Affective Injustice and the Game of Emotional Aptness

Abstract: This paper aims to clarify and develop the account of “affective injustice” offered by Amia Srinivasan. Srinivasan’s account hinges on the claim that the value of emotional aptness (i.e., the responsiveness of our emotions to the way the world really is) is not reducible to the value of happiness or subjective well-being. While this claim is plausible, I argue that Srinivasan’s argument for this claim is unsatisfactory, and I propose a novel way to clarify and develop her account. In particular, I argue that we should locate the value of emotional aptness as arising from a normative practice in which participants challenge and affirm the aptness of one another’s emotional responses—a practice that can be compared to a game. After elaborating on my proposal, I consider the ways it can expand and enrich our understanding of affective injustice.

Section One: Introduction

What is the nature of the emotional harms and burdens that arise from injustice? Do these harms and burdens constitute a distinctive form of injustice in their own right? If so, what precisely makes them unjust? These questions are central to the philosophical investigation of “affective injustice”—that is, injustice faced by people specifically in their capacity as affective beings (Archer & Mills 2019: 75).

The philosophical literature on affective injustice is currently in a nascent state, as only a handful of explicit treatments of the topic have been offered to date (Srinivasan 2018, Whitney 2018, Archer & Matheson 2020, Plunkett 2020). In this paper, I aim to clarify and develop the account of affective injustice offered by Amia Srinivasan. In section two, I summarize Srinivasan’s account and argue that it leaves some important questions unanswered. In section three, I propose a novel way to answer these questions and thereby develop
Srivivasan’s account. In section four, I discuss the implications of my proposal for our understanding of affective injustice.

**Section Two: The Value of Aptness**

One source of difficulty surrounding the topic of affective injustice is the lack of clarity regarding the standards by which we should evaluate people’s emotional lives. In order to determine whether a given circumstance has harmed someone in their capacity as an affective being, we first must determine what it might mean for a person’s emotional life to go well or poorly. However, there is no philosophical consensus regarding what it would mean to do well or poorly as an affective being.

One obvious candidate for something that would make our emotional lives go well is happiness, i.e., subjective well-being. From this perspective, it is plausible to think that many instances of affective injustice will involve cases in which individuals and groups are made to experience significant distress or deprived of resources and opportunities that would allow them to maintain their subjective well-being. Yet it also seems that subjective well-being is not the only important thing that contributes to our emotional lives going well. If so, then it is not the only factor that we should consider when investigating affective injustice.

The limitations of subjective well-being are illustrated most clearly when we imagine cases in which a person is made to be happy in what seems to be an illegitimate manner, such as by being plugged into the “experience machine” imagined by Robert Nozick (1974) or by taking “soma,” the fictional happiness pill described by Aldous Huxley (1932/1998) in the dystopian novel *Brave New World*. One affective good that seems to be lost in such cases is *emotional aptness*, i.e., the fit or harmonious correspondence between evaluative properties in the world and one’s emotional response to those properties. These fictional examples dramatize the idea...
that it is bad for us as affective beings for our emotional responses to lose touch with the world as it is.

Srinivasan’s account of affective injustice begins by affirming the value of emotional aptness in contradistinction to the value of happiness. The account focuses on cases in which members of oppressed social groups are compelled to suppress their anger, even when this anger is warranted. Srinivasan’s central example is the anger felt by black people in response to instances of structural and interpersonal racism. Srinivasan argues that when such anger is expressed in interpersonal interactions or political protests, it can sometimes result in “making the angry person worse off, and indeed exacerbating the very situation at which she is angry,” or even “invite further violence and retrenchment” (131). However, despite being imprudent in these ways, such anger is apt when it is properly targeted (toward a “genuine normative violation”), motivated (e.g., by a concern for justice rather than revenge), and proportional (relative to the gravity of the violation) (127-130). The result, Srinivasan says, is a double-bind in which “victims of oppression must choose between getting aptly angry or acting prudentially”—a double-bind which constitutes “a form of unrecognised injustice, what I call affective injustice” (127).

