



Article scientifique

Article

2025

Published version

Public access

This is the published version of the publication, made available in accordance with the publisher's policy.

The creativity of emotions

Deonna, Julien; Teroni, Fabrice

How to cite

DEONNA, Julien, TERONI, Fabrice. The creativity of emotions. In: Philosophical explorations, 2025, p. 1–15. doi: 10.1080/13869795.2025.2471824

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:185382>

Publication DOI: [10.1080/13869795.2025.2471824](https://doi.org/10.1080/13869795.2025.2471824)

© The author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0)

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Last deposit update in Archive ouverte UNIGE on 06.06.2025 16:18

The creativity of emotions

Julien Deonna and Fabrice Teroni

Department of Philosophy, University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explore the links between emotions and creativity. Building on what we perceive as key examples, we distinguish instrumental and constitutive senses in which emotions can be creative. Emotions are instrumentally creative when they sustain novel and valuable thought processes aiming at maintaining or modifying a given emotional situation. They are constitutively creative when they function as essential parts of value understanding and when they come to carve and sometimes change the evaluative landscape. Despite their alleged passivity and rigidity, we claim, emotions sometimes manifest the kind of skillfulness that creativity presupposes.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 December 2023
Accepted 22 January 2025

KEYWORDS

Emotions; creativity; FA analysis; value; value understanding; imagination

1. Introduction

A young student in the humanities, call him Antti, attends the talk of a distinguished philosophy professor who, through her calm, precise and elegant answers to a hostile challenge, leaves him awestruck. The admiration the student feels makes him vividly imagine what a life in the field might involve and puts him on a path to embrace a career in philosophy.¹ Consider next Oscar, a self-declared nerd who cannot remember a time when he was not ridiculed at school (Congdon 2018). Growing up, anger builds inside him. After going through different stages in his understanding of what he had to endure, he comes to have a rich and socially insightful picture of the mistreatment he was the victim of during his formative years. Now picture Basia, who reconnects with an old friend at a social function. Evoking a recent trip to a nearby city, she expresses her relief at not being one of those people who have to commute in ‘packed and stinking trains’. Her friend’s face reveals to her that she said something improper – yes, she now recalls, the friend is one of these commuters – and soon enough she blushes. Things may stay at that or, once back home, Basia may recall the event, relive what she felt – ‘I blushed with shame’, she thinks to herself – and reflect on what this means for the kind of person she is. Finally, think of the football game immortalized by the Monty Python between Greek and German philosophers.² It is fair to say that the sequence is hilarious, and not only to philosophers. Amusement, in this case as in countless others, is connected to the fact that distinct values come to co-exist in an unlikely environment, clashing and marrying in unexpected ways.

CONTACT Fabrice Teroni  Fabrice.Teroni@unige.ch

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Contemplating these examples, the first thing to notice is that the distinct emotions appear to connect subjects to distinct values. Antti's admiration connects him to achievement and excellence, Oscar's anger to harm and injustice, Basia's shame to her failings and the way they may have degraded her in the eyes of her friend, and finally amusement at the fictive football game connects us to the funny. Second, it is tempting to think that these emotions, in particular thanks to their power to engage the imagination, connect our protagonists to these values in a somewhat *creative* way – or at least that is what we are going to argue. We first (§2) expand on what we have in mind when we talk of emotions and creativity. We then try to substantiate the intuitions we have just seen at work by discussing variations on these examples that will help us understand how creativity plays out in emotions. We start with *instrumental* relations between emotions and creativity (§3) and then explore potential *constitutive* relations between them (§4).

2. Emotion and creativity

Let us start with a sketch of what the emotions are. As we suggested, and as most scholars in the field admit, emotions involve evaluations that often relate to the subject's well-being. When we undergo an emotion, we apprehend the situation in an evaluative light. In admiration, someone is apprehended as virtuous or excellent; in anger, a remark or an attitude is apprehended as offensive or unjust, in shame, we apprehend ourselves as degraded, etc. These evaluations signal something that is (dis)valuable for the subject and can be more or less adjusted or fitting to their objects. The person one admires may indeed be virtuous, or, on the contrary, she may be a self-righteous fool; it is not rare to be ashamed of traits that are in no way shameful, etc. In short, emotions are evaluative apprehensions that can be assessed as more or less fitting. While there is a lot of disagreement as to what governs these assessments³ – e.g. should they be informed by the subject's own evaluative commitments or decided by facts that are independent of them? – we shall see that the normative dimension of emotions is important when discussing their creative nature. Closely related to the evaluative aspect of emotions is their connection to *attention*. The cognitive resources of someone undergoing an emotion are prioritized over other current goals or activities and channeled towards the evaluated situation. This channeling of cognitive resources is the essence of attention. At the same time, the different emotions prepare us to deal in distinctive ways with the relevant aspects of the situation, and typically to act on them. This is why emotions are partly constituted by distinct action tendencies (Frijda 2007; Scarantino 2014). Finally, it is natural to think of the emotions as distinctive types of processes (Scherer 2009). These processes typically begin when the subject notices a well-being relevant situation. This emotional capture of attention is usually passive, but soon enough attention actively fixes on the relevant aspect of the situation. The emotion then follows its course, which is shaped both by what happens in the environment and by the changes that the emotion orchestrates. To recap, emotions are processes that apprehend (typically) well-being relevant situations and prepare the subject to modify (when the emotion is negative) or maintain (when the emotion is positive) these situations.

