

## **Emotions and Wellbeing**

Mauro Rossi  
Université du Québec à Montréal  
455 René-Lévesque East, Montréal  
rossi.mauro@uqam.ca  
(514) 987-3000 #7807

Christine Tappolet  
Université de Montréal  
2910 Édouard-Montpetit, Montréal  
christine.tappolet@umontreal.ca  
(514) 343-7666

**Abstract:** In this paper, we consider the question of whether there exists an essential relation between emotions and wellbeing. We distinguish three ways in which emotions and wellbeing might be essentially related: constitutive, causal, and epistemic. We argue that, while there is some room for holding that emotions are constitutive ingredients of an individual's wellbeing, all the attempts to characterise the causal and epistemic relations in an essentialist way are vulnerable to some important objections. We conclude that the causal and epistemic relation between emotions and wellbeing is much less strong than is commonly thought.

**Keywords:** Emotions; Wellbeing; Motivation; Prudential Reasons

The question of the relation between emotions and the moral (or ethical) domain is an importantly complex one. This is so for a variety of reasons. The first is that emotions make for a notoriously complicated subject matter, as is evidenced by the fact that a variety of theories about emotions have been proposed in the last few decades. A second reason is that there are many sorts of *prima facie* distinct entities which are likely to have interesting relations to emotions. For instance, one can think about the relation between emotions and a) moral judgements, whether they concern *oughts*, evaluative properties, or are of some other kinds; b) moral facts, norms, evaluative properties and reasons; c) moral reasoning; d) character, virtues and vices; e) moral motivation and action; and finally, f) goods, such as autonomy, pleasure, or wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> Finally, a third reason is the fact that the term ‘relation’ itself covers a great many options. Consider for example the relation between emotions and moral judgments. One could claim that some emotions, such as guilt, are (partly) constitutive of moral judgements or, *vice versa*, that moral judgements constitute (at least in part) such emotions. Moral judgements might also figure among the causes of some emotions, or, alternatively, moral judgements might be caused by emotions. A third possibility is that moral judgements justify emotions; but emotions may just as well play an important factor in the justification of moral judgements.

This paper focuses on the relation between emotions and wellbeing, a phenomenon that is considered to be central by most normative moral theories, whether deontological, consequentialist, or virtue-oriented.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, the main question that we shall consider is whether there exists an essential relation between an individual’s emotions and her wellbeing, or, in other words, whether emotions are necessarily such as to contribute to the promotion of the wellbeing of the agent who experiences the emotions. We shall refer to it as the thesis of ‘Emotional Egoism’. It is clear that this thesis may be characterised in several different ways. In this paper, we shall consider three such characterisations. The first holds that the relation between an individual’s emotions and her wellbeing is constitutive. According to this view, emotions are essential ingredients of wellbeing, i.e. an individual’s wellbeing is constituted by the presence (and the absence) of certain emotions. A second possibility consists in saying that the relation between an individual’s emotions and her wellbeing is causal. A natural way to develop this suggestion is to claim that it is *via* motivations that emotions have an impact on our wellbeing. According to what we shall call ‘Motivational Egoism’, emotions necessarily involve a motivation to do some action directed at promoting the wellbeing of the individual experiencing such emotions. Finally, a third possibility consists in maintaining that the relation between an individual’s emotions and her wellbeing is epistemic. According to what we shall call ‘Epistemic Egoism’,

---

<sup>1</sup> Whether these different categories are considered to be genuinely distinct depends on the favoured account of each of them. Thus, moral facts are sometimes taken to be nothing above moral judgements, or, on some accounts, reasons are reducible to motivations.

<sup>2</sup> This is obvious in the case of consequentialism, since most versions of this approach claim that what has to be promoted by an agent is, or at least includes, wellbeing. Wellbeing also plays an important role in virtue ethics, according to which moral behaviour is virtuous behaviour. Indeed, virtue ethicists generally consider the virtues of the agent to be essential to her own wellbeing, thereby blurring the line between morality and prudence. Finally, even deontologists consider that wellbeing is crucial as an incontestable human end. For instance, amongst the imperfect duties, i.e. duties which allow some leeway in their implementation, Kantians include a duty of beneficence, that is, a duty to promote other people’s wellbeing. Wellbeing is, of course, also central in accounts of prudence, which can be conceived of as accounts of what considerations of self-interest require an individual to do.

emotions necessarily provide an individual with information that bears on her wellbeing. Our goal is to analyse each of these ways of characterising the relation between emotions and wellbeing.<sup>3</sup>

An important point to make before we embark on our discussion concerns the generality of the claims that we discuss. As we have formulated them, Emotional Egoism and its different characterisations concern each and every emotion. This might appear problematic because emotions are divided into kinds, such as fear, joy, anger, shame, hope, admiration, indignation, awe, and so forth, and what is plausible about one kind or family of kinds often fails to generalise to other kinds.<sup>4</sup> However, it clearly makes methodological sense to start with the more general question concerning emotions of all kinds, even if, in the end, it may turn out to be the case that only some kinds of emotion contribute to the promotion of the wellbeing of the person who undergoes the emotion. Moreover, while a number of thinkers appear to tacitly assume one version or another of Emotional Egoism, at least one, Martha Nussbaum (2001), explicitly embraces the fully general thesis, and another, Paul Griffiths (1997) claims that this thesis is true of basic emotions. Having said that, in our paper we shall focus primarily on emotions such as fear, anger and disgust, which are good candidates for the claims we want to assess. Indeed, our prime goal is to show that the thesis of Emotional Egoism is questionable even if one restricts its domain of application to a narrower subset of emotions. We shall also briefly discuss the weaker thesis according to which emotions are essentially connected to *some* individual's wellbeing, although not necessarily the wellbeing of the individual who experiences the emotion. In this case, our focus will be on the generalised version of this thesis, according to which *all* emotions are necessarily connected to some individual's wellbeing, since we regard that as the philosophically most interesting version of this thesis.

Our paper will be structured as follows. In order to understand the multifarious ways in which emotions and wellbeing can be related, we need, first, to understand what emotions and wellbeing are. We will start, in section 1, by presenting the main theories of emotions offered in the literature. We shall briefly give reasons to believe that Cognitivist Theories are more plausible than their competitors. We shall also present a theory that will work as a background assumption: the so-called Perceptual Theory, according to which emotions are perceptual experiences of a specific kind. In section 2, we shall present the main theories of wellbeing. In section 3, we shall consider whether emotions are constitutive elements of wellbeing, in light of the theories presented in the previous section. In section 4, we shall examine whether there exists an essential causal relation between emotions and wellbeing. Finally, in section 5, we shall consider the possibility that there is an essential epistemic relation between the two. Our conclusions will be stated in the final section.

---

<sup>3</sup> It is worth emphasising that the thesis of Motivational Egoism is distinct from the thesis of Psychological Egoism, according to which the motivations of human agents are necessarily such as to aim at their own wellbeing. Even so, there are of course interesting connections between the claims. If, as we shall argue, Motivational Egoism proves to be false, then so is Psychological Egoism. Thus, assessing the merits of Motivational Egoism and, more generally, of Emotional Egoism is important to better understand the nature of pro-social and altruistic motivation, as well as the nature of moral motivation.

<sup>4</sup> We assume here that the category of emotion is sufficiently unified to be useful (but see Rorty 1978; Griffiths 1997; as well as Deonna & Teroni 2012).