Srinivasan says that although being compelled to navigate such double-binds is “a sort of psychic tax that is often levied on victims of oppression,” nevertheless “the wrongness of affective injustice does not lie primarily in the fact that it makes its victims feel bad” (136). Instead, Srinivasan suggests that the wrongness of this kind of circumstance “lies rather in the

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1 Read Archer & Mills 2019 for a discussion and development of Srinivasan’s claim that this double-bind constitutes a “psychic tax.” The authors examine four primary strategies of emotional regulation, including situation management, attentional deployment, cognitive reappraisal, and response modulation (Gross 1998). They argue that in the context of the kind of double-bind described by Srinivasan, each strategy may cause harm to the person adopting it by causing deprivations of physical well-being and subjective well-being, as well as undermining one’s capacity to ensure the aptness of their emotional responses.
fact that it forces people, through no fault of their own, into profoundly difficult normative conflicts—an invidious choice between improving one’s lot and justified rage” (136). The claim here, as I understand it, is that emotional aptness is a fundamental affective good—i.e., that aptness is an essential element of a thriving, excellent, or admirable emotional life, and that the value of aptness in this regard cannot be reduced to the value of happiness. In support of this claim, Srinivasan argues that responding emotionally to the evaluative properties we encounter (e.g., the offensiveness of an injustice or the beauty of a work of art), rather than registering these evaluative properties in a merely intellectual way, is necessary to our ability to “appreciate” their significance or meaning (132).

This view is plausible, as far as it goes. But we might press further and ask why it is good, with respect to the normative evaluation of our emotional lives, that we are able to appreciate the significance of the evaluative properties we encounter. In particular, does the value of emotional aptness, and the value capacity to appreciate the meaning of the evaluative properties in the world, depend on whether a person cares about aptness and appreciation? For example, we might imagine a person who says that they only want to be happy and do not particularly care about the aptness of their emotions, and that they would not be distressed to learn that they have failed to appreciate the meaning of many of the things they encounter. On what grounds might we insist that it is bad for such a person, in their capacity as an affective being, that their emotions are inapt and that they are failing to appreciate the meaning of things?

Srinivasan’s work provides no clear answer to this question. With this in mind, I offer my own suggestions regarding how to develop this line of thought.

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2 For an extended defense of the view that emotions are necessary for our capacity to appreciate the meaning or significance of things, read Furtak 2018.
Section Three: The Game of Emotional Aptness

The approach I suggest begins by positing the existence of a telos, function, or purpose of emotions. If emotions have a telos, function, or purpose, then we can identify a kind of normativity that is inherent to emotions themselves, derived from what Plunkett (2020: fn11) calls “the constitutive standards that govern the attitude in question.” In particular, I suggest that emotions can be seen as similar to beliefs, insofar as aiming to be properly responsive to the world is inherent to their very nature. In other words, we might say that it is good for emotions to be aptly responsive to the evaluative properties we encounter because that is what emotions are for.

Pressing further, we might ask: What grounds the value of adhering to the constitutive standards of emotions? To answer this question we can shift our focus to the normative practice that arises from and interacts with those constitutive standards—namely, the normative practice of emotional aptness, in which we give and ask for reasons to respond emotionally to things in certain ways. Here Srinivasan’s (2018: 132) comparison between the emotional appreciation of evaluative properties and the aesthetic appreciation of works of art is instructive. In the normative practice of art appreciation—a practice that can be considered as a kind of “game” (Nguyen 2019)—participants in this practice (artists, art lovers, art dealers,