The emotional processes we described are often triggered by stimuli we are aware of through our senses. Even when this is the case, the process whose aim is to modify or maintain the relevant situations is likely to involve the deployment of the subject's

imaginative capacities. Antti's imagination goes wild following the talk he attends, while Basia's shame forces her to imagine how her comment might have been construed by her friend.⁴ That being said, observe that emotions are often triggered by (e.g. fictional or counterfactual) situations that we are not presently confronting and that we represent by means of the imagination. In addition to focalizing on aspects of one's environment, emotional attention can also be involved in the mental exploration of scenarios that may be relevant for dealing with the situations she confronts. While it is often stressed that emotions are more likely to be triggered by, and to trigger in return, sensory rather than cognitive types of imagination (Robinson 2015; Salmela 2014: chap. 2–3), we won't focus on any particular way of exploring these possible scenarios. Creative emotions, as we shall see, exploit the imagination in all of its guises.

Let us now turn to creativity. As the notion is commonly understood, something is creative if at least two necessary conditions are met: it is novel and it is valuable.⁵ Observe that the conditions of novelty and value on creativity lend themselves to different readings. One may think that what is creative is novel to anyone and valuable to most human beings. If the conditions are understood in this way, creativity is the prerogative of great artists, scientists and engineers. We wish to focus on creativity as a more mundane phenomenon and to understand the novelty and value conditions as being indexed on a specific individual – in this sense, something is creative if it is novel for and of value to a given person.⁶ We shall mainly focus on creativity in this sense, but shall explore how emotions relate to more 'outstanding' forms of creativity towards the end of our discussion. It will also prove important to distinguish process from product creativity (Langkau 2022). At the level of *process*, emotions can be instrumental in bringing the subject to negotiate the emotional situation. More specifically, given their essential connection to attention, emotions are apt to channel the subject's cognitive resources – which, for creatures like us, crucially involve our deliberative and imaginative capacities – so as to deal with the situation. In §3, we suggest that the emotions can play this creative instrumental role by sustaining valuable thought processes that lead to what are, at least for the subject, novel solutions. At the level of *product*, there are at least two ways emotions may be constitutively creative. The first concerns the relation between emotions and *value understanding*. As we have seen, emotions involve value apprehensions and consciously engage us in maintaining or modifying well-being relevant situations – this means that they are likely to constitute a key part of our understanding the evaluative import of these situations. Given that value understanding is valuable and often novel, we argue that emotions play a constitutively creative role in this epistemic domain. The second sense in which emotions are creative as products concern the way they may *constitute value properties*. Properties such as the excellent, the unjust, the degrading and the funny seem to bear a constitutive relation to our emotional responses of admiration, anger, shame and amusement. Since these values are important to us and in some instances novel at the individual as well as the historical level, they and the emotions that partly constitute them qualify as creative products. Or so we argue in §4.

Many scholars think that novelty and value are not sufficient for creativity; in particular, many have insisted on the fact that what is creative must involve the subject's agency (see e.g. Carruthers 2011; Gaut 2010, 2018; Kieran 2014; Stokes 2008, 2011). It is indeed true that we would not be tempted to describe as creative something that we cannot in any way credit to the subject, for instance because she is only the 'vehicle' of happenings

in her she has no inkling about. Given the emotions' notorious passive character as well as the fact that they often operate at a level that is not (fully) transparent to us, we may worry that they cannot satisfy this additional condition. Along the way, we shall thus be concerned with the question of how much credit a subject may claim in relation to the creative powers of her emotions. One of our aims is to show that the sorts of emotional skills that are deployed in the relevant cases are creditable to the subject.

3. Emotional instrumental creativity

Emotions, we said, are evaluative verdicts that trigger the mobilization of the subject's attentional resources to maintain or modify a situation. This process sometimes is quasi-instantaneous. You inadvertently bump into someone and start to worry that you upset her. Before you even look at her face, you apologize. And no sooner is it done than you see that the person indicates there is no problem. Nothing unexpected and of value here.

More generally, emotions often lead us to maintain or modify a situation in ways that need not, and perhaps should not, be creative. While this claim may be surprising, observe that emotions have a form of *rigidity* that is needed for them to play their role. Through fear, we often deal with a threat by taking to our heels; pride and admiration sustain ordinary efforts in the pursuit of mundane goals; and it is typical of anger to remove obstacles in effective and unimaginative ways. In these cases, emotions perform great services, but hardly of a creative kind. Quite the reverse in fact: emotions work best, we may think, when they operate automatically and rigidly.

This is often not how emotions work, however. Fortunately, they often drive the subject's mental resources in a more flexible way.⁷ We shall now argue that this flexibility can sustain creative thought processes. Think of Antti's admiration of the visiting philosophy professor. The works of admiration incline him to emulate the professor. More often than not, however, no immediate emulation can occur and mental exploration of the admired object must take place instead. Antti's admiration triggers his imagination and he now projects himself into scenarios that he figures must be ingredients of a professor's life: impressing bright young students, flying to amazing places to give talks, answering journalists' questions about pressing ethical issues, and so on. Possibly, this imaginative journey nourishes his admiration as well as other emotions. It might for instance lead Antti to experience anticipatory pleasure at the life he now envisions for himself. While the content of this journey as well as the causal, epistemic and narrative connections between these contents is provided by non-affective cognitive states and processes – chief among them his encyclopedic knowledge and deliberative skills – the idea is that admiration sustains an original journey towards what has become a life aspiration. Perhaps it is now with renewed energy that Antti pursues his philosophical dreams. His admiration is thus creative in triggering thought processes that are, at least as far as his life is concerned, novel and valuable.

