

SHADOWS OF THE SOUL

PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

Edited by

Christine Tappolet, Fabrice Teroni and
Anita Konzelmann Ziv



Shadows of the Soul

This volume brings together fourteen highly accessible chapters on negative emotions, written by established experts in the philosophy of emotions for a non-specialized audience. Topics covered range from general questions, such as the nature of valence and the role of negative emotions in fiction, to the study of specific emotions, such as disgust, grief, anxiety, shame, contempt, hatred and jealousy.

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Negative Emotions

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Les Ombres de l'Âme: Penser les Émotions Négatives

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This volume is published in honor of Professor Kevin Mulligan and commemorates his dedication to his students during his time at the University of Geneva. The choice of topic mirrors both Kevin's interest in emotions and his ability to open up new lines of research. We hope that exploring the shadows of the soul will make for an enjoyable, or at least interestingly mixed, experience.



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Introduction

*Christine Tappolet, Fabrice Teroni
and Anita Konzelmann Ziv*

The emotions we feel color many of our thoughts and actions, often in rather dark shades. We have at our disposal a rich lexicon of negative emotions, such as disgust, sadness, fear, shame, guilt, regret, remorse, resentment, despair, indignation, scorn, contempt, jealousy, hatred, anger, etc. In fact, we are more prone to draw fine distinctions among negative emotions than among positive emotions. While it would certainly strain things too far to say with the French philosopher Alain that “we are built such that all our emotions are sorrows” (1934, 12), many of our everyday discussions turn around negative emotions, aiming at a better understanding of their causes and moderation of their sometimes devastating consequences.

This is not to say that we harbor univocal attitudes towards negative emotions; we do not always undergo them reluctantly, for instance. Not only do we think that some situations or objects merit negative emotions, but we also actively pursue them—the aim of many recreational and artistic activities is to elicit fear, and we sometimes enjoy undergoing emotions such as anger and disgust. So, even if we try to get rid of some negative emotions, we certainly do not aim at a purely positive affective life, a life whose interest and coherence can itself be questioned. Indeed, the interest and depth of episodes of satisfaction and joy often appear to be significantly enhanced by the negative emotions to which we are prone. Moreover, is it not difficult, perhaps even incoherent, to attribute the sorts of attachments to values (justice, generosity, friendship), persons and institutions that prove so central in our self-conception to an individual deprived of negative affect? What would remain of a sense of justice in an individual who lacks the disposition to be outraged when confronted with a blatant injustice?

Despite their importance and the complexity of our attitudes towards them, negative emotions have rarely been a topic of study in their own right. Part of the explanation for why is found in the dramatic rehabilitation of emotions that has taken place in the recent philosophical literature. The traditional suspicion with which emotions, positive and negative, were regarded is nicely expressed by Immanuel Kant, according to whom “the principle of apathy—namely, that the wise man must never be in a state of affect . . . is an entirely correct and sublime moral principle of the Stoic school; for affect makes us

more or less blind" (2006, 142). Prominent among the traditional charges against the emotions is the idea that they threaten the exercise of our reasoning capacities and foster a variety of vices. Many contributions in this volume contain critical echoes of this traditional outlook. However, this outlook has been progressively replaced by a near-consensus regarding the indispensable roles played by emotions in relation to the ability to make decisions, the gathering of evaluative knowledge and the ability to conduct moral reasoning.¹ For instance, as Ronald de Sousa hypothesized, emotions such as fear or anger are plausibly seen as having the crucial function to focus the agent's attention on what matters. Thus, it would be thanks to our fear that we avoid the sad destiny of the robot that sat on a bomb, spending time considering the effects of its options, including whether the price of tea might increase, instead of simply saving its skin.² Given that many negative emotions may seem more difficult to rehabilitate in a similar way, they have been somewhat neglected within this scholarly trend. Many of the contributions to this volume argue that this is a mistake and that negative emotions have the potential to contribute positively to our lives.