## 1. Theories of emotions

Theories of emotion often proceed by assimilating emotions to different, and supposedly better understood, kinds of mental states. When doing so, the theories generally focus on one of the components involved in a typical emotion episode. According to Feeling Theories, emotions are kinds of feelings, i.e. states that are taken to lack cognitive contents (James 1884; Lange 1885; Whiting 2011). Emotions, it has also been claimed, are conative states, such as desires or action-tendencies.<sup>5</sup> Conative states can have propositional content – one can desire that it rains – but it is usually denied that conative states represent states of affairs, so that, unlike beliefs and judgements, they do not have correctness conditions. By contrast with Conative Theories, Cognitivist Theories claim that emotions are partly or wholly constituted by cognitive states, broadly understood. According to an important kind of Cognitive Theory, Judgementalism, emotions are, or necessarily involve, evaluative judgements. Others have argued that emotions are, or necessarily involve, evaluative thoughts or construals.<sup>6</sup> According to these theories, to feel anger amounts to judging that one has been slighted, or else to entertain the thought that one has been slighted, or to construe the situation as a slight. In the same vein, emotions have been claimed to be states that are distinct of, but necessarily based on, evaluative judgments or appraisals (Arnold 1960; Lazarus 1991; Scherer et al. 2001; and Brady 2013). However, Cognitivist Theories can also be spelled out in terms of representational content that is not conceptually articulated. This is the kind of Cognitive Theory proposed by those who adopt the Perceptual Theory (de Sousa 1987, 2002; Tappolet 2000, 2012; Elgin 1996, 2008; Döring 2003, 2007; Prinz 2004, 2008; Deonna 2006).<sup>7</sup>

The upshot of recent debates is that Cognitive Theories are better placed than Feeling Theories and Conative Theories to accommodate the assessability of emotions in terms of how they fit the world. Indeed, both Feeling Theories and Conative Theories have a hard time making room for the assessment of emotions in terms of how they fit the world. However, it seems that your fear can be appropriate if what you are afraid of is genuinely fearsome — that is, if it calls for fear. But on a standard conception, neither feelings nor desires can be assessed in terms of how they fit their object.

As we indicated, there is a variety of Cognitive Theories, and for our purpose in this paper, we do not need to argue for a specific version. However, for the sake of clarity, it will be useful to assume the Perceptual Theory. According to that account, emotions are, in essence, perceptual experiences of evaluative properties. When appropriate, fear consists in the perception of something as fearsome. The same holds for disgust and the disgusting, admiration and the admirable, etc. The properties of being fearsome, disgusting or admirable are what are called the ‘formal objects’ of fear, disgust and admiration respectively. Formal objects constitute what is shared by kinds of emotion, in that they determine the correctness conditions of emotions belonging to a particular kind (Kenny 1963: 132; Teroni 2007). On the proposed account, emotions have representational, albeit not conceptually articulated, content. Emotions represent their object as having specific

---

<sup>5</sup> See Frijda 1986, as well as Deonna & Teroni 2012 (79-80) for the claim that emotions are felt states of action readiness.

<sup>6</sup> For judgements, see Solomon 1976 and Nussbaum 2001; for thoughts, see Greenspan 1988; for construals, see Roberts 2003.

<sup>7</sup> See Deonna and Teroni 2012 for an excellent introduction to emotion theories.

evaluative properties, as fearsome or disgusting, and so on, even though the agent who undergoes the emotion need not possess the relevant evaluative concepts (*fearsome*, *disgust*, etc.).<sup>8</sup> Thus, an emotion of fear towards a dog will be appropriate just in case the dog is really fearsome.<sup>9</sup>

The Perceptual Theory has important epistemological implications. If emotions are non-conceptual representations of evaluative properties, then it should be expected that emotions are like sensory perceptions in that they allow us to be aware of certain features of the world. Just as the visual experience of a blue mountain allows us to be aware of the colour of the mountain, the experience of fear would allow us to be aware of the fearsomeness of things. More precisely, since emotions can misfire, fear would allow us, under favourable circumstances, to be aware of the property of being fearsome. Given this, it also appears plausible to claim that evaluative judgements that are grounded in emotion are at least *prima facie* justified. Moreover, in so far as emotions are perceptions of evaluative properties, they are perceptions of the moral and prudential reasons we have for acting in certain ways.<sup>10</sup> Put differently, the claim is that emotions can inform us about our practical reasons. The idea is that, in Karen Jones' words, '[...] an agent's emotions can be keyed to her reasons in such a way that they enable the agent to track those reasons, while her all-things-considered judgement does not' (Jones 2003: 181).<sup>11</sup> This claim follows from the Perceptual Theory provided that one accepts a plausible assumption concerning the relation between evaluative properties and reasons, according to which evaluative properties are (*pro tanto*) reasons for action, or alternatively that whenever an evaluative property is instantiated, there is also a (*pro tanto*) reason for action.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. Theories of wellbeing

Let us now turn to wellbeing. The notion of wellbeing is the notion of what makes a person's life good for the person who lives that life (Raz 2004). Typically, this notion is used to refer to a distinct kind of value, i.e. prudential value (Sumner 1996). What does wellbeing consist in? This question can be divided into two further questions. First, which items are wellbeing-enhancing (-decreasing)? Second, what makes such items wellbeing-enhancing (-decreasing)? These two questions are often confused in the literature. However, it is important to realise that the two are relevantly distinct. While considering the first question, our goal is to give a list of things that are good (bad) for the individual, paying particular attention to things that are non-instrumentally good (bad) for the individual. Theories that attempt to address this question are often called *enumerative* theories of wellbeing (Crisp 2006). By contrast, our goal in considering the second question is to identify the properties that make certain things good (bad) for the individual, or, more simply, to explain why certain things are wellbeing-enhancing, while others are wellbeing-decreasing. For this reason, theories that attempt to address this question are often called

---

<sup>8</sup> For concepts and non-conceptual contents, see, *inter alia*, Evans 1982 and Peacocke 1992.

<sup>9</sup> Note that we take fearsomeness to be a property that supervenes on the dangerous.

<sup>10</sup> By 'reasons', we mean normative, rather than motivational, reasons (see Smith 1994 for the distinction). In particular, what we have in mind are normative reasons for action, that is, considerations that speak in favour of doing certain things (Scanlon 1998).

<sup>11</sup> These claims are further developed in Tappolet 2014a and 2014b.

<sup>12</sup> The second version of the assumption is compatible with Scanlon's buck-passing account (1998), according to which having evaluative properties amounts to having natural properties that provide or constitute reasons.

*explanatory* theories of wellbeing (Crisp 2006). While the second question about wellbeing is undoubtedly the more important of the two, a complete account of wellbeing must address both. In what follows, we shall try to say something about both of these issues. Typically, the literature distinguishes three main theories of wellbeing (Parfit 1984): Mental State Theories, Preference Satisfaction Theories, and Objectivist Theories. Let us now characterise each of these theories with respect to the two questions about wellbeing mentioned above.

Mental State Theories can be characterised in terms of two claims. First, mental states are the only non-instrumentally good things for an individual. Second, what makes mental states non-instrumentally good for an individual is their being enjoyable. The question immediately arises as to how the property of being enjoyable should be characterised. According to one conception, the property of being enjoyable should be seen as a phenomenal property of mental states. However, various authors (e.g. Sumner 1996) have argued that there does not seem to be a unique phenomenal property common to all mental states that are relevant for wellbeing. In light of this, such authors generally adopt a conception of enjoyableness according to which the property of being enjoyable is not a homogeneous phenomenal property, but a placeholder for whatever property mental states have that is desired, or sought for, by the individual.<sup>13</sup>

Mental State Theories of wellbeing explicitly address both the enumerative and the explanatory questions about wellbeing.<sup>14</sup> Preference Satisfaction Theories, however, are primarily concerned with the latter question. Generally speaking, they can be characterised thus. First, any object of individual preferences is a wellbeing-enhancing item<sup>15,16</sup>. Second, what makes an item wellbeing-enhancing is the fact that its occurrence satisfies the individual's preferences. On this point, two families of preference satisfaction theories can be distinguished. According to some authors (e.g. Heathwood 2005), what matters is the satisfaction of actual preferences, i.e. the preferences that an individual happens to have. In certain cases, however, e.g. when the individual's preferences are based on false or irrational beliefs, satisfying actual preferences may be detrimental for the individual.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, the majority of preference satisfaction theorists hold that what matters is the satisfaction of rational and well-informed preferences (e.g. Brandt 1979; Griffin 1986).