Think back now of Basia's shame after having expressed her relief at not having to commute in less-than-optimal conditions. Her shame signals to her that she acted in a way that is incompatible with her values (Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni 2012) – in one short sentence, she thinks, she succeeded in brandishing her privileged position and showing contempt for those who do not share it. Her shame also prepares her to rectify the impact of the words she uttered. But there are many ways she might do so.

In one scenario, Basia says right away that, if she was understood as implying that there is some problem with people taking such trains, she apologizes. And it might well be that the color of her face is enough to reassure her friend. Here, Basia's sense of shame has simply led her to signal her commitment to the values she shares with her friend in an efficient and straightforward manner. This is not to say that shame cannot sustain more creative thought processes. If Basia felt shame, as opposed to the more superficial emotion of embarrassment, simply communicating her commitment to the relevant values may not be enough. She may be led to revisit the incident later and ponder over what it reveals about herself. She perhaps starts wondering whether her discomfort stemmed from *appearing* to her friend to revel in her privileged position and belittling her friend in the process, or whether it was actually linked to her realization that she has become a person who brazenly looks down upon less fortunate individuals. From there, her exploration of different scenarios – which may trigger more shame or other emotions – may lead to diverging diagnoses about who she has become. Basia may promise to herself that she won't let the advantages she has been provided curb her open-mindedness. Alternatively, she may conclude that she can't stand anymore the naïve liberal views that cemented her relationship with her friend during their university days. Whatever the result, shame leads Basia to think hard about her views, imagine the kind of life she wants for herself and deliberate about how to attain it. The thought processes sustained by shame, we may then insist, are creative: they are valuable and novel paths to self-discovery.

As we have described her, Basia is in a situation that is close to that of Oscar, the self-confessed nerd, since both are led by emotions to evaluative discoveries. The anger Oscar accumulates gradually brings him to consider the harm he had to put up with – mockery for, say, not living up to the standards of social desirability prevalent in his days – as an injustice that he, and countless others, had to suffer. If everything goes well, his anger will express itself in useful ways: Oscar may join an organization fostering inclusion in school, or perhaps develop a talent for constructively antagonizing those who tend to downplay the issue. We can now realize that Oscar's situation resembles cases of so-called outlaw emotions, which differ from Basia's in at last two respects.⁸

First, we are to imagine that Oscar's anger was long in the making. Only after a while did the repeated mockery start to elicit anger rather than shame or incomprehension. When it did, the anger could initially not express itself and follow its natural course, because it could not be reconciled with Oscar's beliefs about his schoolmates and his standing in their eyes. It remained unacknowledged and thus likely to be displaced. Still, Oscar gradually develops what we may describe as resentment: a disposition to respond with anger, sometimes against his real-world tormentors, but most often only when he privately imagines his anger following its course, to the unjust treatment he has been subjected to. So, insofar as we want to say that Oscar's emotions subtend creative thought processes, they do so in a way that manifests an *emotional sensitivity*, i.e. a disposition molded by his cultural and historical embedding. Second, and in direct connection, these processes may lead to evaluative discoveries that are significant to many more than the individual undergoing the emotion.⁹

Having been through these examples, can we draw any lesson regarding what fosters the kind of emotional creativity at issue? A safe bet is that emotions foster a flexible and potentially creative deployment of mental resources when it is not immediately apparent

how the situation can be modified or maintained. The first group of cases, which appears to be typical of positive emotions such as admiration, pride, amusement and joy, are characterized by a general tendency to maintain, renew or replicate the situation. Spurred by admiration, Antti's imagination roams between positive images and symbols of a successful career in philosophy. But, in truth, situations triggering negative emotions may also belong to this group.¹⁰ When a looming threat triggers anxiety, the end-resolution of the situation may be obvious – physical elimination of the threat, say – while the possible means are numerous and their respective merits difficult to assess. In such situations, anxiety also helps channel the subject's resources towards a resolution (Vazard 2022).

Second, we have cases in which the evaluative apprehension provided by the emotion is not immediately clear to the subject. While they are situated on different timescales, the cases of Basia and Oscar are of that kind: their emotions appear to inform them of something about which they have no belief or even incompatible beliefs. This is why their emotions trigger and sustain the search for a resolution. Slightly different cases involve ambivalent emotions. A friend of yours complains of the food at the funeral of your aunt, which you have spent the week organizing. The friend is right, the food is dreadful. Soon after, you recognize in yourself the shame of serving poor tasting food together with a barely contained fury at your friend. How dare he complain in such circumstances? Still, why be so angry if he was only stating a fact? Two days later, sharing the anecdote with your husband, you find that it is quite a good story, and a funny one at that. Ambivalent emotions, that is, promote the exploration and appraisal of evaluatively complex situations.

One way of thinking about cases of emotional doubt and emotional ambivalence is that we find ourselves with an emotion and wonder as to what exactly it is directed at. The emotion thus triggers a search for reasons (Brady 2010). 'What am I ashamed of/angry at?', we wonder. We may or may not find reasons. In the former case, we acknowledge the important role played by the emotion; in the latter, we discard it as being mistaken or perhaps a remnant of a former sensitivity we have distanced ourselves from. Thought of in this way, emotions contribute to interrogating and, when we are lucky, re-aligning how we reflexively think about the world in light of the verdicts of our emotional sensitivities. As we shall see in §4, this role of emotions will prove important when we will discuss them as being constitutively creative.

