Fitting Emotion and the Limits of Attention

**Abstract** We all have more opportunities for fitting emotion than we can take, given our limited attention. What do norms of fitting emotions say about these missed opportunities? In this paper, I argue that all missed opportunities for fitting emotion toward unattended objects have the same status: either they are all unfitting, or none are. I argue, in other words, against *discriminating* fittingness-norms on emotion. The search for a discriminating fittingness-norm has initial appeal; our everyday appraisal of emotion seems best captured by such a norm. But discriminating norms face serious challenges. Some discriminate between objects of emotion by appealing to practical or moral interests. These approaches misleadingly conflate importantly different normative questions. Some others discriminate between objects of emotion by appealing to intensity of merited emotion. This approach undercuts the motivations for a discriminating norm. To the extent that everyday practice suggests a discriminating fittingness-norm, then, everyday practice is misleading.

**Word Count:** 2,992

This is a paper about fitting (or, as I’ll sometimes say, ‘merited’) emotion. The question of whether an emotion is fitting is distinct from the questions of whether the emotion is useful, reflects virtuous character, or is all-things-considered good. A fitting emotion matches its object in a certain way.¹ Take an example: even if all episodes of envy are imprudent or immoral, envy over a rival’s promotion is sometimes fitting, while envy directed toward a piece of paper is (usually) not.

The world provides more opportunities for fitting emotion than a limited individual can take. I could spend the afternoon at a museum feeling aesthetic appreciation of beautiful sculpture, reading the news and feeling indignation about awful governmental policy, or listening to a relative’s recent medical troubles and feeling downcast. Some of these fitting emotions will go unfelt.

In fact, the issue is more severe: it’s sometimes difficult, perhaps impossible, to have all the fitting emotions toward a simple event directly in front of one’s eyes. As Bradley (2015) notes, many objects of fitting emotion are contrastive—they appeal to differences between actual states of affairs and counterfactual ones. Take Bradley’s

¹ For helpful introductions to the notion of fitting emotion, see D’Arms and Jacobson (2000) and Howard (2018). It’s notoriously difficult to define or analyze fittingness, which may account for the recent appeal of a “fittingness-first” approach that takes analyzes other normative notions in terms of fittingness (Chappell 2012, McHugh and Way 2016, Howard 2019)
example of Jim, who dies quickly after being hit by a bus. It's fitting to feel despondent about the fact that Jim died rather than living a long and healthy life and also fitting to feel relief that Jim died rather than living for weeks in agony. We can expand this list simply by considering different counterfactuals: it's fitting to feel relief that Jim, rather than a person who wasn't an organ donor, died, and it's fitting to feel sadness that Jim, rather than a person who had only a day or two left to live, died. The list goes on.\footnote{Maguire (2018) uses a similar example to note the plenitude of fitting emotions toward apparently simple events.}

Even a limited epistemic position on the world, then, offers an enormous plenitude of objects for fitting emotion. We cannot attend to all of these objects, and so are bound to miss out on some fitting emotions. What do norms of fitting emotion say about these missed opportunities?

This paper argues that, on the best approach to fittingness-norms, all missed opportunities for fitting emotion toward unattended objects have the same status. Either all such missed opportunities are unfitting, or none are. My goal, in other words, is to argue against fittingness-norms that discriminate between the accessible objects that merit emotional responses.

In section 1, I'll explain why the search for a discriminating fittingness-norm has some \textit{prima facie} appeal. Then, in section 2, I'll argue against discriminating norms on fitting emotion. Some of these norms unnecessarily blur the distinction between importantly different normative questions. Others undercut the motivation for adopting a discriminating norm in the first place. To the extent that discriminating fittingness-norms seem active in everyday appraisal, then, everyday appraisal is a poor guide to the normative properties of emotion.

**Section 1: A Plurality of Fittingness-Norms for Emotion**

In this section, I'll explain why we need multiple fittingness-norms on emotion. I'll then explain why it might be tempting to think that at least one of those norms is a discriminating one.

