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# Being moved

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**Abstract** In this paper, we argue that, barring a few important exceptions, the phenomenon we refer to using the expression “being moved” is a distinct type of emotion. In this paper’s first section, we motivate this hypothesis by reflecting on our linguistic use of this expression. In section two, pursuing a methodology that is both conceptual and empirical, we try to show that the phenomenon satisfies the five most commonly used criteria in philosophy and psychology for thinking that some affective episode is a distinct emotion. Indeed, being moved, we claim, is the experience of a *positive core value* (particular object) perceived by the moved subject as *standing out* (formal object) in the circumstances triggering the emotion. Drawing on numerous examples, we describe the distinctively rich phenomenology characteristic of the experience as well as the far-reaching action-tendencies and functions associated with it. Having thus shown that the candidate emotion seem to satisfy the five criteria, we go on, in section three, to compare it with sadness and joy, arguing that it should not be confused with either. Finally, in section four, we illustrate the explanatory power of our account of “being moved” by showing how it can shed light on, and maybe even justify, the widespread distrust we feel towards the exhibition of ‘sentimentality’. On the whole and if we are right, we have uncovered an emotion which, though never or rarely talked about, is of great interest and no small importance.

**Keywords** Being moved · Emotions · Sentimentality · Values

## 1 Introduction

We often say of things (sights, scenes, events, or even works of art) that they “move us”. In this paper, we try to describe the affective phenomenon that we refer to

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when we use this expression. With a few exceptions,<sup>1</sup> there has been a conspicuous lack of interest in this subject on the part of philosophers and psychologists. This is perhaps because it *prima facie* seems as though no interesting generalisation can be made regarding the different uses of this expression. We might suppose, for instance, that when we say of something that it moves us, we are simply underscoring the fact that we are experiencing some emotion more or less intensely. This could be understood, in accord with the primary sense of the verb “move”, as referring to how an event arouses some inchoate, indeterminate bodily sensations. Or, alternatively, it could refer to an event arousing quite determinate emotional affections that we do not bother to specify or that we have difficulty specifying.<sup>2</sup> If that is the case, absence of interest in this particular expression and the phenomena that it covers is not surprising: “being moved” neither refers to a particular emotion nor does it cover any unified class of affective phenomena worthy of separate study.

If we take a closer look, however, these suggestions start to seem less plausible. Although the phenomenon being referred to is likely to involve some intensity of feeling or bodily disturbance, we do not use the expression “being moved” to refer indifferently to any and all forms of affective reaction. Saying one is moved rarely, if ever, simply serves to report that one is having an emotional experience. For instance, it would be very unusual to refer to experiences of anger, disgust, fear, jealousy, shame (on the negative side) or amusement and hope (on the positive side) by saying that one is moved (though it happens of course that a given situation or object triggers both the experience of “being moved” and one or more of these emotions).

These linguistic observations lend support to the idea that the expression “being moved” denotes a specific affective phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> However, there are several options regarding the nature of this specific phenomenon. First, even if it does not apply to all and every possible emotion, “being moved” could still express a cluster concept grouping very different affective phenomena,<sup>4</sup> possibly sharing similar

<sup>1</sup> A notable one is the Swiss psychologist Claparède whose study of “pure emotions” (Claparède 1930) is precisely on this topic. In this rich article, Claparède argues that although pure emotions constitute distinct phenomena, they are ultimately “disturbances” that allow “no adjustment of the individual to the circumstances that move him”. Although we reject this claim in the following, we highly recommend the article as well as an earlier one that helps understand it (Claparède 1928). Another, more recent, exception is Konecni (2005), who claims that “being moved” is a “very distinctive subjective state” but discusses it mainly from an aesthetic perspective.

<sup>2</sup> This is what certain dictionaries seem to suggest. For example, the MacMillan Online Dictionary defines “moving” as “making you feel emotional”, the Collins English Dictionary defines the same word as “arousing or touching the emotions” and, according to the Wiktionary, a moving thing is one “that causes someone to feel emotion”.

<sup>3</sup> This claim and the further developments that follow will obviously be more plausible if they apply also to the corresponding expressions in other languages (e.g. “je suis ému”, “sono commosso”, “Ich bin gerührt”, “ik ben ontroerd”, “Estoy conmovido”, etc.). Intuitions of native speakers of these languages that we have consulted as well as linguistic suggestions made by an anonymous referee make us quite optimistic in this regard.

<sup>4</sup> This is what is suggested by other dictionaries, such as the Webster, Collins, or Oxford English dictionaries, that define the words “move” or “moving” as “stirring the passions or affections (usually tender)”, or “having an effect on your emotions and causing you to feel sadness or sympathy for another person”. In each case, the range of emotions is reduced by specifying a shared property (e.g. being tender) or by specifying a set of possible emotions (e.g. sadness and sympathy).

features, perhaps the physiological responses with which they are associated together with the way these are felt. A second and stronger thesis, however, would have it that we are here dealing with a distinct and unified emotion that deserves a place alongside the others that we mentioned (e.g. shame, anger, fear).