These are in our opinion the most important cases in which emotions trigger and sustain potentially creative thought processes. We are not saying that they are the only sorts of processes sustained by the emotions. Let us bring this section to an end with two observations in this regard. First, we have contended that emotions manifest a form of creative flexibility in the cases just described, but it would be wrong to think that these cases involve emotions that are at their 'emotional best'. Situations of emotional doubt and emotional ambivalence are as likely as not to bring the subject to familiar dead ends. Upon feeling shame, Basia might close and withdraw from the situation to avoid being confronted with the source of her shame. Worse, she might attempt to cancel her shame by deriding her friend for having to commute.¹¹ As to Oscar, we have pictured him as successfully channeling his resentment into a worldview that helps him confront and perhaps change his environment for the better. We all know that resentment often ends up in obsessive rumination or even in self-consuming hatred, however. Cases of emotional ambivalence also have a well-attested tendency to impede if

not disrupt communication with our close ones, etc. We emphasized at the outset of this section that emotions tend to exhibit a form of rigidity and inertia that serves us well. Yet, we sometimes find ourselves in complex situations that require the emotions to adjust and foster creative thought patterns. The point is that this requirement is often not met.

Second, as we have seen, creativity presupposes the subject's agency so that credit can be given to her for the relevant thought processes. And it might not be clear that the processes sustained by emotions are so creditable. Let us start by emphasizing that, to be creditable to a subject, thought processes need not be consciously controlled by her: even if they work 'under the radar', so to speak, these processes may be guided by the subject's beliefs, desires, memories or imaginative states. Moreover, when a condition of expertise is satisfied, we can talk of a form of skilled mental performance in the same way as we can talk of skilled overt behavior in tennis, say. In both domains, the performances are eminently creditable to the subject given that they manifest a competence that draws from and orchestrates several sources of knowledge and was typically long and effortful in the making. For that reason, when emotions sustain thought processes that are fast, effortless and automatic, this should not obscure the fact that they often are skilled performances. One may even think that emotional expertise fosters creativity: expertise allows for the automatic and attentionless treatment of familiar information, thereby creating room for attending to more elusive aspects of the situation and novel resolutions (Ivy 2022).

To conclude this section, we may wonder as to how exactly, in light of what we have said, emotions can be said to be creative. In the foregoing, we have claimed that the emotions were just instrumental in fostering and/or sustaining creative thought processes. This conclusion is premised on one widespread understanding of the portrayal of the emotions that we offered in the previous section. According to it, emotions are individuated independently of these thought processes, e.g. because emotions are judgments (Nussbaum 2001; Solomon 1976) or experiences of value (Roberts 2003; Tappolet 2016) that precede them. Note that we are not forced to adopt this perspective, however. It will substantially change if we rather think that emotions occupy time in a different way. Suppose for instance that one understands the emotions as protracted processes that channel the subject's attentional and deliberative resources so as to deal with the situation she confronts (Scarantino 2014; Scherer 2009; Soteriou 2013). If that is the case, then at least some of the creative thought processes we have mentioned – we may think here of those that occur 'in the heat' of the emotion – are constitutive of it. This is to say that, while we have adopted a dialectically less committing account of the relations between emotions and the relevant thought processes, there is an argument for concluding that we have already unearthed constitutive rather than merely instrumental relations between emotions and creativity.¹² Be that as it may, we will explore in the next section other reasons to think that emotions can be constitutively creative.

4. Emotional constitutive creativity

We shall now be interested in two (compatible) ways emotions can be constitutively creative. They can be constitutively creative, first, because they constitute value understanding and, second, because they partly constitute value properties. Let us see why.

Peter Goldie has drawn attention to the role played by emotions in value understanding. He gives the example of a subject knowing that walking on ice is dangerous but understanding the danger only when experiencing fear while walking on ice (Goldie 2000). More generally, a broad trend in the literature insists that emotions are fundamental for value understanding because of some of their properties, such as their motivational tendency, their valence or, more generally, their experiential dimension (Deonna and Teroni 2020; Gorodeisky 2021; Madjar 2020). That being said, the example offered by Goldie may give the wrong impression that we usually have a 'pre-emotional' evaluative outlook the truth of which is then understood through an emotion. We do not always coldly judge how things are evaluatively before having the relevant emotion, however.

First, we should leave room for cases in which the subject reaches an evaluative verdict for the first time thanks to her emotion. For instance, we can modify Goldie's example and consider a reckless young child unaware of the danger of walking on ice, a danger he only comes to appreciate when he becomes afraid as the ice starts to crack around him. More generally, it is natural to speak of many emotions as constituting the subject's value understanding. Let us revisit some of our previous examples. Young Antti's admiration for the philosophy professor may partly constitute his understanding of the value there is in pursuing an intellectual career; Basia's shame may constitute her understanding of the social disgrace there is in arrogantly showcasing one's privileged situation; and amusement at the Monty Python sketch may constitute one's understanding of the fun there is in this unexpected spectacle. In none of these cases is it convincing to claim that the emotion emerges from an articulated pre-emotional evaluative outlook: the subject rather comes to understand the (dis)value of a situation thanks to her emotion. This understanding is novel. Is it valuable? According to many philosophers, understanding is a, if not the, central epistemic value (Kvavig 2003; Pritchard 2016: chap. 8). The claim seems to be especially convincing in relation to the sort of value understanding at stake here. So, given that value understanding is valuable and potentially novel, it seems that emotions can be constitutively creative.

The reasoning may be too quick, however. Value understanding indeed presupposes the emotions, one may think, while maintaining that the relation between the two is only instrumental. Emotions sometimes help generating value understanding, e.g. by drawing our attention to aspects of a situation that we would otherwise have missed, thereby helping us to appreciate it better. But the value understanding we then reach, the thought continues, is exclusively constituted by the evaluative judgements they help us reach (Brady 2014). Cases in which the subject has an emotion but does not make the relevant evaluative judgements put pressure on this approach to the relations between emotions and value understanding. The outlaw emotions that we met above illustrate this possibility. You may recall that the term refers to emotions in tension with the subject's explicit evaluative verdicts. When Oscar is in his early teens, his anger is, we said, an outlaw emotion: if asked, he would deny that he is subject to unfair treatment and claim that his classmates' jeers are innocent teasing. But anger he already feels, and his anger only builds with time. Since emotion does not lead to evaluative judgement in these cases, the claim under discussion would force us to conclude that the subject lacks value understanding.