We need multiple fittingness-norms on emotion because there are multiple important questions to be asked about the “fit” between one’s emotions and the world. Consider an example: suppose that I feel fear because someone has placed a harmless, but extremely convincing, replica of a deadly snake at the foot of my bed. Is my fear fitting? Well, my fear does not fit the replica \textit{as it really is}; it is, we might say, \textit{objectively} unfitting. But there is clearly at least some sense in which my fear is fitting;
my fear fits its object as presented by my epistemic position. It is, we might say, subjectively fitting.\(^3\)

These different fittingness-norms play importantly different roles. Notably, questions about the reasonableness and criticizability of emotion seem more closely connected to subjective fittingness-norms than to objective ones. Perhaps for this reason, subjective fittingness-norms seem more prevalent in everyday appraisal of absent emotion.\(^4\) Suppose that a joke is being told on the other side of the world, and that you will never hear it. Your lack of amusement about this joke may be unfitting in a certain technical sense. But everyday appraisal would usually not flag this as a failure of fit. Everyday appraisal of absent emotion, then, is usually not concerned with whether a person's emotions fit the entire world, but with whether a person's emotions fit the world given her epistemic constraints.

Now, we are epistemically constrained in more than one way. I've been discussing our non-omniscience--that is, the constraints on the quality and comprehensiveness of our information. But, in the introduction, I gestured toward a different constraint: we all have limited attention. Just as some objects that merit emotion lie wholly outside our epistemic ken, some objects that merit emotion are epistemically accessible to us, but go unattended.\(^5\) How should a subjective fittingness-norm approach our failures to respond to the latter sort of object?

One extreme answer to this question involves a broad norm on fitting emotion: one that is violated any time that a person misses an opportunity for fitting emotion toward an object that is epistemically accessible to her. At the other extreme lies a narrow norm on fitting emotion: one that is only violated by failures to have an emotion that fits an object of one's attention.

Some will be tempted by an approach that lies between these extremes. To see why, note some apparent drawbacks of the broad and the narrow norms. The broad norm, like the objective norm, might seem inadequately sensitive to our epistemic constraints. To see this, return to Bradley's example of Jim, who is hit by a truck and dies. Imagine that someone who sees the accident feels only grief--she pays no

---

\(^3\) This distinction between objective and subjective fittingness is seldom brought up, although many would likely accept it; see Chappell (2012, 689n10) for an endorsement. It may be worth noting that I do not assume, in this argument, that objective and subjective norms of fittingness cannot be analyzed in terms of one another.

\(^4\) Defenders of fittingness-norms for emotion are frequently at pains to argue that allusions to fitting emotion are recognizable in certain strands of everyday thought and talk; see D'Arms and Jacobson (2000, 69-70), who draw on similar observations in Brandt (1946).

\(^5\) There are a wide range of ways that we could make the epistemic-accessibility relation more precise (we could talk, for instance, of the propositions that are believed, or that are propositionally justified for one, or that one is in a position to know) but the differences between these won't matter for present purposes. Any relation that outstrips the bounds of one's attention will pick out an enormous class of objects for fitting emotion, and therefore run the risk of seeming inadequately sensitive to our epistemic constraints.
attention to, and therefore feels nothing about, the many counterfactuals that draw out other emotionally significant features of Jim’s accident. This is an entirely normal way for a person with limited cognitive resources to react to a tragic death. But, according to the broad norm, this reaction is unfitting in an enormous variety of respects. If we want a norm on fitting emotion that is more sensitive to our limits, we might want to look for something more relaxed.\(^6\)

The narrow norm, by contrast, seems too relaxed. Surely, one might think, a person can sometimes have an unfitting reaction to an object in virtue of ignoring one of its significant features. Consider:

**Advika** Advika, driving to work, sees a horrifying car crash while simultaneously listening to the news in her car. Her attention is primarily directed at the podcast, and though she notices that the car crash is happening, she pays no attention to the fact that it is causing suffering. As a result, she does not feel any distress. At the time, she only feels mildly annoyed about the newscaster’s abrasive laugh (which is indeed mildly annoying).

Advika has the fitting emotion toward the only object of her attention. So the narrow norm gives her a pass. But her response to the car crash—which she knows perfectly well is happening, despite her failure to attend to the suffering it causes—seems like a paradigmatic case of unfitting emotion. If we want a norm that notes this failure of fit, the narrow one is not the one for the job.

If we want a norm on fitting emotion that plays a recognizable role in everyday evaluation of emotions, and one that makes concessions to our constraints, we might be inspired to look beyond the broad and narrow norms. We might look, instead, to a discriminating norm—one that is sometimes, but not always, violated by the failure to have a fitting reaction to an object outside the reach of one’s attention.