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3 For a discussion of the claim that emotional responses can be normatively evaluated in light of their constitutive aims or teloi, read Gallegos 2020.
4 Describing the role of emotions in our capacity for appreciating the significance of evaluative property, Srinivasan (2018: 132) says the following: “I want to suggest that getting angry is a means of affectively registering or appreciating the injustice of the world, and that our capacity to get aptly angry is best compared with our capacity for aesthetic appreciation. Just as appreciating the beautiful or the sublime has a value distinct from the value of knowing that something is beautiful or sublime, there might well be a value to appreciating the injustice of the world through one’s apt anger—a value that is distinct from that of simply knowing that the world is unjust.”
and so on) are obligated or directed as participants to respond appropriately to the aesthetic properties of works of art. In other words, in the “game” of art appreciation, participants do well when they respond appropriately to artworks. On the basis of this basic goal or purpose of the practice, a rich panoply of sub-practices arise to facilitate the mutual correction of participants’ responses to artworks and the collaborative discovery of aesthetic properties.

Analogously, then, in the normative practice or “game” of emotional aptness, participants are obligated or directed to respond emotionally to evaluative properties in an apt manner and so, in pursuit of this aim, create and participate in various sub-practices that facilitate the mutual correction of participants’ emotional responses and the collaborative discovery of evaluative properties. We see just such a practice in nearly every part of everyday life, in parents’ and teachers’ efforts to help children and students direct their emotions more aptly, in conversations among friends, romantic partners, and work colleagues about what emotional response is justified in a given circumstance, in debates among political commentators and cultural critics about the meaning or significance of current events or cultural products, and so on.

Understanding the value of emotional aptness as being internal to such a normative practice enables us to avoid construing the value of emotional aptness as dependent on what a person desires or cares about. In this way, it avoids the conclusion that emotional aptness is merely instrumentally good for those whose subjective well-being depends on believing that their emotional responses are apt. It avoids this conclusion by locating the value of emotional aptness within the parameters of a practice or game, and in particular, a practice or game that one may participate in even if one does not desire to do so or care about doing so. Consider that if a person does not desire to play a game, or if they do not value a normative practice, this does not mean that they are exempt from the rules of the game, nor that they cannot be evaluated
with reference to the standards that are inherent to the normative practice. For example, a basketball team could not legitimately claim they did not really “lose” the match because they stopped wanting to play and instead took up singing halfway through the game. From the perspective of participants in the normative practice of basketball, by singing instead of dribbling and shooting, the players were still playing basketball; they were simply playing exceptionally badly. Likewise, some would argue that a person who does not care about the normative practice of morality can still be properly evaluated as immoral. Analogously, then, a person who claims to not care whether their emotions are apt could still be considered to be missing out on a fundamental affective good.

This comparison between the normative practice of emotional aptness and the game of basketball raises questions about how we might describe the procedures for entering into or exiting the normative practice of emotional aptness. After all, a basketball team could only claim victory against opponents that had successfully entered into competition with them, and while a team would not become exempt from the rules just because they’ve lost interest in the game, there are procedures for legitimately suspending play in various circumstances. When we examine how a person becomes inducted into the normative practice of emotional aptness and designated as a legitimate participant, we see that such induction typically happens gradually as a normal and indispensable part of the affective education of children, and that this education often occurs by treating children as if they were already legitimate participants in the practice and subject to challenges regarding the warrant of their emotional responses. With regard to “exit conditions” of this practice—i.e., how a person might make it the case that they are no longer subject to having their emotional responses evaluated in terms whether the responses are warranted—Strawson’s (1974) work suggests that such an exit would involve a radical change in one’s relationship with others. In particular, a person exiting this practice
might involve other people no longer taking up a “participant attitude” toward them by responding to their emotional responses as deriving from reasons; instead, others would adopt an “objective attitude” toward them by construing their emotions as basically irrational, so that the central concern becomes managing and controlling the person’s behavior. However, I suspect that more fine-grained conditions for partial or temporary exits from the practice of emotional aptness are often arranged, in which we acknowledge that a person’s emotional state is too burdened or fragile to be entirely reason-responsive.