This is a conclusion we have reason to resist (Arpaly 2002). Given how we have characterized the emotions, we should insist that Oscar's anger allows him to apprehend the

unfairness of the treatment his peers subject him to, draws his attention to it and prepares him to deal with it. True, all this being in tension with his explicit verdicts, we can surmise that he rejects the construal of his situation as unfair, that he makes efforts to draw his attention elsewhere and that his thoughts about reprisal stay bottled-up. Still, denying that Oscar understands the unfairness of his predicament looks more like begging the question in presupposing that value understanding comes solely in the form of a judgement than the result of properly attending to how he is moved. It is more convincing to say that his anger constitutes an understanding of unfairness that he fails to acknowledge. This could not be maintained if emotions presupposed or partly consisted in the relevant value judgements. However, it is widely agreed nowadays that, if emotions are often sensitive to our beliefs, they do neither presuppose nor systematically align with our explicit value judgements (e.g. D'Arms 2005; D'Arms and Jacobson 2023). So, the value understanding constituted by the emotions is a candidate for being a creative product whenever it is novel and creditable to the subject.

If we accept this conclusion, we should try to put some flesh around it. Can we further elucidate the claim that emotions *constitute* cases of value understanding? And under which conditions is this understanding *novel* and *creditable* to the subject? Let us examine these issues in this order. Observe first that the claim that emotions can constitute a form of value understanding chimes well with the thought that there is something amiss when we make a value judgement that is completely disconnected from the relevant emotional sensitivity. We would expect an explanation if adult Oscar told us that he has been subject to unfair treatment during his whole childhood, yet never felt anger. Our reaction would be the same if Basia maintained that she behaved shamefully with her friend but insisted that she felt no shame. What exactly is lacking in these cases? While any answer to this question is controversial, an attractive idea is to appeal to features of the emotions to explain what is lacking when we do not have them or what goes wrong when we have emotions that do not fit the situation (D'Arms and Jacobson 2023; Deonna and Teroni 2024; Svavarsdóttir 2014). Emotions, we said, channel the subject's cognitive resources to prepare her to deal with the situation. If we think that there is something amiss in Oscar and Basia not feeling anger or shame, this is because they are the emotions that would fit the situation as these subjects themselves see it. And, when we criticize an emotion, this is because we think that it orients the attention toward an object that does not merit it. Our claim regarding what is lacking when value judgements – 'I was treated unfairly', 'I behaved shamefully' – occur without the relevant emotion builds on this insight: what is lacking is a specific way of being attentionally engaged with the situation.¹³

But why is lack of attentional engagement a lack of understanding as opposed to, say, a lack of motivation regarding something we understand? To answer this question regarding value understanding, we must investigate the relations between the value concepts on which this understanding rests, value properties and the emotions. Approaching it requires that we take a broader temporal perspective than the one we implicitly occupied until now. We should surely admit that someone who is not currently angry or amused may understand the offensiveness or funniness of a situation and judge it to be so. This should not foster the conclusion that value understanding is independent of the emotions, however. For observe that, for the subject to understand the judgements he makes, he should master the concepts of offensiveness and funniness. What does it

take to master them? An attractive answer is that these concepts are concepts of fitting emotions: the concept of offensiveness is the concept of what it is fitting to be angry at, the concept of funniness is that of what it is fitting to be amused by. This is the so-called Fitting-Attitude (FA) analysis of value.¹⁴ We shall soon consider how robust this notion of fit is. For the moment, the idea that these value concepts are concepts of fitting emotions should lead us to deploy the considerations of the previous paragraph as follows.

To understand these concepts is to understand that the attentional engagement characteristic of a given emotion fits some situations – an understanding that is difficult if not impossible to acquire if one never undergoes this emotion. Someone who already gained this understanding can pass the relevant value judgement and understand what he claims. Taking a broader temporal perspective, however, we realize that his understanding relies on his past emotions. The relation between evaluative concepts such as those of offensiveness and funniness and the emotions is constitutive. What is the consequence of these considerations on the relations between emotions and creativity? If emotions are constitutive parts of value concepts, one thing is clear: they are constitutive parts of an invaluable resource for anyone hoping to navigate our social environments. Whether this qualifies as a constitutive form of creativity will then depend on how we answer our two remaining questions: when is the value understanding constituted by emotions novel? And under which conditions is it creditable to the subject?

Approaching the issue of novelty requires that we say a few words about the origins of our emotional sensitivities. It is widely acknowledged that our emotional sensitivities are structured around a finite set of basic human concerns: our capacities for fear, disgust, anger, admiration, envy, shame, etc. are structured around the (dis)value of certain aspects of our environment. Psychologists often refer to these values as ‘core relational themes’ (e.g. Lazarus 1991) in order to emphasize their connection to basic concerns. We may think of the emotions as being at first responses to what De Sousa (1987) aptly describes as primitive scenarios, i.e. the recurrent and basic situations that emotions have been set up to deal with. The paradigmatic scenario for anger is a situation that constitutes an unjustified encroachment on our ends (being jostled, intrusion into our private space, etc.); that of amusement one of the ‘slipping on a banana peel’ or ‘grossly breaking a social norm’ variety; that of fear a situation in which we are at the mercy of a predator.