In this paper, we propose to investigate the nature of the experience of “being moved” and to argue for a combination of these two solutions. More specifically, we argue that, although the expression “being moved” is occasionally used to refer to distinct affective phenomena that are related to each other only by phenomenological and physiological commonalities, it is prototypically used to refer to a single distinct emotion that has currently no description or label more appropriate than that of “being moved”.

## 2 Being moved

How can we argue for the idea that “being moved” is the name of a distinct emotion? What are the reasons to think that an expression relating to affective phenomena constitutes the name of a specific type of emotion? Philosophers and psychologists alike tend to think that fulfilling the following five criteria constitutes a good indication that we are dealing with a distinct emotion: all of its instances (i) are intentional states directed at objects, (ii) have the same formal object (or core relational theme), (iii) share the same distinct phenomenology, (iv) are associated with the same type of action tendencies and (v) serve the same general function.<sup>5</sup>

Now whether or not “being moved” satisfies the five criteria—all of which will be explained in due course—is a question that might either be answered from the armchair by the philosopher or by investigating empirically how people use the term. Our approach in this paper exploits both avenues: conceptual and phenomenological explorations conducted from the armchair will be kept in check by empirical examination of how people use the expression.<sup>6</sup>

### 2.1 Particular objects and formal object

The first criterion is concerned with what philosophers call the *intentionality* of mental states. Emotions, like most (or all) mental states, are intentional states:

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<sup>5</sup> For a defense of these criteria, see Deonna and Scherer (2010).

<sup>6</sup> We rely on the results of an internet-based survey we ran on English-speaking participants living in the US and recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (<https://www.mturk.com/>). 100 participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 28.2$ ;  $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.7$ ; 60 were men and 39 were women, 1 did not declare his or her gender) were recruited and asked to remember and describe an event in which they were “particularly moved”. After doing so, they were asked several questions about (i) the event itself (was it negative? positive?), (ii) the physical sensations they experienced, (iii) what it “made them feel like doing”, and (iv) how pleasurable this affective experience was. A final question tested the potential pro-social action tendencies of “being moved”: participants were told that one of them would be chosen at random to receive a special prize of \$10, but that they could decide to transfer part of this amount to UNICEF, and that they should tell us how much they were willing to part with in case they were the lucky participant. Throughout the paper, we describe and use their answers to reach a better understanding of the phenomenon of “being moved”. A full description of the method and results obtained can be found in Cova et al. (in preparation).

they are directed at, or about, certain particular objects (events, states, processes, etc.). This seems to be clearly true of being moved. We are moved by something, even if the object of our emotion is often difficult to determine. But what are we moved by? And what do the particular objects that move us have in common?

This question leads us to immediately introduce the second criterion, likely the most important, that relates to what philosophers call the *formal object* (or *core relational theme*) of an emotion.<sup>7</sup> Different instances of an emotion-type will have different *particular* objects (e.g. I may be angry at a colleague, and angry at the government), but the *formal* object will remain the same (e.g. if I am angry, I experience both the colleague and the government as offensive). My various episodes of fear, sadness, guilt, and so on, will be directed at and take as objects a rich variety of things, but I will always see as dangerous what I fear, see as a loss what I am sad about, and see as a wrongful act what I feel guilt about. It is an essential feature of each emotion-type that we construe the particular object of the emotion in a way that is specific to that emotion-type. In addition to the fact that it sheds light on the nature of an emotion-type, the formal object of an emotion also constitutes a feature in virtue of which it is possible to evaluate the intelligibility and the appropriateness of an emotion. For instance, we would say of an instance of fear that is directed at something that seems quite harmless and innocuous that it is unintelligible or inappropriate.

This raises the question: is there a formal object specific to being moved? That is to say, do the many varying particular objects that move us share a general feature that is always salient for the subject who is moved? Is stating that something is moving saying something specific about it? Only if we answer this question affirmatively can we say with confidence that “being moved” refers to something that amounts to an emotion in its own right.

Let us proceed inductively and see if we can find something similar to all the particular objects that move us. What are the different types of objects that move us? Clearly, different individuals are moved by different things, just as different individuals are frightened by different things. However, we can make a start by recalling things which, in the right context, will move many of us: an unexpectedly kind gesture, a reconciliation between two estranged old friends, a long hoped for victory, a hopeful sign of the end of hostilities, the freedom fighter finally liberated from prison, an impossible love, the last words of a dying mother to her children, the sacrifice of a soldier, Christ on the cross, etc. Is there something common to all these cases, something which would qualify as the formal object of “being moved”?