According to both Mental State and Preference Satisfaction Theories, the explanation why an item is good (bad) for an individual makes reference to a mental state or property of the subject herself. According to Mental State Theories, an individual's wellbeing depends *entirely* on the individual's mental states and properties, whereas, according to Preference Satisfaction theories, an individual's wellbeing depends *both* on the individual's mental states (i.e. her preferences) *and* on the actual state of the world (i.e. on whether the world is as the individual prefers). Since both theories take wellbeing to depend on the individual's mental states or properties, they are typically categorised as subjectivist

---

<sup>13</sup> However, see Crisp 2006 for a defence of the former conception of enjoyableness.

<sup>14</sup> For a dissenting view, see Fletcher (2013), according to whom Mental State Theories are just enumerative theories of wellbeing.

<sup>15</sup> However, see Heathwood 2005, according to whom the only wellbeing-enhancing objects are the episodes of preference satisfaction themselves.

<sup>16</sup> Typically, these are prospects or states of affairs, but, in principle, nothing prevents them to be concrete entities, like persons or things.

<sup>17</sup> However, see Heathwood 2005 for a defense of the actual preference satisfaction view.

(explanatory) theories of wellbeing.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, according to objectivist theories, an individual's wellbeing is independent from the individual's mental states. While there are several objectivist theories in the literature, here we shall focus on what we take to be the most influential amongst them, namely, Perfectionism.<sup>19</sup> Typically, Perfectionist Theories start by listing a series of goods that are supposed to be non-instrumentally good for every individual. For instance, in her own version of the capability approach, Martha Nussbaum (2000) identifies a list of ten essential capabilities that are relevant for each individual's wellbeing: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; relationships with other species; play; and control over one's environment. According to Nussbaum, capabilities are freedoms to achieve alternative combinations of functionings, that is, combinations of beings and doings. Strictly speaking, an individual's wellbeing depends on the quality of the individual's functionings. In this sense, we may regard Nussbaum's list of capabilities as specifying the most important functionings that affect an individual's wellbeing and that each individual should be free to realise. While the list is perhaps not exhaustive, what matters most is the reason why these items are included in the list. What makes these items wellbeing-enhancing is the fact that they contribute to human excellence or flourishing. This is indeed the central claim of any Perfectionist Theory.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. The constitutive relation examined

Emotions are often taken to be important ingredients of an individual's wellbeing. But are emotions really *essential* to wellbeing? And if they are, what makes them so? In this section, we will try to address these questions by considering the three main approaches to wellbeing described above.

Consider Mental State Theories of wellbeing. According to such theories, emotions are constitutive elements of wellbeing provided that they belong to the class of wellbeing-enhancing (-decreasing) mental states. What makes emotions wellbeing-enhancing items, when they are so, is their positive tone or valence.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Notice that this is not the only way of characterising the contrast between subjective and objective explanatory theories of wellbeing. According to some authors (e.g. Haybron 2008: 178 ; Dorsey 2011: 174), a theory of wellbeing counts as subjective if and only if the explanation of why an item is good for an individual makes reference to the individual's *attitudes*, most commonly the individual's preferences or desires.

<sup>19</sup> Whether Perfectionist Theories are genuine theories of wellbeing is a disputed issue. In fact, some authors (e.g. Hurka 1993; Sumner 1996; Haybron 2008) argue, for rather different reasons, that Perfectionist Theories should be seen as accounts of the good life, i.e. the life that is worth choosing, rather than accounts of wellbeing. Without taking a substantive position in this debate, what matters for our purpose is that, as a matter of fact, Perfectionist Theories are often presented and discussed as theories of wellbeing. Indeed, Nussbaum herself, while not interested in offering a precise theory of wellbeing, argues that her Capability approach does provide a useful framework for understanding and evaluating different people's wellbeing (Nussbaum 2000: 14).

<sup>20</sup> This presentation of the main theories of wellbeing is clearly not exhaustive. Amongst the theories that will not be discussed here, but which are particularly interesting for the purpose of our paper, figure eudemonistic, yet non-perfectionist, theories of wellbeing, such as the one proposed by Haybron 2008. According to Haybron, happiness is one of the constituents of an individual's wellbeing. Since happiness is conceived as a broadly positive emotional condition, it follows that (at least some) emotions are essential ingredients of wellbeing within Haybron's account.

<sup>21</sup> Symmetrically, what makes emotions wellbeing-decreasing items, when they are so, is their negative tone or valence.

Two points are worth noticing. First, emotions may contribute to an individual's wellbeing within a Mental State Theory of wellbeing either instrumentally, i.e. by producing other mental states that are non-instrumentally good (bad) for the individual, or non-instrumentally. Consistently with this point, it is not the case that emotions will belong to the class of non-instrumentally good (bad) items within *any* mental state theory of wellbeing. Whether emotions are considered to be non-instrumentally good (bad) items for an individual depends on how the class of such items and emotions themselves are characterised. To give just one example, consider a crude form of hedonism, according to which the class of wellbeing-enhancing items includes only pleasures, conceived as mere hedonic feelings. If it is not the case that emotions involve hedonic feelings essentially, then emotions will be excluded from the class of wellbeing-enhancing objects, according to this theory.

The second point is that, even if emotions are included within the class of non-instrumentally good (bad) items, the explanation why they contribute to an individual's wellbeing will vary according to the characterisation of emotional valence to which one subscribes.<sup>22</sup> This is in fact a disputed field. On an initially plausible account, the positive and negative valence of emotions is explained in terms of hedonic properties (Goldstein 2002). On that account, what negative emotions, such as shame and fear, share is that they are unpleasant, whereas positive emotions, such as joy, hope and pride, are pleasant. If this account is correct, it would not be difficult to see how emotions are connected to wellbeing. As Fabrice Teroni underlines (2011), however, one difficulty consists in specifying exactly what pleasant experiences (or unpleasant experiences) have in common, given their great diversity. Another important account of valence claims that valence is a matter of desire representation. A positive emotion would involve the representation of a desire that is satisfied, whereas a negative one the representation of a desire that fails to be satisfied.<sup>23</sup> One difficulty is that a clearly positive emotion, like hope, would have to be considered as a negative one, given that, if it involves the representation of a desire, it is clearly one that is not satisfied. It might be possible to argue that hope involves the representation of a desire that is likely to be, or at least can be, satisfied.<sup>24</sup> However, the question is whether this suggestion can be generalised to all positive emotions. The representation involved in pride, for instance, seems to concern a desire that is actually satisfied. More generally, as Teroni underlines, it is not clear that such an account does a good job at explaining the contrast between positive and negative emotions. In fact, the representation of a desire that fails to be satisfied need not come with any negative feeling. A third account that has been proposed is that positive emotions involve behavioural tendencies that consist in getting close to the object of the emotion, while negative emotions involve tendencies to move away from that object (McLean 1993). However, it is far from clear that all emotions come with such tendencies. Moreover, and this is again a point made by Teroni, if emotions do come with these tendencies, a further problem is that postulating such tendencies does little in the way of explaining valence. It would seem that a good theory ought to yield an explanation of why emotions that come with such tendencies do so. One good reply to this request is to appeal to a deeper feature of emotions, such as the fact that they represent

---

<sup>22</sup> For a detailed discussion of the accounts of valence, see Colombetti 2005. See also Deonna & Teroni 2012.

<sup>23</sup> This account is often attributed to Lazarus 1991. Lazarus' overall conception is that positive emotions are those that facilitate the subject's goals, while negative emotions thwart the subject's goals (1991: 150).

<sup>24</sup> Thanks to a referee for suggesting this possibility.

positive and negative values. Without exploring this option further, what matters for our purpose is that there is no straightforward way to link emotions to wellbeing on account of their valence, even if one assumes a Mental State Theory of wellbeing.

Consider now Preference Satisfaction Theories of wellbeing. Within such theories, emotions belong to the class of wellbeing-enhancing objects to the extent that they figure amongst the objects of an individual's preferences.<sup>25</sup> What makes them wellbeing-enhancing items, when they are so, is not an internal property of theirs, e.g. their positive tone, but simply the fact that their occurrence satisfies one of the individual's preferences. In light of this characterisation, it is clear that emotions will belong to the class of wellbeing-enhancing objects only contingently. This is the case even if one considers a refined preference satisfaction view of wellbeing, according to which wellbeing depends on the satisfaction of well-informed and rational preferences. It is indeed possible to imagine a well-informed and rational individual who wants to pursue a lifestyle aiming at neutralising all of her emotions, independently of their positive or negative tone. In this case, no emotion will be such that its occurrence satisfies the individual's preferences. Consequently, emotions will not belong to the class of wellbeing-enhancing objects.