Most scholars agree that emotional responses to these scenarios have been shaped by evolutionary pressures. While we have seen that emotions, even in these primitive scenarios, may constitute a form of value understanding that is novel at the individual level, the novelty at issue involves nothing more than the subject discovering for herself what we all experience. Provided that these emotions are more or less innate responses, the sense in which they are creditable to the subject is rather thin. Still, these emotions are only the starting point of individual emotional sensitivities – one’s sense of shame, of humor, etc. – that develop from them. The potential novelty and creditability of emotional sensitivities lies in the fact that they typically evolve by way of perceived resemblances, which is sometimes difficult to articulate in words, between the situations that already elicit the emotion and new situations (D’Arms and Jacobson 2023). The capacity to extend in these ways emotional sensitivities is often described as a form of ‘aspectual perception’ building upon imagination: one sees the situation as falling under a given concept, a bit like when one sees a cloud as a dragon (Roberts 2003). Needless to say, the maturation of this capacity will benefit from exposure to many different stimuli and

draw upon various cognitive and conative resources. While the growth of emotional sensitivities is no doubt shaped by personal and social factors, the resulting skills and their manifestations are, for reasons adumbrated above, creditable to the subject even if these skills manifest themselves effortlessly and automatically.

While emotions that manifest emotional sensitivities are creditable to the subject, we are still a long way from measuring the impact of emotional sensitivities on the relations between emotions and creativity. Since progress on this issue can be made only if we take a stand on the ontology of value, all approaches are bound to be controversial. It is obviously not the place to assess the respective merits of these approaches, only to chart some of their consequences for emotional creativity in the value domain.

A first approach is subjectivist. According to it, emotions are free to latch into the world in a way that is shaped by personal and social idiosyncrasies because there are, apart from evolutionary pressures that are no longer relevant to our lives in advanced societies, no standards to appeal to: the relevant values (the shameful, the offensive, the funny) turn out to be nothing over and above our emotional sensitivities (e.g. Prinz 2007). Emotions are thus regarded as the seat of one's subjective evaluative outlook, which clamors for expression when it is not taken into account – think again here of Oscar's anger slowly growing. This subjectivist approach leads to an account of the creative potential of emotions that gives pride of place to their relation to the self, since it denies any substantial contrast between what is of value and what one values. Value understanding turns out to be a form of self (or group) understanding. Given that self-understanding is valuable and sometimes novel, the subjectivist ends up claiming that emotions can constitute creative forms of self-understanding. What is unclear is whether emotional sensitivities so conceived can constitute skills. Skillful performance implies that one has, to one's credit, overcome possible mistakes and subjectivism does not make room for value mistakes. More fundamentally, one may want to resist the claim that values are so dependent on the emotions that value understanding boils down to a form of self-understanding.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is a realist approach that adopts a robust account of values: they would exist independently of our emotional sensitivities. The development of the latter is then conceived as that of skills apprehending independent values (or, as the case may be, of incompetencies making one incapable of apprehending them). A consequence is that this approach downplays the creative role of emotions regarding value properties and value understanding for the opposite reason to the one we saw at play in subjectivism. One can adopt a realist approach and maintain that emotions are our best (perhaps our only) way of apprehending some parts of the value domain. Yet, while such apprehension may be novel at the individual, social or historical levels, the consequence of realism is that emotions are creative in a strictly epistemic sense. There is no place for a more substantially ontological creative role of the emotions, since emotional sensitivities are thought to be in the business of mirroring a pre-existing evaluative realm.

An alternative approach tries to steer a middle course between subjectivism and realism. It consists in applying the kind of FA analysis of value *concepts* discussed above to value *properties*. The approach has it that values themselves should be understood in terms of fitting emotions: the offensive, the shameful and the funny are the properties of what anger, shame and amusement fit. This is an attempt to strike a balance between subjectivism and realism for the following reasons. As against subjectivism,

not any emotion and emotional sensitivity will do: only those that are fitting carve up the relevant values. As against realism, the nature of these values depends on these emotions and the fundamental concerns they manifest – emotions do not apprehend a pre-existing evaluative realm. The approach has it that properties such as the offensive and the shameful depend on fundamental human concerns and the sensibilities that we build on them. True, one may describe what is offensive, shameful or amusing in any specific case without reference to anger, shame or amusement – in Oscar’s case, what is offensive is a degrading treatment by his peers; in Basia’s case, what is shameful is the careless display of a privileged position; in the Monty Python sketch, what is funny is clueless philosophers wandering around a football pitch. But many very different situations are offensive, shameful or funny – the key thought in the approach under discussion is that the only thing these situations have in common is that they make specific emotional engagements fitting (Roberts 2011).

Within this approach, the creative role of the emotions is not purely epistemic because they help constitute these values. This is why people equipped with a specific emotional sensitivity can unify in new and potentially creative ways situations that have nothing in common except that they make a certain type of emotional engagement fitting. One clear case of this phenomenon is that of the Monty Python sketch (or of *Flying Circus* more generally): talented comics have a gift for imaginatively exploring funny situations and spotting novel features that make amusement fitting. In a perhaps socially more insightful way, people like Oscar have developed, through their singular history, a skill for appreciating – in hitherto uncharted territory – how degrading some treatments can be. Spurred by pain, their imagination has allowed them to bring something of universal significance to light. What was taken to be, say, children mocking one another is later seen as bullying or harassment. Now, since there is always some leeway between a novel and a fitting emotion, the issue of fit should be approached case by case. Some subjects are endowed with sensitivities that generate emotions in response to novel situations that fit them – their sensitivities are then likely to be adopted by people who directly interact with them, a process that sometimes grows in concentric circles to reach historic proportions.¹⁵ Oscar may be one of them, and his past tormentors may pick up on this novel sensitivity and feel in retrospect the shame that their bullying merits. In other cases, the issue of whether an emotion is fitting remains disputed without any clear prospects of resolution – after all, our emotional sensitivities divide as much as unite us.