It is clear that many of us care about and value our participation in this practice and so would suffer severe deprivations to our subjective well-being if we were unable to participate in it, either as a result of our own incapacitation or because others refused to engage with us as legitimate participants. At the same time, we can think of many cases in which exiting this practice and no longer being expected to maintain a rational warrant for our emotional states may contribute positively to one’s subjective well-being. In either case, however, it is important in the context of this discussion that the ultimate value of emotional aptness does not lie in whether aptness contributes to our subjective well-being. Instead, according to the view I am proposing, the value of emotional aptness is internal to the normative practice of emotional aptness and grounded on the constitutive standards of emotions themselves, derived from the telos, purpose, or function of emotions to respond appropriately to the world. From this perspective, emotional aptness is a value that is truly native to the affective domain. Appreciating this point may help to motivate the philosophical analysis of affective injustice. While many of the injustices related to the value of subjective well-being described in the previous section are commonly included in standard accounts of injustice and autonomy rights, we can expect that there will be a distinctive role for the analysis of affective injustice—which focuses on the ways that our emotional lives can go well or poorly—to discern the moral
urgency of deprivations related to people’s participation in the normative practice of emotional
aptness, which may have negative effects on a person’s emotional life that cannot be reduced to
deprivations of subjective well-being.

Section Five: Implications for Affective Injustice

If it is true that emotional aptness is a fundamental affective good (i.e., that the value of
this affective good is not reducible to the value of subjective well-being), and that the good of
emotional aptness depends on and arises in the context of participation in normative practices
that facilitate the mutual correction of emotional responses and the collaborative discovery of
evaluative properties, then it may be possible to begin identifying relevant subsidiary goods to
which one might have a legitimate claim, or which might be distributed to members of a society
in a just or unjust manner. Using the same basic categories used in the previous section to
identify subsidiary goods related to the fundamental affective good of subjective well-being, we
can identify the following subsidiary goods that may be necessary for the provision of the
fundamental affective good of emotional aptness:

- **Affective freedoms**, such as freedom from interference in one’s apt emotional responses
  and in one’s participation in the normative practices that facilitate emotional aptness.

- **Affective resources and opportunities**, such as materials, activities, and circumstances that
  contribute positively to the aptness of one’s emotional responses, including education
  and hermeneutical resources that help one to hone one’s emotional responses, and
  adequate exposure to sufficiently rich, complex, and scaffolded environments that
  support the development of relevant skills.

- **Affective recognition**, such as being respectfully considered and responded to as a
  legitimate participant in the normative practice of emotional aptness, and consideration
of, and responsiveness to, one’s particular needs with regard to the pursuit of emotional aptness.

With this in mind, considerations of affective injustice would arise regarding conditions in which a person or social group is unduly subjected to such things as: negative practical consequences or social sanctions for apt emotional responses, which might give rise to a severely suppressed or inhibited emotional life, either in general or with regard to specific kinds of emotions, such as anger; circumstances that contribute to an emotional life that is impoverished or to a general affective numbing or desensitization to certain evaluative properties, either persistently or for significant or frequent periods of time in which an inflexible mood or a preoccupation with the past or future reduces the range of evaluative properties in the present situation to which one is aptly responsive; circumstances that give rise to trauma, hypersensitivity, or other affective states and conditions that contribute to inapt emotional responses, such as by lashing out at, or getting overly attached to, inappropriate objects; having one’s emotional responses misdirected as a result of the influence of an ideology, worldview, or a mistaken understanding of or misguided outlook on particular topics; circumstances that contribute to being unable or unwilling to participate fully in processes of affective education, the correction of one’s emotional responses, and the discovery of evaluative properties; and having one’s apt emotional responses inappropriately claimed or used by others to inflate their relative standing.

Thus, the picture of affective injustice that emerges from my proposed account of the value of emotional aptness goes far beyond the kinds of cases described by Srinivasan. It is my hope that this more developed picture can guide further research into this important topic.

References