Finally, consider Perfectionist Theories. Emotions (at least some of them, such as joy or love) are typically included within the list of items that are non-instrumentally good for any individual by perfectionist authors.<sup>26</sup> As we have seen above, Nussbaum includes emotions within her list of ten essential capabilities. According to Nussbaum's definition, the capability of experiencing emotion is a matter of 'being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by overwhelming fear and anxiety, or by traumatic events or abuse or neglect' (Nussbaum 2000: 79). The underlying idea is that the individual's emotional development and experiences (at least in some cases<sup>27</sup>), as well as the opportunity to have a rich emotional life, are ways of functioning that positively contribute to an individual's wellbeing. Once again, however, what makes emotions relevant for the individual's wellbeing, when they are so, is not their valence, but the fact that they contribute to human development and excellence. Whether this fact is necessary or contingent depends on the specific type of Perfectionist Theory that one adopts.

The perhaps unsurprising conclusion of this section is that whether emotions are essential ingredients of wellbeing depends on the specific accounts of wellbeing and of emotional valence that one adopts. Furthermore, even though some of these accounts do imply that at least *some* emotions are constitutive of individual wellbeing, none of them is uncontroversial. Of course, in order to have a more definite answer to the question of whether there exists a constitutive relation between emotions and wellbeing, it would help to know, for one thing, which theory of wellbeing is actually correct. Unfortunately, this is a task that goes beyond the scope of this paper. We will thus leave our discussion of the

---

<sup>25</sup> Symmetrically, emotions belong to the class of wellbeing-decreasing items to the extent that they figure amongst the objects of an individual's negative preferences or aversions.

<sup>26</sup> Symmetrically, some emotions may figure within the list of non-instrumentally bad items for the individual when they preclude the full realisation of the individual's excellence.

<sup>27</sup> The question of how negative emotions, such as fear and anger, can contribute to an individual's wellbeing is especially interesting. For reasons of space, however, we cannot discuss this point in more detail here.

constitutive relation here and move on to consider another way of characterising the relation between emotions and wellbeing.

#### 4. The causal relation examined<sup>28</sup>

The second way in which emotions and wellbeing are often thought to be related is causal. It is indeed a commonplace that emotions have some sort of motivational effect and can causally impact on our wellbeing. This is clearly witnessed by the many literary examples of characters who, in the emotional heat of the moment, have done things that had important repercussions on their, and other people's, lives. If asked about the nature of the causal relation between emotions and wellbeing, the layman would probably claim that emotions sometimes lead us to perform actions that either promote or reduce our own wellbeing or the wellbeing of others.

This is a very general, and rather uncontroversial, way of characterising the causal relation between emotions and wellbeing. Various authors, however, have wanted to argue for a different thesis. More specifically, they have made two stronger claims. The first is that emotions involve some dispositions to perform wellbeing-affecting actions *essentially*. In other words, according to these authors, emotions are such as to necessarily involve wellbeing-affecting dispositions to act. The second is that, contrary to popular belief, an individual's emotions involve some dispositions to perform actions directed at promoting her *own* wellbeing.

While talking about fear, for instance, Nico Frijda writes that '[f]ear, presumably, motivates actions to protect *oneself* from the event that caused it, or to prevent the event from actually materialising, or to suppress activity until the threat has passed (as in anxious freezing)' (Frijda 1994: 114). If we assume that according to Frijda emotions involve such motivations essentially, then it follows that fear essentially motivates one to perform actions that are directed at the enhancement of one's wellbeing.<sup>29</sup>

As indicated in the introduction, we shall call the thesis underlying a position such as Frijda's the thesis of Motivational Egoism. The first question to consider is how to formulate this thesis more precisely. In particular, we need to specify exactly which sort of dispositions emotions are supposed to involve. Since we have referred to Frijda as one defender of such a thesis, his work represents a good starting point. Now, according to Frijda (1986), emotions *are* action-tendencies. More precisely, they are 'tendencies to establish, maintain, or disrupt a relationship with the environment' (Frijda 1986: 71). Thus, in light of Frijda's view of emotions, the thesis of Motivational Egoism can be formulated as the thesis according to which emotions are tendencies to perform actions directed at promoting our own wellbeing.

When stated in this form, however, the thesis of Motivational Egoism appears to be a non-starter, for it is far from clear that emotions involve action-tendencies of the hypothesised kind. While speaking about fear, for instance, the psychologist Gerald Clore distinguishes between what he calls 'motivational' and 'behavioural' effects and claims that:

---

<sup>28</sup> This section and the next one partly draw on Tappolet 2010.

<sup>29</sup> As one of the referees has reminded us, one may argue that Frijda only makes the claim that that emotions *typically* come with such motivations. As it should be clear, however, Clore's arguments also threaten this weaker claim.

[...] the direct effects of emotions are motivational rather than behavioral. One can achieve more agreement about the likely goals of [...] fearful [...] persons than about their likely behaviors. It seems clear, for example, that fear involves a desire to avoid harm or loss, but not at all clear whether achievement of this goal would necessitate selling one's stocks, listening to the weather report, or running away. Thus, the immediate effects of emotion may be more mental than behavioral. (1994: 111)

According to Clore, emotions facilitate action, but do not involve behavioural tendencies. In other words, emotions prepare us for action and increase the probability that certain types of actions are performed. However, they do not determine specific behaviours or actions.<sup>30</sup> What is needed for emotions to result in action is that the agent deliberates and chooses. In other words, the link between emotions and actions is mediated by the agent's decision system and, therefore, is considerably more indirect than what it is assumed by Frijda. While rejecting a view of emotions as action-tendencies, authors like Clore still maintain that there exists an essential link between emotions and motivations. More specifically, they think that emotions are such that they essentially involve a desire, understood as a state that influences the agent's deliberation or, more generally, her decision-making. For this reason, their view can be referred to as the Desire Theory of emotions (see also Tappolet 2010).<sup>31</sup> In light of these considerations, the thesis of Motivational Egoism can be reformulated as follows:

**Motivational Egoism:** Emotions are constituted by desires to perform actions directed at promoting our own wellbeing.<sup>32</sup>

Is this a plausible claim? Let us start by briefly clarifying the conditions under which this claim may be true. In order to do this, we need to consider the three main theories of wellbeing presented above. Consider first Mental State Theories. In the context of such theories, Motivational Egoism is true provided that emotions are constituted by desires to perform actions directed at producing enjoyable mental states. By contrast, within Preference Satisfaction Theories, Motivational Egoism is true provided that emotions are constituted by desires to perform actions directed at satisfying one or the other of the individual's preferences. Finally, within Perfectionist Theories, Motivational Egoism is true provided that emotions are constituted by desires to perform actions directed at promoting one's own flourishing.

It is worth emphasising that the desires that constitute emotions may not *necessarily* lead one to perform wellbeing-enhancing actions. The reason is that there may be other, motivationally stronger, desires pulling in opposite directions. This qualification is clearly

---

<sup>30</sup> For example, anger increases the probability of revenge, but it does not automatically dispose us to seek vengeance.

<sup>31</sup> See Smith 1994 (116), for the claim that desires involves goals. Smith defends a dispositional account of desires according to which, roughly, to desire that *p* is to be disposed to do what you believed will result in *p*.

<sup>32</sup> Again, as a referee has suggested to us, it might be argued that Clore only makes the claim that emotions typically involve a desire. While we shall not consider it explicitly, we believe that our argument works against this weaker claim too. In particular, below we attempt to show that some typical instances of fear for others do not involve egoistic desires.

compatible with the Desire Theory of emotions and, more specifically, with the recognition of the intermediate role played by deliberation in leading an individual experiencing an emotion to act on the desire involved by that emotion. Having said this, it is now time to examine two powerful objections that can be raised against Motivational Egoism.