**2. Against Discriminating Norms**

The search for a discriminating norm on fitting emotion is *prima facie* attractive. But, as I’ll argue in this section, we should not accept any such norm.

---

\(^6\) Objection: just as we have limited capacities for attention, we have limited capacities to feel. Generally, a person can’t feel intense grief while simultaneously feeling modest relief, even if she simultaneously attends to the features that make both emotions fitting. Since even fully-attended features of the world frequently outstrip the constraints on our actual capacities to feel, the search for a norm narrow enough to respect our psychological limits is hopeless. **Response:** this objection presumes that norms on fitting emotion only evaluate occurrent bouts of emotion, not standing emotions that exist while going unfelt. But there is no reason that norms on fitting emotion could not also evaluate standing emotions, which a person can have even though their typical phenomenal profile is temporarily inactive.
I’ll make my case against discriminating norms by considering concrete proposals about how to develop them. Section 2.1 considers proposals that discriminate between objects of attention by appealing to practical or moral interests. Section 2.2 considers a proposal that discriminates between objects of attention by appealing only to the emotions that those objects merit. All of these proposals are ultimately unattractive. The upshot: to the extent that everyday practice appeals to a discriminating fittingness-norm, everyday practice is a poor guide to the normative properties of emotion.

2.1 Interest-Sensitivity for Fitting Emotion

In his Change of View (1986, 55), Gilbert Harman calls attention to a phenomenon structurally similar to the one that interests us: even from a limited agent’s perspective, infinitely many propositions enjoy strong epistemic support. Yet, while some failures to believe well-supported propositions seem epistemically problematic, others seem like benign instances of “clutter avoidance” (1986, 12). In response to this puzzle, Harman proposes that facts about one’s interests help to determine which propositions one ought, and which propositions one ought not, believe.7

Those tempted by this approach to epistemic norms may be tempted by a similar approach to norms of fitting emotion. Perhaps facts about an individual’s interests can help us discriminate between the objects of fitting emotion that demand a response and those that do not. Or perhaps prudential, moral, or all-things-considered normative facts can do that work. The defender of discriminating fittingness-norms might propose a norm, for instance, that demands the fitting response (whatever it might be) to only those objects that would garner attention from a rationally self-interested, or a prudent, or a morally virtuous agent.8

There are two things to be said in favor of this Harman-inspired proposal. First, it explains why Advika’s emotional state is unfitting: the best sort of agent (along any of several normative axes) would attend to the suffering caused by the car crash. Second, it allows for inter-normative influence on fittingness without suggesting that fitting emotion just is prudent, or moral, or all-things-considered good emotion.

7 For helpful discussion of this proposal and its implications, see Friedman (2018). For an alternative approach to this puzzle in epistemology, and one that more closely aligns with the conclusions that I’ll be drawing, see Nelson (2010).

8 We can develop variants on this approach by changing the locus of rational, prudential, or moral evaluation: one available norm, for instance, demands a fitting emotion to an unattended object only when that fitting emotion would constitute a morally good outcome. Another demands a fitting emotion to an unattended object only when the prudentially optimific rules for managing one’s attention would bring attention to that object. All of these approaches face the challenge that I develop in the main text.
Despite these virtues, the Harman-inspired proposal is ultimately unattractive. This proposal makes the property of unfitting emotion into a misleading gerrymander, a grab bag of importantly different sorts of failure. Some people will violate this norm because of a failure in their sensibility—that is, their dispositions to have emotions upon attending to certain objects. But some others will violate it, even though their sensibilities are working perfectly, simply because they have a morally vicious or imprudent pattern of attention. So the question of when an absence of emotion is unfitting, on the Harman-inspired proposal, is not a question about one sort of normative phenomenon, or a family of closely related ones, but about a disjunction of importantly different normative questions.\(^9\)

Now, I want to grant that there may be some entirely respectable normative properties that are sensitive to facts about multiple distinct “flavors” of normativity. Some, for instance, defend an all-things-considered ought that weighs prudential obligations against moral obligations.\(^10\) This is a norm that is sometimes violated through prudential failures, and sometimes violated through moral failures.\(^11\) But there is a significant difference between the all-things-considered ought and a discriminating norm on fitting emotion of the sort we’ve considered. Namely, the all-things-considered ought takes inputs from radically different norms precisely in order to address a pressing, further normative question. According to the defenders of the all-things-considered ought, even after I’ve determined the moral and prudential status of my action, I can ask a further deliberative question: what ought I do all-things considered?

