraid of the bull" and "Sarah is happy to be home" fall short is that they identify the distinctive way in which

[14] One might construe an "evaluative orientation" as a matter of self-narrative. However, the temporal organization of a human life is not merely narrative in structure. Not all temporal organization has an explicit or even implicit narrative form. The experience of a melody has an irreducibly dynamic, temporally extended, non-narrative structure. Similarly, patterns of emotional unfolding that lend themselves to narration in terms of movement need not consist of narratives themselves (although I allow that narrative and narration may be partly constitutive of some emotional experiences). See Schechtman (2014) for the broader notion of a "person-life", which includes self-narrative but is not exhausted by it.

[15] An emphasis on temporally extended emotional processes also makes salient the importance of emotional *scaffolding*, especially interpersonal and social scaffolding. How we experience, interpret, and navigate profound disturbances in our evaluative orientation usually depends to a larger extent on how others respond (Ratcliffe, forthcoming). For further discussion of emotional scaffolding, see, e.g., Colombetti and Krueger (2015), Griffiths and Scarantino (2009) Coninx and Stephan (2021), Krueger and Osler (2022), and Maiese (2016).

something matters (such as threat) without acknowledging the *other side* of emotional experience—how we experience its significance *relative to* our changing evaluative orientation. Our *being affected* by what matters is equally part of the experience, as illustrated by phenomena such as emotional sinking in. Indeed, it is plausible that certain emotional experiences that lack established names are *primarily* a matter of sensing tensions within an evaluative orientation. The structure of a human life is complex and heterogeneous. So, as we respond and adapt to changing situations, tensions and conflicts will inevitably arise within the orientation through which things appear significant—within ourselves. These tensions are distinct from forms of emotional ambivalence where an object of emotion is significant in contrasting ways relative to a singular, cohesive evaluative orientation. Instead, the conflicting significance reflects tensions within us. Such experiences occur in a range of situations where we feel somehow ill at ease, where things appear familiar and yet unfamiliar, where we continue to be haunted by a significance that should be consigned to the past, where who we are in different social contexts cannot be reconciled when those contexts come together, and so forth. Such experiences, I suggest, comprise a distinctive subcategory of what Festinger (1957) famously called "cognitive dissonance". According to Festinger, cognitive dissonance more generally is experienced as a "psychological discomfort" and could just as well be termed cognitive "hunger", "frustration", or "disequilibrium" (1957, pp. 2-3). It thus involves a sort of emotional experience.

The combination of temporally extended emotional patterns and experienced tensions within oneself features frequently in literature. For instance, in just one paragraph of Sebald's *The Emigrants*, we find the themes of something only "gradually" coming to "dawn on me", a significant past that "only sank in by degrees", and one's still struggling to "grasp" that significance emotionally, experiencing it over many years as a tension within the structure and course of one's life, trying to "keep it at bay", and finding that tragic circumstances with "deep roots" later "shot up again" (Sebald, 1996, p.191). Emotional experience is conveyed and evoked through dynamic, temporally

extended patterns, which involve an evaluative orientation riddled with tensions. This does not require any reference to established emotion categories. Admittedly, Sebald's style and subject matter, here and elsewhere, are quite distinctive. Nevertheless, his writing exemplifies—I suggest—understandings of emotional experience that are at work more widely.

Again, one might respond by endorsing a broader account of affectivity, conceding that canonical emotions comprise only a part of our affective lives.[16] However, what is really needed, I think, is not supplementation of limited taxonomies but a larger shift in philosophical perspective. If we seek to identify conceptions of emotionality integral to everyday practice and to analyse the associated experiences, it should be kept in mind that clear distinctions between emotion and these other forms of affective experience are not themselves integral to that practice. So, it will not suffice to restrict the scope of *emotion* and introduce various other terms to mop up whatever remains. In fact, it is doubtful that talk of emotion, emotional experience, and emotionality even have a clearly bounded domain of application. However, a common theme is that of dynamic patterns which we experience *as* dynamic.[17] These, I have proposed, can be construed in terms of the interplay between evaluative orientations and situations that are ever-changing in significant ways. Referring to them as emotional does not warrant the subsequent move of treating them as isolated, countable episodes. Instead, they are integral to the larger structure of experience, which is essentially dynamic and temporally extended. Much of our emotional vocabulary resists a way of thinking that prioritises individuation and categorisation. We have a far richer vocabulary for describing, conveying, expressing, and evoking the movement of emotional life. Emotion research is thus bursting at the seams—it addresses a subject matter that does not conform to artificial constraints imposed upon

[16] For example, Colombetti (2014) adopts an approach to affectivity that is both wide-ranging and discerning, one that is consistent with my emphasis on the dynamic structure of emotional experience and its place in our everyday talk.

[17] Hence, a potentially promising scientific direction to take is the field of "affect dynamics", which emphasizes these aspects of emotion rather than the constituents of episodes that belong to different types. It is debatable whether and how this might accommodate longer-term dynamic patterns that characterize the unfolding of grief, guilt, and other profound, protracted emotional responses. See Majeed (2025) for an interesting discussion.

it. This is not a matter of its pressing against the limitations of everyday discourse but of our needing to look beyond the limitations of entrenched theoretical perspectives.

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