The first problem with this thesis comes from the existence of other-regarding emotions, i.e. emotions directed towards other people, such as fear for others, indignation, and compassion. If emotions are constituted by desires, then it is plausible to think that other-regarding emotions are constituted by other-regarding desires. Yet, other-regarding desires seem to be fundamentally concerned with the wellbeing of other people. If this is true, it follows that Motivational Egoism is false. It is simply not the case that emotions are such that they essentially involve desires to perform actions directed at promoting one's own wellbeing.

What might a defender of Motivational Egoism reply? The first possibility is simply to deny that emotions involve *other*-regarding desires to act. According to this line of thought, emotions involve only *self*-regarding desires to act. The problem with this reply is that it seems rather implausible. Consider, for example, fear for others. It seems reasonable to think that, if fear for others involves any desire, then it involves a desire to perform some actions that target other individuals, i.e. the individuals in the fearsome situation. For instance, fear for others may involve a desire to act in such a way as to prevent other individuals from being harmed. If so, the first line of thought is simply a non-starter.

A more promising strategy for the defender of Motivational Egoism consists in distinguishing two pairs of opposite terms: self- versus other-regarding desires, on the one hand, and egoistic versus altruistic desires, on the other. The first pair identifies a distinction concerning the object of desire. Accordingly, some desires may have as their object either an action directed at oneself, e.g. buying an ice-cream, or an action directed at others, e.g. kissing another person. On the other hand, the second pair identifies a distinction concerning the properties for which an action is desired. Accordingly, some actions may be desired either for the contribution that they bring to one's own wellbeing or for the contribution that they bring to other people's wellbeing (or for neither reasons). For present purposes, it is important to notice that these two pairs do not necessarily overlap. This means that it is possible for an individual to have an other-regarding, yet egoistic, desire to do something. For instance, an individual may have the desire to help others because this will contribute to her own happiness. How this impacts on the issue under consideration is obvious. The defender of Motivational Egoism may claim that, although other-regarding emotions are constituted by other-regarding desires, such desires are necessarily egoistic. In other words, according to the defender of Motivational Egoism, it is simply impossible for other-regarding emotions to be constituted by desires that are, at the same time, other-regarding *and* altruistic.

It must be recognised that, in some cases, this line of thought looks plausible. It is true that there are circumstances where it is possible to desire to perform some other-regarding actions for egoistic reasons. Examples abound with respect to all theories of wellbeing. Cases of persons donating money to charity simply to feel better about themselves are not uncommon. Similarly, it is easy to imagine cases of people desiring to help others simply because this is what they prefer doing. Finally, one must admit that, for some people, the decision to devote their lives to others may be based on the belief that this is the best way to fully flourish as persons. However, it is important to notice that, for

Motivational Egoism to be true, it must be the case not only that it be *possible* for other-regarding emotions to involve egoistic desires, but that this be *necessarily* the case. This is a much stronger claim – one that stands in need of a defence. What does the defender of Motivational Egoism have to say in this respect?

One possibility consists in resorting to an evolutionary argument. Consider again fear for others. According to Cosmides and Tooby (2000: 92), the function of fear is to coordinate a number of reactions that help to deal with danger. Fear thus increases, or at least must at some point have increased, the chances that the organism survives, thereby increasing the probability that it has lots of offspring, spreading its genes. The defender of Motivational Egoism might be tempted to conclude that the desire that constitutes fear – any kind of fear, including fear for others – must necessarily be egoistic. However, this is clearly a *non sequitur*. Natural selection does not have the same ‘aim’ as the organism. What promotes the spreading of one’s genes has little to do with what is in one’s interest. It could well be the case that the desires that threaten your wellbeing nonetheless promote the survival and spreading of your genes. For instance, it is certainly quite an advantage from the point of view of genes that you are inclined to sacrifice yourself for your offspring.

Another possibility is to appeal to the phenomenology of other-regarding emotions in order to find some support for Motivational Egoism. However, phenomenology seems to squarely side with the opposite stance. Consider compassion as an example. From a phenomenological point of view, not only does it make sense to distinguish between cases of what might be called quasi-compassion involving a desire to relieve somebody’s suffering for egoistic reasons and cases of compassion involving a desire based on altruistic reasons, but it is also possible to have a better clue about what distinguishes such cases. While in both cases a desire with the same intentional object is involved, the difference lies in the fact that compassion involves a desire with a different attentional focus. When an individual feels compassion for someone for altruistic reasons, her attention is not focused on her own wellbeing, e.g. on the discomfort that she might experience, but on the other person’s wellbeing, e.g. the fact that she will suffer. This difference in attentional focus generally reflects a difference in the reasons underlying the desire involved in compassion. In other words, the direction of the individual’s attention when feeling compassion at the sight of someone’s suffering will generally predict the character of the underlying desire to help the suffering of others.

The previous considerations suggest that the thesis of Motivational Egoism applies, at most, to self-regarding emotions. Yet, there is reason to think that even this qualified conclusion may not hold. The idea is that self-regarding emotions, such as the emotion of fear, need not come with a desire to perform any actions directed at the promotion of one’s wellbeing. In fact, fear need not come with any desire at all. The cases of fear that we have in mind are cases in which someone feels fear at fictional entities, such as Charles’s fear at the movies, when a green slime threatens to swallow everything, including himself. As one of us has argued (Tappolet 2010), such a case, which has famously been discussed by Kendall Walton (1978), seems to involve genuine emotions, which are, in a sense, purely contemplative. Charles appears to have no motivation resulting from this intense fear; he has no inclination to leave the theatre or to call the police, for instance. Of course, it is not accurate to say that Charles does nothing at all: he cringes in his seat, shrieks, and clutches at his chair. But these reactions are just the more or less apt manifestations of behavioural dispositions. We do not need to postulate any desire to explain them. Hence, there is no

reason to postulate the presence of any desire that sets a goal and influences deliberation to account for Charles' fear.<sup>33</sup> If this is true, the upshot is, of course, that Motivational Egoism is false even when restricted to self-regarding emotions.

Before proceeding further, we want to notice that the previous considerations cast doubt also on the following, much weaker thesis:

**Motivational Welfarism:** Emotions are constituted by desires to perform actions directed at promoting *someone's* wellbeing.

According to this thesis, emotions involve some desire directed at the enhancement of someone's wellbeing, where 'someone' may refer *either* to the individual experiencing the relevant emotion *or* to individuals other than the one experiencing the relevant emotion (or to both).<sup>34</sup> This thesis is interesting because, while it clearly brings us outside the thesis of Motivational *Egoism*, it still captures a way in which there may be an essential causal relation between emotions and wellbeing. Despite its apparent plausibility, however, this weaker thesis might be challenged by means of the same considerations explored above. As we have seen, there are cases where fear for oneself seems to be purely contemplative, in that it does not involve a desire that sets a goal. Such cases represent genuine counter-examples to the thesis of Motivational Welfarism. If this is true, then the thesis of Motivational Welfarism is false.

Of course, much more should be said about fear involving fictions and similar examples. For reasons of space, however, we will leave the matter here and move on to examining a final way in which emotions and wellbeing can be related. More specifically, in the next section, we will consider a weaker relation between emotions and motivation. The idea that we want to investigate is that emotions simply inform us about our wellbeing, so that motivation follows only on condition that the agent has an independent desire to promote her wellbeing. Put differently, it is only if the agent happens to be motivated to promote her wellbeing that she will use the information that the emotion is supposed to provide.

## 5. The epistemic relation examined

The third way in which emotions and wellbeing are often thought to be related is epistemic. Emotions are supposed to provide us with information about wellbeing.<sup>35</sup> Notice that this is a rather general way of characterising the epistemic relation supposedly holding between

---

<sup>33</sup>As one referee has pointed out, it might be argued that, in such situations, the subject is at least typically tempted to avoid looking at the movie, which seems more intentional and closely related to the sort of intentional motivations accompanying other cases of fear. We agree that Charles's fear *may* involve such a motivation, and that Charles *may* indeed close his eyes for a moment. The question remains, however, whether a motivation of this kind is *necessarily* involved in cases of fear at fictional entities.