It does indeed seem possible to identify such a formal object. A common feature of the cases iterated above is *the presence of the positive in the negative*. Indeed, all the cases listed satisfy this description, and mix both positive and negative values:

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed study of the various objects of the emotions, see de Sousa (1987, Chap. 5). For the role of *formal objects* in philosophical theories of the emotions and their relation to values in particular, see Teroni (2007). For the similar notion of a *core relational theme* in psychology, see Lazarus (1991, Chap. 3).

the first five cases can be read as the end of and the solution to adverse situations (the victory of the positive over the negative), while the last four are manifestations of virtues and positive dispositions (love, friendship, courage) in trying times (the resistance of the positive to the negative). However, a mere blend of positive and negative values is obviously not enough to move us: we wouldn't be moved by hearing on the news that a virtuous man with a loving family was suddenly tortured and murdered by a homicidal maniac. This is true although this story blends positive and negative values. In fact, pure destruction of the positive is not only *not* moving, it is the opposite, namely, heart-sinking.

In fact, what stands out in our examples is the *emergence* of positive values from negative values. We are moved by events or scenes that present cases in which positive values—solidarity, courage, kindness, health, fraternity, love, life itself—are manifested *in* and *despite* circumstances that are unfavourable to their emergence, that is, in cases in which these values are not only present but also succeed in *making a stand*, rather than, say, being ruined or swept away. The soldier's sacrifice moves us—if it is not pointless or misguided—because it manifests the full measure of his devotion to a higher ideal, like protecting the lives and wellbeing of the innocent, or simply because it manifests exceptional bravery. The reconciliation of old estranged friends constitutes a victory of friendship over petty quarrelling, while the solemn or reassuring words of the dying mother to her children seems to affirm the indomitable nature of a mother's protective love beyond and despite death.

These few examples encourage the thought that the phenomenon of being moved does have a formal object: the emotion consists in sensitivity to the fact that certain important positive values manage to emerge from the midst of, and vanquish (or resist, at least temporarily), negative values. It is in terms of construing scenes or events as exemplifying this contrast that the emotion seems intelligible to us.<sup>8</sup>

However, there is a reason to resist this hypothesis: we are also and often moved by the presence of positive values without there being any background of negative values at all. Some life defining events, say marriages and births, but also certain scenes—perhaps the simple sight of a mother suckling her young, or the contemplation of a flag that is being hoisted aloft—do certainly move some of us. In fact, when asked to remember occasions by which they were moved, most of our participants reported seemingly purely positive events, such as surprise parties, love declarations, weddings, births, but also achievements such as winning a sporting competition or graduating.<sup>9</sup> These cases seem hard to reconcile with the

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<sup>8</sup> For an articulation of this hypothesis, see Deonna (2011).

<sup>9</sup> Of over 100 participants, 11 mentioned a birth (or nurturing a child for the first time) as a moving episode, 5 reported a declaration of love and 2 a wedding, while 9 reported being moved by an (academic or sporting) achievement, whether their own or someone else's. Overall, births were the kind of event most frequently reported. When we replicated this experiment in French with a younger population, 100 psychology students from the University of Geneva, we found that the most frequently reported events were academic and sporting achievements (11), closely followed by surprise reunions organized by family and/or friends (10).

idea that we are moved only by instances in which positive values take precedence over negative values.

A possible reaction to these cases is to reinterpret them so as to make them fit into the ‘positive in negative’ template. Though examples such as the birth of a child, the mother suckling her young, and the flag being hoisted aloft may seem entirely positive events and thus not compatible with our initial template, there are plausible ways of making them so. The birth of a child, we may say, would not move us if the process leading to it were effortless and painless. The patriotic sentiment that takes hold of (some of) us as the flag is unfurled would not occur, some may argue, without reflecting on the cost in lives and hardship of bringing into being and maintaining a unified sense of community, as well as the prosperity and values, that the banner symbolizes. And if we feel neither wonderment (a sense of the magical) nor mere tenderness (seeing something as endearing), but actually feel moved at the sight of the mother suckling her young, it is precisely because it incarnates a natural order, life seen as moving steadily through its cycles yet also manifestly fragile. Isn’t it against the backdrop of this fragility, the fleeting remoteness of the usual strains and struggles, that the scene becomes moving rather than endearing, magical or kitsch?