5. Conclusion

We have explored two ways in which emotions can be creative. When they elicit and sustain novel and valuable mental processes, they are (at least) instrumentally creative. Given that they can constitute valuable and novel instances of value understanding and that they are parts of value properties, emotions can be constitutively creative. As we have seen, the fact that emotions often operate below the surface in a quite automatic fashion is compatible with their manifesting emotional skills that are creditable to the subject. And, while we have insisted throughout on the creative roles of emotions, we have warned of the potential dangers linked to their rigidity, on the one side, and their tendency to apprehend value where there is none, on the other side.

Notes

1. Example freely adapted from Kauppinen (2019), who recounts the lasting effects of the admiration he felt at the occasion of a talk given by Martha Nussbaum.
2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfduUFF_i1A
3. For a discussion of various approaches to the normative assessment of emotions, see D'Arms (2025).
4. We allude here to the well-documented contrast in the way positive and negative emotions respectively impact on attention, which is discussed in Brady (2014).
5. For a nice and up-to-date presentation of definitional issues regarding creativity, see Paul and Stokes (2023).
6. This distinction corresponds to what Boden (2004) has famously called, respectively, historical novelty (H-novelty) and psychological novelty (P-novelty).
7. There is ample evidence, albeit often indirect, that emotions elicit the imaginative exploration of significant scenarios. For wide-ranging examinations of the complex and multi-faceted interactions between emotions and the imagination, see Blackwell Simon (2020), D'Armenteau and Van Der Linden (2007) and Morton (2013).
8. The term "outlaw emotion" has been coined by Jaggar (1989) and refers to emotions that are in tension with one's wider belief system. For a recent discussion focusing on the epistemic role of these emotions, see Silva (2021).
9. We briefly come back to the historical dimension of emotions' creative power when we focus on creative emotional products as opposed to creative emotional processes, which are our concern in this section.
10. While a lot of research has focused on the links between hedonic tone and creativity, there is no clear-cut evidence supporting the claim that positive affect has a privileged link with creativity (Baas, De Dreu, and Nijstad 2008).
11. The "ugly" sides of shame are emphasized in Tangney and Dearing (2003).
12. Gaut (2003) and Stokes (2014, 2016) argue that imagination, which we have seen to have rich relations with emotions, is distinctively suited to qualify as creative because it allows the subject to flexibly manipulate mental representations. If we endorse this idea, the creativity of emotions will depend on how we conceive of their relation to such flexibility. It will be merely instrumental if emotions are individuated independently of imaginative thought processes, and constitutive if one rather thinks that these processes are ingredients of the emotions.
13. Saying that experiencing fitting emotions constitutes a form of value understanding does not imply the (rather implausible) claim that it is all things considered always good to experience the relevant fitting emotions. Sometimes, prudential or moral reasons support the conclusion that a fitting emotion should not be felt.
14. For the general approach, see Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004) and, for a discussion of the role of emotions within it, D'Arms and Jacobson (2010).
15. For some convincing examples of the latter, see Appiah (2010).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Julien Deonna is Professor of philosophy at the University of Geneva and project leader at CISA, the Swiss Centre for Affective Sciences. He works in the philosophy of mind and moral psychology.

Fabrice Teroni is Professor of philosophy at the University of Geneva and project leader at CISA, the Swiss Centre for Affective Sciences. He works in the philosophy of mind and epistemology.