The discriminating norm on fitting emotion we are now considering, by contrast, does not address a further question for the evaluation of emotion. To the contrary, we can do away with its verdicts entirely, and gain communicative power in the bargain, simply by addressing, separately, the multiple questions that it runs together. We can ask, of characters like Advika, whether their emotional states demonstrate a problem with their sensibility. We can then ask whether their emotional states demonstrate a

\(^9\) Objection: doesn’t the broad norm similarly conflate notably different normative phenomena—including both failures of sensibility and failures to attend? Response: it does not. The broad norm is best understood as addressing a simple, unified question: does a person have all the emotional states merited by the objects epistemically accessible to her? There is no similar slogan available to the defender of an interest-sensitive fittingness-norm: such a norm can only be specified by simultaneous allusion to (1) attention-independent facts about the fitting responses to objects and (2) some distinct norm on attention.

\(^10\) For defenses of this approach to the all-things-considered ought, see Thomson (2001, 46) and McPherson (2018). For skepticism, see Tiffany (2007) and Baker (2018).

\(^11\) There are likely other examples as well. Some, for instance, hold that the question of whether a person’s action is morally blameworthy is settled partly by the question of whether her action is morally wrong and partly by the question of whether certain beliefs involved in her action are epistemically blameworthy. Note, that this norm, like the norm of all-things-considered obligation, addresses a pressing further question, and that there is no appeal to paraphrasing that question away by only raising questions about wrongness and epistemic blameworthiness.
moral (or a prudential, or a rational) problem with their patterns of attention. Once we've settled these questions, no further question arises about the evaluative status of their emotions. So precision is lost, and nothing is gained, by this discriminating norm on fitting emotion.

2.2 Discrimination by Fit Alone

The Harman-inspired approach needlessly lumps together failures of notably different kinds. In light of this problem, one might retreat to a norm that discriminates between objects of attention by appealing to facts about fittingness alone.

The best way to develop this approach looks beyond the evaluative status of attention and instead appeals directly to facts about the emotions merited by unattended objects. We can grasp the idea through the metaphor of a threshold: if the fitting emotional response to a given object rises above a certain threshold, the absence of that emotional response is unfitting. Absences of emotions whose intensities lie below the threshold, by contrast, are not.

Defenders of this threshold approach must rank fitting emotions in terms of some gradable property, such that some lie above the threshold and some below. What provides this ranking? Plausibly, not degree of fit—as Maguire (2018, section 4.1) argues, the fittingness of a given response to a given object is not gradable. A more contemptible dictator, for instance, does not make contempt more fitting; he simply makes a greater degree of contempt fitting.

We might do better by saying that the absence of emotion toward an unattended object is unfitting when the intensity of the emotion merited by that object rises above a certain threshold. This seems like a promising way of accounting for the unfittingness of Advika's emotional state; the car crash merits very intense distress, and she lacks it.

A less promising “fittingness-alone” approach says that an absence of emotion toward an (emotion-meriting) object is unfitting whenever attention to that object is fitting. This approach faces at least two serious hurdles. First, it's not clear that attention itself can be fitting or unfitting. (Attention, on the face of it, is a sort of mental action, and there are theories on which the distinction between fitting and unfitting attitudes does not neatly apply to actions.) Second, this approach faces precisely the same problem that I raised in section 2.1; it unhelpfully groups together importantly different sorts of failure. It misleadingly uses the same property to call out failures of sensibility alongside failures of attention, even though we lose nothing (and leave no “further questions” unaddressed) by using separate norms to note these failures.

The full story here will be a bit more complicated. Suppose, for instance, that my epistemic position presents two opportunities for extremely intense merited emotion, but my attention is too limited to take both opportunities. It might seem unattractive, to a defender of a discriminating norm on fitting emotion, to say that my failure to have both of these emotions puts me in violation of the discriminating norm. Those who favor this approach will have to provide a more complicated threshold account, on which fitting emotions are ranked both...
This intensity-based approach, however, is ill-suited to address the concerns that motivate the search for a discriminating norm. To see why, imagine a case:

**Hideous Painting** Benito is walking down a school hallway covered in preschoolers’ paintings. One of them is hideous, and merits nigh-maximally intense aesthetic displeasure. But the painting is also small and not very striking; though Bentio sees it as he passes by, and will be able to remember how it looks later, it does not grab his attention. His attention is instead fixed primarily on the fact that he will have an above-average salad for dinner, a fact to which he responds with fitting, very mild excitement.