<sup>34</sup>We called this the thesis of Motivational Welfarism to indicate that, from a motivational point of view, the only thing that matters is the promotion of someone's welfare.

<sup>35</sup>One may argue that this claim sits ill with the thesis that emotions constitute wellbeing, for one can wonder how something may at the same time inform us about *x* and constitute *x*. However, it can be replied that, while emotions do not inform us about our wellbeing *via* their content, they can nonetheless inform us about our wellbeing through their phenomenology. The experience of an emotion is thus, at the same time, the reason why emotions are good for us, when they are so, and a source of information about it. Thanks to a referee for raising this point.

emotions and wellbeing. For one, it does not specify whether the epistemic relation between emotions and wellbeing holds essentially, i.e. if it is part of the nature of emotions to provide us with information about wellbeing. For another thing, it does not specify whose wellbeing emotions are supposed to provide information about.

In this section, we first want to examine a more radical thesis, namely, the thesis that emotions by essence provide us with information about our own wellbeing. Indeed, this thesis is often presupposed, although seldom explicitly, by authors in the literature about emotions. For instance, Paul Griffiths, who argues that basic emotions are affect programs in the sense that such emotions consist in a number of correlated reactions, claims that '[a]ffect programs are adaptive responses to events that have a particular ecological significance for the organism. The fear response is adapted to dangers, the disgust response to noxious stimuli, the anger response to challenges, the surprise response to novel stimuli.' (1997: 89). Clearly, Griffiths assumes here that these dangers are dangers for the organism that experiences fear, the noxious stimuli are noxious to the organism, and so forth.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Nussbaum claims that 'emotions appear to be *eudaimonistic*, that is, concerned with the person's flourishing' (2001: 30). Given the prominence of the more radical thesis in the literature, it is thus worth assessing its merits here.

The first question that we need to ask is how exactly emotions are supposed to provide us with information about our own wellbeing.<sup>37</sup> There is clearly a trivial sense in which they can do so. If emotions are constituents of our wellbeing, then, by merely experiencing some emotions, we may have an indication of how our life is going in that moment. For instance, the feeling of joy could count as information about our wellbeing, on the assumption that joy is a constituent of wellbeing. However, this is not what the defenders of the more radical thesis typically have in mind. The epistemic relation between emotions and wellbeing is taken to be less trivial. The key to understanding what this relation may be is the notion of an emotion's formal object. As we have seen in section 1, emotions of each kind share a specific formal object, which determines the emotion's general correctness conditions. It is by providing us with information about their formal objects that, according to the defenders of the radical thesis, emotions provides us also with information that is relevant for our own wellbeing. To see how, let us take fear as our working example. As we have seen in section 1, the formal object of fear is the fearsome. Now, fearsome things have a tendency to be harmful to individuals and, thereby, to be detrimental to the individuals' wellbeing. How this exactly happens depends, of course, on the theory of wellbeing that one adopts. Within Mental State Theories, this will happen because harm tends to produce non-enjoyable mental states. Within Preference Satisfaction Theories, this will happen because (rational and well-informed) individuals tend to be averse to harm. Finally, within Perfectionist Theories, this will happen because being harmed generally prevents one from developing and achieving human excellence. It is obvious that these are only generalisations, statements holding only *ceteris paribus*. Be that as it may, by providing an individual with information about their formal objects, emotions provide her with information that is relevant for her own wellbeing.

---

<sup>36</sup> In this passage, Griffiths argues that his account is consistent with an evolutionary account of affect programs, so he might be interpreted as merely claiming that emotions promote the individuals' reproductive fitness. However, it has to be noted that danger, noxious stimuli, challenges and novel stimuli, to mention the examples that Griffiths gives, are generally taken to be relevant for the individuals' wellbeing.

<sup>37</sup> In what follows, we will ignore the qualification 'essentially', whenever the context is unambiguous.

An alternative way to present things consists in saying that emotions provide an individual with information about her prudential reasons for action.<sup>38</sup> Consider again the example of fear. By informing an individual that something is fearsome, and given the fact that fearsome things tend to decrease one's wellbeing, fear informs the individual of the fact that she has a *pro tanto* prudential reason to do or to refrain from doing certain things, e.g. to avoid the fearsome thing or to escape the fearsome situation in which she finds herself.

In terms of prudential reasons, one could suggest that emotions essentially inform us of our prudential reasons to act or not to act in certain ways. Conceived thus, however, the radical thesis is obviously false. Consider the example of fear. As we have seen, fear represents something as being fearsome, where the property of being fearsome is conceived as the property of deserving a reaction of fear. It is clear, however, that fear reactions may be inappropriate, that is, represent something as fearsome when it is not really so. This may happen for a variety of reasons, e.g. most notably, as a consequence of one form or another of irrationality. It follows that, if fear is supposed to provide us with information that are relevant for our wellbeing, then, in such cases, it provides us with mistaken information, i.e. it leads us to think that we have a *pro tanto* prudential reason to do or not to do something, where there is no such reason.

While the problem clearly generalises to all emotions, it can nonetheless be easily avoided by weakening the radical claim in the following way:

**Epistemic Egoism:** Emotions essentially inform us of our prudential reasons to act or not to act in certain ways, *unless they are inappropriate*.

According to this account, the essential epistemic relation between emotions and wellbeing holds only if emotions are appropriately experienced. Put differently, emotions can, when things go well, inform us about our prudential reasons, but they need not do so.

Even if one considers only appropriate emotions, however, there seems to be some cases when emotions do not inform us about our prudential reasons. As we have seen, it is quite obvious that two kinds of fears have to be distinguished: fear for ourselves and fear for others. The problem is that, while fear for ourselves may effectively inform us of our prudential reasons, fear for others seems to provide us with a different kind of information. Here is why. To begin with, fear for others informs us that a situation in which another individual finds herself deserves a reaction of fear from us. In turn, experiencing fear for that individual is appropriate if such a situation is fearsome for that individual. Now, as we have seen above, fearsome situations tend to bring about harm and, thereby, to reduce an individual's wellbeing. It follows that a situation that is fearsome for another individual will tend to bring about harm for that individual and, thereby, to reduce her wellbeing. If so, fear for others seems to inform us either that the other individual has a specific prudential reason, i.e. a reason to do or not to do specific things to avoid harm, or that we have a *pro tanto* moral reasons concerning that individual, i.e. a reason to do or not to do something in order to help her avoid being harmed. Importantly, in both cases, fear for others does not

---

<sup>38</sup> Once again, when talking about prudential reasons, we are talking about *normative* prudential reasons, i.e. considerations that speak in favour of doing or refraining from doing something for the sake of the individual's wellbeing.

seem to provide us with information that is relevant for our own wellbeing, at least not in a non-trivial sense.<sup>39</sup>

The distinction between fear for ourselves and fear for others is an instance of the more general distinction between self- and other-regarding emotions, which we have already explored in section 4. To generalise accordingly, in light of this distinction, we can say that the problem for the radical thesis is that (appropriate) other-regarding emotions do not seem to inform us of our prudential reasons. What can a defender of Epistemic Egoism respond?

One possibility consists in maintaining that, although other-regarding emotions provide us with information that is relevant for other people's wellbeing, it does not follow that they do not *also* provide us with information that is relevant for our own wellbeing. Consider, once again, fear for others. As we have seen, fear for others informs us that a situation is fearsome for another individual and that it is likely to negatively affect her wellbeing. Yet, it is clearly possible for the harm suffered by another individual to have an impact on our own wellbeing as well. If so, by providing information that is relevant for that individual's wellbeing, other-regarding emotions may also inform us of our prudential reasons.