References

- Appiah, Anthony. 2010. *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*. New York: Norton.
- Arpaly, Nomy. 2002. "Moral Worth." *The Journal of Philosophy* 99 (5): 223–245. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3655647>
- Baas, Matthijs, Carsten De Dreu, and Bernard Nijstad. 2008. "A Meta-analysis of 25 Years of Mood-Creativity Research: Hedonic Tone, Activation, or Regulatory Focus." *Psychological Bulletin* 134 (6): 779–806. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0012815>
- Blackwell Simon, E. 2020. "Emotional Mental Imagery." In *The Cambridge Handbook of the Imagination*, edited by Anna Abraham, 241–257. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Boden, Margaret. 2004. *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Brady, Michael. 2010. "Virtue, Emotion and Attention." *Metaphilosophy* 41 (1–2): 115–131. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9973.2009.01620.x>
- Brady, Michael. 2014. "Emotion, Attention, and the Nature of Value." In *Emotion and Value*, edited by Sabine Roeser and Cain Todd, 52–71. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carruthers, Peter. 2011. "Creative Action in Mind." *Philosophical Psychology* 24 (4): 437–461. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2011.556609>
- Congdon, Mathew. 2018. "Creative Resentments: The Role of Emotions in Moral Change." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 68 (273): 739–757. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqy011>
- D'Argembeau, Arnaud, and Martial Van Der Linden. 2007. "Emotional Aspects of Mental Time Travel." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 30 (3): 320–321. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X07002051>
- D'Arms, Justin. 2005. "Two Arguments for Sentimentalism." *Philosophical Issues* 15 (1): 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-6077.2005.00050.x>
- D'Arms, Justin. 2025. "What Makes an Emotion Appropriate or Inappropriate to its Objects." In *Emotion Theory: The Comprehensive Routledge Guide*, edited by Andrea Scarantino, 605–627. New York: Routledge.
- D'Arms, Justin, and Daniel Jacobson. 2010. "Demystifying Sensibilities: Sentimental Values and the Instability of Affect." In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*, edited by Peter Goldie, 585–613. New York: Oxford University Press.
- D'Arms, Justin, and Daniel Jacobson. 2023. *Rational Sentimentalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Deonna, Julien, Raffaele Rodogno, and Fabrice Teroni. 2012. *Defense of Shame*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Deonna, Julien, and Fabrice Teroni. 2020. "Emotional Experience: Affective Consciousness and its Role in Emotion Theory." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Consciousness*, edited by Uriah Kriegel, 102–123. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Deonna, Julien, and Fabrice Teroni. 2024. "Emotions and Their Correctness Conditions: A Defense of Attitudinalism." *Erkenntnis* 89 (1): 45–64. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-022-00522-0>
- De Sousa, Ronald. 1987. *The Rationality of Emotion*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Frijda, Nico. 2007. *The Laws of Emotions*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Gaut, Berys. 2003. "Creativity and Imagination." In *The Creation of Art; New Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics*, edited by Berys Gaut and Paisley Livingston, 148–173. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gaut, Berys.. 2010. "The Philosophy of Creativity." *Philosophy Compass* 4 (12): 1034–1046.
- Gaut, Berys. 2018. "The Value of Creativity." In *Creativity and Philosophy*, edited by Berys Gaut and Matthew Kieran, 124–139. New York: Routledge.
- Goldie, Peter. 2000. *The Emotions. A Philosophical Exploration*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gorodeisky, Keren. 2021. "The Authority of Pleasure." *Noûs* 55 (1): 199–220. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12310>
- Ivy, Spencer. 2022. "The Role of Creativity in Expertise and Skilled Action." *Synthese* 200 (456): 1–22.
- Jaggar, Alison. 1989. "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology." *Inquiry* 32 (2): 151–176. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00201748908602185>
- Kauppinen, Antti. 2019. "Ideals and Idols: On the Nature and Appropriateness of Agential Admiration." In *The Moral Psychology of Admiration*, edited by Alfred Archer and André Grahle, 21–28. London: Rowman and Littlefield.

- Kieran, Matthew. 2014. "Creativity as a Virtue of Character." In *The Philosophy of Creativity: New Essays*, edited by Elliot S. Paul, and Scott B. Kaufman, 125–144. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kvangig, Jonathan. 2003. *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Langkau, Julia. 2022. "Two Notions of Creativity." In *Wittgenstein and Beyond. Essays in Honour of Hans-Johann Glock*, edited by Christoph Pfisterer, Nicole Rathgeb, and Eva Schmidt, 254–271. New York: Routledge.
- Lazarus, Richard. 1991. *Emotion and Adaptation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Madjar, Shai. 2020. "Emotion Regulation and Evaluative Understanding." *Philosophical Psychology* 33 (6): 777–798. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2020.1751102>
- Morton, Adam. 2013. *Emotion and Imagination*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 2001. *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Paul, Elliot Samuel, and Dustin Stokes. 2023. "Creativity." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward Zalta and Uri Nodelman. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2024/entries/creativity/>.
- Prinz, Jesse. 2007. *The Emotional Construction of Morals*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pritchard, Duncan. 2016. *Epistemology*. New York: Routledge.
- Rabinowicz, Wlodek, and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen. 2004. "The Strike of the Demon: On Fitting Pro-attitudes and Value." *Ethics* 114 (3): 391–423. <https://doi.org/10.1086/381694>
- Roberts, Robert. 2003. *Emotions. An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Roberts, Debbie. 2011. "Shapelessness and the Thick." *Ethics* 121 (3): 489–520. <https://doi.org/10.1086/658898>
- Robinson, Jennefer. 2015. *Deeper than Reason. Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Salmela, Mikko. 2014. *True Emotions*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Scarantino, Andrea. 2014. "The Motivational Theory of Emotions." In *Moral Psychology and Human Agency*, edited by Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, 156–185. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Scherer, Klaus R. 2009. "The Dynamic Architecture of Emotion: Evidence for the Component Model Process." *Cognition and Emotion* 23 (7): 1307–1351. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699930902928969>
- Silva, Laura. 2021. "The Epistemic Role of Outlaw Emotions." *Ergo* 8.
- Solomon, Robert. 1976. *The Passions*. New York: Doubleday Anchor.
- Soteriou, Matthew. 2013. *The Mind's Construction: The Ontology of Mind and Mental Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stokes, Dustin. 2008. "A Metaphysics of Creativity." In *New Waves in Aesthetics*, edited by Kathleen Stock and Katherine Thomson-Jones, 105–124. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Stokes, Dustin. 2011. "Minimally Creative Thought: Minimally Creative Thought." *Metaphilosophy* 42 (5): 658–681. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9973.2011.01716.x>
- Stokes, Dustin. 2014. "The Role of Imagination in Creativity." In *The Philosophy of Creativity: New Essays*, edited by Elliot S. Paul and Scott B. Kaufman, 157–184. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stokes, Dustin. 2016. "Imagination and Creativity." In *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Imagination*, edited by Amy Kind, 247–261. New York: Routledge.
- Svavarsdóttir, Sigrún. 2014. "Having Value and Being Worth Valuing." *The Journal of Philosophy* 111 (2): 84–109. <https://doi.org/10.5840/jphil201411125>
- Tangney, June, and Ronda Dearing. 2003. *Shame and Guilt*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Tappolet, Christine. 2016. *Emotions, Values, and Agency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vazard, Juliette. 2022. "Everyday Anxious Doubt." *Synthese* 200 (3): 1–19.