The intensity-based norm on fitting emotion calls Benito’s response unfitting. Like Advika, Benito fails to respond to the feature presented by my epistemic position that merits, far and away, the most intense emotional response. But his failure to do so is an entirely predictable result of his having a limited capacity for attention. This is particularly clear in Benito’s case because, unlike Advika, Benito spends his attention in a way that is acceptable by any normative standard. Benito, then, runs afoul of the intensity-based norm simply because he operates impeccably with a limited faculty for attention. This would not be a problem for a broad norm on fitting emotion, which accepts that we are all doomed to many such violations. But it is a problem given the central motivation for a *discriminating* norm: to avoid the result that impeccably-functioning agents are doomed to unfitting reaction.

I’ll bolster this case against the intensity-based norm by drawing a comparison between norms on fitting emotion and norms on epistemic rationality. Our opportunities for well-supported belief, like our opportunities for fitting emotion, are legion. Two people in the very same epistemic position, then, could form entirely rational sets of beliefs about wholly different propositions. But, importantly, the intensity of the resulting beliefs does not make a difference to their epistemic rationality. Consider a case:

**Weather Forecasters** Two weather forecasters, Xavier and Yasmin, are presented with the same body of data. Yasmin makes the hedged, tentative predictions about the next day’s weather that the data make based on their intensity and based on the other emotions with which they compete for limited attention. My argument against the simple approach in the main text applies equally to this more sophisticated version.

---

14 Some, including McHugh (2014), Schroeder (2012, 458-9), and Way (2012, 491-2) treat distinctively epistemic norms as part of the broader family of fittingness-norms; specifically, they identify epistemic norms with fittingness-norms for belief. On that sort of approach, the comparison between epistemic norms and norms on fitting emotion is guaranteed to be a fruitful one in at least some respects. But even if the relationship between fitting emotion and rational belief is not quite so close, it will be instructive to see the oddness of using an intensity-based approach to manage the limits on attention.
rational. Xavier, instead, uses his time to draw much more secure, intensely held conclusions about the font and page numbering used in the data set.

On any of a variety of ways of construing “intensity” for belief, Yasmin fails to direct her attention to the features of her evidence that rationalize the most intense beliefs. But if Wally’s failure to form beliefs about font and page numbering is an epistemically irrational lack of belief, surely Xavier’s failure to form less intense doxastic states is epistemically irrational as well. The lesson: when it comes to missed opportunities for rational belief, the intensity of the missed-out-on belief is neither here nor there. This provides useful precedent for an analogous conclusion about fitting emotion: the intensity of missed opportunities for emotion does not make a difference to whether our responses are unfitting.

Conclusion

This paper made a case against discriminating norms on fitting emotion. I’ll close by mentioning two applications of this conclusion.

First, we should acknowledge that everyday assessment of emotion is a poor guide to its normative significance. It’s likely true that we tend to give some people a pass, but also tend to criticize others, when they fail to respond to unattended objects that merit emotion. But if my argument is on the right track, this everyday criticism is unfortunately unclear, not only as to the character of the shortcoming in play (e.g. prudential, moral, or fit-related), but also as to its object (e.g. the emotion itself, or at the attention that gives rise to it).

Second, this paper provides a useful vantage point for contemporary debates about lost emotion. Several recent papers ask whether it’s unfitting for a person to stop attending to, and thereby lose her emotional response to, some past event. But this question is a special case of the more general puzzle I’ve articulated: what constitutes an unfitting response to a world that gives us more opportunities for fitting emotion than we can manage? A comprehensive answer to this more general question promises to shed light on the issue of attenuated and lost emotion.

15 Some options: perhaps the intensity of a rational belief is the credence, or degree of confidence, with which it is held. Or perhaps the intensity of a rational belief has to do with its tendency to resist revision in light of minor new evidence.

16 See, e.g., Marušić (2015, forthcoming) and Na’aman (forthcoming). Note that these authors are not exclusively interested in cases of lost emotion that involve reduced attention (though that is certainly the paradigm case). This means that, though an adequate answer to the general question I’ve raised here promises to constrain theorizing about fitting loss of emotion, it may not fully settle all questions in the territory.
References