At this stage, it is important to emphasise one thing. It is certainly true that, in some cases, the harm suffered by others *may* have a negative impact on our wellbeing and that, as a consequence, fear for others may *sometimes* provide us with information that is relevant for our wellbeing. However, in order for the radical thesis to be true, it must be the case that fear for others *necessarily* informs us of our *pro tanto* prudential reasons every time we experience it. This is a much stronger and controversial thesis. Yet, it seems to be the thesis that several authors have in mind. Nussbaum, for instance, argues as follows:

I do not go about fearing any and every catastrophe anywhere in the world, nor (so it seems) do I fear any and every catastrophe that I know to be bad in important ways. What inspires fear is the thought of damage impending that cut to the heart of my own cherished relationships and projects. (2001: 30-31)

According to Nussbaum, we experience fear for others only when we perceive that someone to whom we are emotionally attached or related in some significant way to our own flourishing, is in a fearsome situation. In such cases, the likely harm suffered by the individual will have an impact both on her wellbeing and on our own. As such, fear for others informs us, at the same time, of the individual's prudential reasons and of our own. While Nussbaum operates within a broadly perfectionist framework, according to which what makes it the case that the likely harm suffered by others will affect our wellbeing is the fact that this will deprive us of some of the goods that contribute to our flourishing, i.e. psychological health, emotional relationships, and so on, her argument can be generalised to other conceptions of wellbeing. In the context of Mental State Theories, for instance, what makes it the case that the likely harm suffered by a close other will affect our wellbeing is

---

<sup>39</sup> As suggested above, there is a trivial sense in which fear for others may provide us with information about our wellbeing. If experiencing fear decreases our wellbeing, then, by experiencing fear for others, we may have an indication that our life is not going well at the moment. However, we are interested here in a non-trivial sense in which fear for others may provide us information about our wellbeing, which makes reference to the emotion's formal object, rather than to its phenomenology.

the fact that the harm suffered by someone to whom we are emotionally attached will generally lead us to experience some non-enjoyable mental states, e.g. distress, anguish, suffering. On the other hand, in the context of Preference Satisfaction Theories, the explanation will appeal to the fact that the harm suffered by someone emotionally close to our heart will generally frustrate some preference of ours, e.g. a preference that the individual do not be harmed, a preference for us not to feel distress, etc.

How convincing is Nussbaum's argument? Not very. The central thesis is that we only experience fear for others when we have some emotional relation or attachment to the individual that is (perceived to be) in a fearsome situation. Stated in this form, the claim is empirical. If so, however, it seems to be an empirically false claim. In fact, it is hard to deny that we can experience fear for perfect strangers. Imagine that you lie reclining in a comfortable long chair and are watching the north face of the Eiger with binoculars. You catch the sight of a climber making his way up to the top and start following his movements. Suddenly, the climber misses a grip and starts to fall. You hold your breath and a shudder overcomes you as you see him tumbling over a cliff. What you experience, it would appear, is fear for the climber, even though he is a total stranger, someone whom you have never met, and are not likely to ever meet. It is of course true that your emotion shows that, in a sense, you care for the fate of this person. Your reaction is indeed a way of caring for that person. But of course, the fact that you have this reaction does not mean that you quickly adopt the stranger as one of your closest and dearest, nor that the promotion of her wellbeing becomes part of your projects.

Cases where we experience emotions for complete strangers seem to be ubiquitous. Such cases provide a powerful challenge to Nussbaum's argument and, more generally, to the thesis that emotions essentially inform us of our prudential reasons. Is there any other way of defending the thesis Emotional epistemic egoism? One possibility consists in denying that fear for strangers constitutes a genuine counter-example to the radical thesis. Accordingly, the idea is that fear for strangers, whenever it is appropriate, *does* provide us with information that is relevant for our wellbeing and, as such, informs us, amongst other things, of our prudential reasons. However, this claim seems rather difficult to defend. To see why, consider the different theories of wellbeing.

Let us start with Nussbaum's Perfectionism. Within this theory, fear for strangers informs us of our prudential reasons only if it informs us of a situation that is likely to deprive us of one of the goods contributing to our flourishing (not necessarily our attachments or projects, as in Nussbaum's argument). However, as a brief look at Nussbaum's own list of essential capabilities reveals, it seems clear that fear for strangers is not necessarily connected to any specific good (although, of course, it may occasionally be). If so, fear for strangers will not necessarily provide us with information that is relevant for our wellbeing. Consider now Preference Satisfaction Theories of wellbeing. Within such theories, fear for strangers informs us of our prudential reasons only if it informs us of a situation that is likely to frustrate one of our (actual or well-informed and rational) preferences. Now, it is certainly true that, in some cases, we may have (actual and well-informed and rational) preferences involving strangers and that fear for strangers may be epistemically connected to such preferences. Nevertheless, the claim that fear for strangers, when appropriately experienced, informs us of our prudential reasons remains dubious. For one, it seems unlikely that fear for strangers is necessarily connected to preferences involving strangers. Even if it were, however, one must notice that preferences for strangers

are typically regarded as being irrelevant for wellbeing, at least unless they meet some additional, specific conditions, e.g. the satisfaction of the individual's preferences for a stranger must be a genuine goal of the preferring individual (e.g. Griffin 1986).<sup>40</sup> In combination, both reasons appear to drastically reduce the plausibility of the line of defence under consideration. Finally, let us consider Mental State Theories. Within such theories, fear for strangers informs us of our prudential reasons only if it informs us of a situation that is likely to cause us to experience some non-enjoyable mental states.<sup>41</sup> Once again, however, there appear to be cases where fear for strangers will fail to do so, for instance because we do not really care about the stranger or because we know that we will never see that stranger again.

In light of these considerations, the claim that fear for strangers, when appropriately experienced, informs us of our prudential reasons appears to be false under any conception of individual wellbeing. This leads us to a more general conclusion. If there is no other plausible line of defence available, then the thesis that emotions essentially inform us of our prudential reasons to act or not to act in certain ways should be rejected.<sup>42</sup>

Once again, one may notice that the previous conclusion is still compatible with the possibility that there exists another kind of essential epistemic relation between emotions and wellbeing. Indeed, nothing said so far excludes the possibility that emotions may essentially be such as to provide information that is relevant for *someone's* wellbeing, although, as we have seen, not necessarily information that is relevant for the individual's own wellbeing. Of course, this possibility brings us fully outside the thesis of Epistemic Egoism. Yet, it still represents a way of preserving some sort of necessary epistemic connection between emotions and wellbeing. Let us refer to it as Epistemic Welfarism, to express the underlying idea that the only kind of information that emotions *essentially* provide us with is information that is relevant for someone's wellbeing. In terms of reasons, this thesis can be formulated thus:

**Epistemic Welfarism** Unless inappropriate, emotions essentially inform us that there exist some *wellbeing-related* reasons to do or not to do something, where such reasons may be either prudential reasons or moral reasons having to do with the promotion of someone's wellbeing.

---

<sup>40</sup> Our claim relies on the idea that an individual's preferences may not be goals of the individual. I might, for instance, prefer that there be peace in the world in the year 3000, and yet not adopt this as a goal in any recognisable sense.

<sup>41</sup> Once again, this claim should be interpreted in a non-trivial sense. See p. 15 for this.

<sup>42</sup> A different way of formulating the thesis of Epistemic Egoism consists in saying that emotions have the (evolutionary) *function* of informing us of our prudential reasons to act or not to act in certain ways. This formulation is different from the one considered in this paper, in that it is compatible with the possibility that emotions may not *actually* inform us of our prudential reasons. The reason is that, although emotions might have been selected for as mechanisms providing relevant information for our wellbeing, changes in environmental conditions make them unsuitable for necessarily fulfilling their evolutionary function now, *even when* they are appropriately experienced. However, we think that the objection against Cosmides and Tooby's argument, which we have discussed in the previous section, helps us to equally dispose of this alternative characterisation of the thesis of Epistemic Egoism. To briefly rehearse our objection in a way that applies to the present context, while it may be true that emotions have been selected for as fitness-maximising mechanisms, this does not necessarily entail that, ipso facto, they have been selected for as wellbeing-mechanisms.

This thesis is considerably weaker than the thesis of Epistemic Egoism. Despite this, we want to conclude by suggesting that even this weaker thesis might, on reflection, turn out to be false. Our reasoning here will be more tentative than before. Indeed, for reasons of space, we will be content to merely sketch our argument.