More generally, the exploration of negative emotions raises several fundamental issues. Obviously, it presupposes a grasp of the way we distinguish negative and positive emotions. This distinction between negative and positive emotions may well be the central distinction governing our apprehension of the affective domain. Within the contemporary literature, scholars attempt to develop accounts of what they describe as the "valence" or "polarity" of affective states, often emphasizing this central distinction and the various reasons for which we may speak of positive or negative emotions. The papers by Fabrice Teroni and Christine Tappolet, which open this volume, concentrate on these fundamental theoretical issues raised by the very idea of affective valence.

In *Emotionally Charged: The Puzzle of Affective Valence*, Teroni's aim is to understand what it is that makes certain emotions positive and others negative. To that end, he insists that valence is supposed to be a fundamental contrastive property of emotions, which should not be explainable in terms of other properties that they have. Teroni uses this constraint to criticize accounts of valence that appeal to desires—e.g., the idea that negative emotions are those emotions that frustrate the subject's desires—and hedonic states—e.g., the idea that negative emotions are those that contain an irreducible, unpleasant phenomenal quality. According to him, the explanatory power of these accounts is illusory, since the relevant desires need to be explained by hedonic states, and hedonic states are in turn partly composed of emotions. For that reason, trying to explain affective valence by means of desires and hedonic states is to go around in circles. This conclusion leads Teroni to explore an alternative, evaluative explanation of valence and to give some reasons favoring a specific evaluative account that emphasizes the role of emotional attitudes. In this context, he raises doubts regarding the possibility of explaining valence in terms of what the emotions represent, and favors an approach

centered around the bodily dimension of emotional experience. Emotions are embodied attitudes, and this is key to understanding their valence, according to Teroni.

Nasty Emotions and the Perception of Values, by Tappolet, starts with the observation that, in some contemporary discussions, the emotions of regret and shame have been rehabilitated alongside emotions like compassion. However, she points out that other negative emotions, such as jealousy, envy or hatred, do not easily lend themselves to similar reappraisals; they appear intrinsically nasty. Tappolet's discussion explores the impact of nasty emotions on one view that she herself favors and that underlies many attempts at rehabilitating the emotions: the view according to which an emotion is a kind of perceptual experience, one which allows us to apprehend the values of things, such as their fearsomeness or admirableness. Tappolet distinguishes several sorts of affective faults of which emotions may be guilty, and explores whether these faults threaten the view that emotions are perception-like experiences. According to her, they do not. As opposed to perceptual experiences, emotions may sometimes be irrational, painful and immoral, but this is to be expected in light of their distinctive characteristics. They are not entirely passive and their concern with values means that they can be intrinsically painful or pleasant as well as morally relevant. The take-home lesson is a sane reminder that the rehabilitation of emotions cannot be wholesale. Emotions are liable to be afflicted by all sorts of faults.

The utter ugliness of some of our emotional reactions raises worries in itself. One can wonder whether we would not be better off without any negative emotions whatsoever. Do negative emotions have a function, however? This is what Anne Reboul discusses in *Imaginative Resistance: Negative Emotions, Values and Fiction*, where she explores the fact that, despite appearances to the contrary, there are limits to what we can imagine. These limits relate to an asymmetry between two kinds of contents, as David Hume emphasized: factual contents and evaluative contents. We can easily imagine factual contents that contradict our beliefs (e.g., suppose that the Earth is flat), but have a much harder time imagining evaluative contents that contradict our convictions (e.g., suppose that killing girls at birth is a good thing). How should we understand this imaginative resistance? What does it reveal about imagination and emotions? These are crucial issues given the widespread and plausible idea that fiction influences our perception of values and our evaluative judgments, for good or for bad. Reboul argues that imaginative resistance does not simply manifest the refusal to imagine; it manifests the inability to imagine evaluative contents that contradict our beliefs, an inability she goes on to explain by the negative emotions that such contents trigger. In imaginative resistance, negative emotions make it impossible to endorse some evaluative thoughts, thereby proving crucial for the delineation of our ethical outlook. In addition, Reboul explains how fiction can refine our emotional sensitivity by making us react differently to subtly different scenarios. The result is a rich picture of the interplay between fiction and emotion, where fiction not only triggers the