

# How to Overcome Unreliable Emotions & Achieve Moral Knowledge

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Understanding Value X

University of Sheffield, 16/7/21

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## 1. Setting the Scene

- *Question:* How do we know right from wrong?
- *Observation:* Many of our ethical judgments are formed on the basis of emotion.
  - Cases: Photographs from humanitarian crises.



- Empirical evidence. Clore & Gasper (2000), Haidt (2001), Greene (2001), Slovic et al (2007)
- *Suggestion:* Maybe we can achieve ethical knowledge on the basis of emotion?
  - Johnston (2001), Jacobson (2005), Cuneo (2006), Döring (2007), Roeser (2011), Kauppinen (2013), Dancy (2014), Pelsner (2014), Tappolet (2016), Milona (2016, 2017), Mitchell (2017), Milona & Naar (2020).
  - Aristotle; 18<sup>th</sup> c. Moral Sense theorists; Phenomenologists.

Task for today: Answer an objection to this proposal of “emotion-based knowledge”.  
**The Unreliability Objection**

## 2. The Unreliability Objection

“[E]ven if emotions give rise to true beliefs some of the time, emotion seems far too unreliable or untrustworthy on the whole to count as a source of justified beliefs[.]”  
Pelsner (2014), p. 114

*Background: The Intentionality of Emotion*

- Emotion is directed at a ‘target’

“You hate your rivals, grieve over your mother’s death, or are afraid of the aggressive-looking woman” Döring (2003)

- Emotions have evaluative content

Hatred ⇒ despicable

Grief ⇒ irreparable loss of something important

Fear ⇒ dangerous

- Experiencing the emotion inclines you to believe the content.
- The belief you form will come out true if the emotion's target really does exhibit the relevant evaluative property and false if not.
- Plausibly, a belief-forming habit needs to be reliable to result in knowledge.

A belief-forming habit is **reliable** iff it produces mostly true beliefs.

So, *Why Think Emotions Are Unreliable?*

- Influence by irrelevant factors.
  - Bad odours (Schnall *et al.*, 2008; Inbar *et al.*, 2012), low blood-sugar (Danziger *et al.*, 2011), hangovers (Fjær, 2015), how your day is going (Goldie, 2004)
- In all cases, there's evidence that this influence is mediated by mood

**Mood:** a conscious affective state that isn't directed towards a particular object.

irrelevant factor ⇒ shift in mood ⇒ inaccurate emotion ⇒ false ethical belief

- Imagine someone whose emotions tend to match up with the evaluative properties of their targets, except when irrelevant factors are at work.
- The influence of mood will create mismatches.

### 3. Existing Responses

- Perfectly virtuous agents, i.e. agents who experience nothing but fitting emotions.
  - Cuneo (2006), Pelsler (2014)
- Retreat to *prima facie* justification
- Shortcomings: Unambitious. Don't give us any practical advice for improving our moral judgments.

### 4. My Proposal: Watchfulness

- Existing responses make the tacit assumption that an unfitting emotion will always translate into a false belief.
- But why assume that people trust *every emotion* they have in *every situation*?
  - Compare: vision, testimony. We **withhold judgment when conditions are bad**. This allows us to filter out many of the bad cases.
- Proposal: we should aim to do the same with emotion.
- Cultivate a habit of watchfulness.
  - Watchfulness: watching out for signs that your emotions may be responding to ethically irrelevant factors.
- Inward-looking watchfulness:
  - Mood
- Outward-looking watchfulness? .... a topic for further research.

**Conclusion:** To achieve moral knowledge on the basis of emotion, you don't need a perfect emotional disposition. You just a basic level of emotional attunement to the moral landscape, plus a habit of watchfulness.

**Appendix: Evidence that irrelevant factors operate by modulating mood**

- **Bad odours** worsen your mood; good odours improve it (Herz, 2009; Kontaris *et al.*, 2020).
- **Hangovers** are known to cause anxious moods (McKinney and Coyle, 2006; Penning *et al.*, 2012).
- Your mood is partly a function of **recent emotional experiences** (Kontaris *et al.*, 2020).
- **Low Blood sugar:** hunger can cause a mood of “tense tiredness” (Gold *et al.*, 1995).

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