The main counter-example against the thesis of Epistemic Welfarism is brought out by the existence of emotions that do not appear to be tied to any prudential value. Consider the case of awe. The formal object of awe is the awesome, conceived as what makes a reaction of awe appropriate, i.e. what is awe-worthy. In conformity with the Perceptual Theory of emotions, we can say that awe represents some evaluative properties. However, such evaluative properties do not seem to be necessarily related to any *wellbeing*-making properties. In other words, the case of awe seems to be the case of an emotion that provides us with information about an impersonal value only. If this is true, then awe does not inform us of any *wellbeing-related* reasons to do or not to do something. As such, awe seems to represent a genuine counter-example to Epistemic Welfarism.

As we have said, this argument is only tentative. For one, its plausibility depends on the conception of impersonal value that one endorses. For instance, if one believes that impersonal value is somehow reducible to personal value, then one will certainly think that the previous argument does not succeed. To give just one concrete example, if one believes that something may have value only to the extent that it *may* contribute to an individual's wellbeing, even if it does not contribute to any *actual* individual's wellbeing, then one will think that emotions such as awe provide information about the *possible* existence of wellbeing-related reasons.<sup>43</sup> Clearly, more needs to be said on this subject. For obvious reasons, however, this will have to wait for a different occasion.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we considered the question of whether there exists an essential relation between emotions and wellbeing. We distinguished three ways in which emotions and wellbeing might be essentially related: constitutive, causal, and epistemic. We argued that, while there is some room for holding that emotions are constitutive ingredients of an individual's wellbeing, at least under certain conditions, all the ways to characterise the causal and epistemic relations in an essentialist way seem to be vulnerable to important objections. If this is true, the conclusion is that the causal and epistemic relation between emotions and wellbeing is much less strong than is commonly thought.

## Acknowledgments

This paper was presented at the *5th International Summer School in Affective Sciences*, in Geneva 2013. We are grateful to the participants and in particular to David Amadio, Florian Cova, Julien Deonna, Kristján Kristjánsson, David Pizzaro, Fabrice Teroni, as well as to the two anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

---

<sup>43</sup> A perfectionist defender of Epistemic Welfarism may argue that awe does contribute to an individual's wellbeing insofar as it favours the individual's flourishing, e.g. by developing a healthy conception of the individual within the large scheme of things. The question of whether awe can be relevant for wellbeing also within non-perfectionist accounts of wellbeing remains more controversial. We thank a referee for drawing our attention to this possible reply.

## *References*

- Arnold MB (1960) *Emotion and personality*. Columbia University Press, New York.
- Brady MS (2013) *Emotional insight*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Brandt R (1979) *A theory of the right and the good*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Clore G (1994) Why emotions are felt. In: Ekman P, Davidson RJ (eds) *The nature of emotion: Fundamental questions*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Colombetti G (2005) Appraising valence. *J Consciousness Stud* 12.8-10:103-126.
- Cosmides L, Tooby J (2000) *Evolutionary psychology: Foundational papers*. MIT Press, Cambridge MA.
- Crisp R (2006) *Reasons and the good*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Deonna J (2006) Emotion, perception and perspective. *Dialectica* 60(1):29-46.
- Deonna J, Teroni F (2012) *The emotions: A philosophical introduction*. Routledge, New York.
- Döring S (2003) Explaining action by emotion. *Philos Quart* 53(211):214-30.
- Döring S (2007) Seeing what to so: Affective perception and rational motivation. *Dialectica* 61(3):361-94.
- de Sousa R (1987) *The rationality of emotion*. MIT Press, Cambridge MA.
- de Sousa R (2002) Emotional truth. *P Aristotelian Soc, Supp Vol* 76:247-63.
- Elgin C (1996) *Considered judgement*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Elgin C (2008) Emotion and understanding. In: Brun G, Doguoglu U, Kuenzle D (eds) *Epistemology and emotions*. Ashgate, Aldershot.
- Evans G (1982) *The Varieties of references*. Clarendon, Oxford.
- Fletcher G (2013) A fresh start for the objective-list theory of well-being. *Utilitas* 25:206-220.
- Frijda NH (1986) *The emotions*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Frijda NH (1994) Emotions are functional, most of the time. In: Ekman P, Davidson RJ (eds) *The nature of emotion: Fundamental questions*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Goldstein I (2002) Are emotions feelings? A further look at hedonic theories of emotions. *Conscious Emot* 3.1:21-33
- Greenspan PS (1988) *Emotions and reasons*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, New York.
- Griffin J (1986) *Well-being: Its meaning, measurement, and moral importance*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Griffiths PE (1997) *What emotions really are*. Chicago University Press, Chicago.
- Haybron D (2008) *The pursuit of unhappiness*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Heathwood C (2005) The problem of defective desires. *Aust J Philos* 83:487-504.
- Hurka T (1993) *Perfectionism*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- James W (1884) What is an emotion? *Mind* 9:188-204.
- Jones K (2003) Emotion, weakness of will, and the normative conception of agency. In: Hatzimoyis A (ed) *Philosophy and the emotions*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Kenny A (1963). *Action, emotion and the will*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.

- Lange CG (1885) *Om sindsbevaegelser: Et psyki-fysiologisk studie*. Jacob Lunds, Kjøbenhavn. Translated in: Lange CG, James W (eds) (1922) *The emotions*. Williams and Wilkins, Baltimore.
- Lazarus R (1991) *Emotion and adaptation*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- MacLean P (1993) Cerebral evolution of emotion. In: Lewis M, Haviland J (eds) *Handbook of emotions*. The Guilford Press, New York.
- Nussbaum M (2000) *Women and human development: The capabilities approach*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Nussbaum M (2001) *Upheavals of thought: The intelligence of emotions*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Parfit D (1984) *Reasons and persons*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Peacocke C (1992) *A study of concepts*. MIT Press, Cambridge MA.
- Prinz JJ (2004) *Gut reactions. A perceptual theory of emotion*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Prinz JJ (2008) Is emotion a form of perception? In: Faucher L, Tappolet C (eds) *The modularity of emotions*. *Can J Philos, Thema Vol 32*:137-60. Calgary University Press, Calgary.
- Raz J (2004) The role of well-being. *Philos Persp* 18(1):269-294.
- Roberts RC (2003) *Emotions: An essay in aid of moral psychology*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Rorty A (1978) *Explaining emotions*. Reprinted in A. O. Rorty, ed., *Explaining emotions*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Scanlon T (1998) *What we owe to each other*. The Belknap Press, Cambridge MA.
- Scherer K (2001) Appraisal considered as a process of multilevel sequential checking. In Scherer K, Schorr A, Jonhstone T (eds) (2001) *Appraisal processes in emotion: Theory, methods, research*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Smith M (1994) *The moral problem*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Solomon RC (1976) *The passions*. Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis.
- Sumner L (1996) *Welfare, happiness, and ethics*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Tappolet C (2000) *Emotions et valeurs*. Presses Universitaires de France, Paris.
- Tappolet C (2010) Emotions, action, and motivation: The case of fear. In: Goldie P (ed) *Oxford handbook of philosophy of emotion*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Tappolet C (2012) Emotions, perceptions, and emotional illusions. In: Calabi C (ed.) *Perceptual illusions: Philosophical and psychological essays*. Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Tappolet C (2014a). Reasons and emotions. In: Star D (ed) *The Oxford handbook of reasons and normativity*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Tappolet C (2014b). Emotions, agency and reason-responsiveness. In Weltman A, Piper MC (eds) *Relational autonomy: Ten years later*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Teroni F (2007) Emotions and formal objects. *Dialectica* 61(3):395-415.
- Teroni F (2011) Plus ou moins: Émotion et valence. In: Tappolet C, Teroni F, Konzelmann Ziv A (eds) *Les ombres de l'âme: Penser les émotions négatives*. Presses Markus Haller, Geneva.
- Walton K (1978) Fearing fiction. *J Philos* 75:5-27
- Whiting D (2011) The feeling theory of emotion and the object-directed emotions. *Eur J Philos* 19(2):281-303.