Now, whatever we think of these readings of the relevant cases—certainly plausible on some occasions—it seems wrong to think that the descriptions offered are always those that *explain* why we are being moved in such cases. Indeed, showing that there is some negativity to be perceived in such cases is not enough: one must also claim that it is *because* people perceive this negative background that they are moved, and so predict that the intensity with which they are moved is correlated with the extent to which they perceive the scene as having a negative background. When applied to cases such as surprise parties in one’s honour, birth or weddings, this hypothesis is implausible. Do people moved to tears by surprise reunions in their honour really have in mind that life is a trying journey? Is it the case that only those who take it that “it is a jungle out there” and that life is hard are likely to shed tears at the birth of a child? Or that the people who cry at weddings all have in mind the trials of love and the high rate of divorce? Any attempt at painting the background of such events in black can only be a courageous but wrongheaded attempt to save our initial hypothesis.<sup>10</sup>

Once it is acknowledged that an adequate account of “being moved” should integrate the possibility that people are moved by episodes they perceive as purely positive (and that such cases might in fact be more central and paradigmatic than the “mixed” cases), we must seek what these purely positive

<sup>10</sup> Additional reasons to reject this hypothesis come from our data. After remembering and writing down an occasion in which they were moved, participants were asked to respond ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the two following questions: “Was the thing or event that moved you partly or totally positive?” and “Was the thing or event that moved you partly or totally negative?”. Results in Table 1 show that a majority of participants perceived moving events to be purely positive, suggesting that, *even if* all moving situations can be interpreted as involving both positive and negative elements, no negative elements need be perceived for a situation to be experienced as moving. More on the role of the negative later.

**Table 1** Distribution of participants' answers for questions about the presence of positive and negative elements

	Positive	Not positive
Negative	19	17
Not negative	61	3

cases and the “mixed” ones have in common. Our hypothesis is that both are instances in which *positive values are brought to the fore and manifest themselves in a particularly salient way*. For example, the deep love you have for your family is testimony to how much you value it, and this might actually account for many of your actions. However, the value you lend to family bonds is not always at the forefront of your mind. In the whirl of everyday life, you rarely pause to think of how important your family is to you. Yet, on certain occasions, your mind is reoriented to focus on this value. This might be because the value is threatened: the near death of your kin reminds you of how much family means to you. It might also be because the relevant occasion is extraordinary (and even surprising). For instance, the birth of a child is a unique event that breaks the flow of ordinary life and focusses the attention on the particular value exemplified by this event. Finally, it might be because the occasion is specifically designed to celebrate this value, as in the case of baptisms and weddings, events that can be considered *mise-en-scene* whose effect is precisely to make certain important values very salient.

These three ways of redirecting the mind towards particular values account for the cases we have surveyed so far. The fact that a negative background can make positive values more salient or can, when that background is construed as presenting an obstacle in some sense, constitute an extraordinary opportunity to showcase certain values, accounts for the mixed cases in which it seems that we are moved by the triumph or resistance of positive values.<sup>11</sup> The fact that a positive value can be highlighted when presented in an extraordinary or surprising setting can account for cases such as the birth of a child and also surprise parties. Finally, the fact that a positive value can be made salient by an occasion specifically dedicated to making it

<sup>11</sup> Although we do not address here the issue of what is peculiar to being moved by music, what we say of being moved in general is consistent with, or even congenial to, the experience of being moved by music. It is interesting to note that Levinson's characterisation of music-induced chills (2006) is very close to what we claim with regard to being moved in the mixed cases. Drawing on empirical work by Panksepp (1995), Levinson suggests that what triggers music-induced chills is some apprehension, often vague, of the indissoluble fusion of the positive and the negative in most human experiences of importance to us. Indeed, alleged moving pieces often begin with a sad or dark mood—generally in minor key and slow pace—but turn at some point into something more hopeful—generally in major key and faster tempo—yet not quite joyful, so that the sad or dark mood is still present in the background. The sombre themes with which the music starts in these cases often re-emerge before a new lighter moment begins. This constant oscillation between darker and lighter themes is characteristic of all these famous moving examples: the Andante of Schubert's 2nd trio in E flat, the Andante con moto of his Death and the Maiden quartet, the second movement of Beethoven's 7th, the 3rd movement of his 15th quartet, his Sonata Pathétique, the Casta Diva from Bellini's La Norma, Chopin's 1st and 20th Nocturnes and the Introtuis or the Lacrimosa from Mozart's Requiem.

salient can account for cases such as weddings and birthdays, but also national and patriotic celebrations. Of course, some cases fit in several categories. Finally, some others will fall in none of these categories. It might be that, on certain occasions, a positive value manifests itself in such a way that it is salient by itself, without needing to be emphasized by external factors. Sometimes, all it takes to be moved is watching a baby sleep peacefully.

Now, if these observations are going in the right direction, what are the formal and particular objects of “being moved”? The formal object appears to be *a certain positive value standing out*. As we have made clear, the formal object of “being moved” cannot be *one* particular positive value: the occasions that move us are too different and varied to be traced back to a particular positive value. But it cannot be just *any* positive value either: even if, for instance, we like fine wines and ascribe positive value to fine wines, neither suddenly discovering a bottle of fine wine, nor drinking fine wine together with terrible wines, nor even attending celebrations in honor of fine wines will move us. We thus have to specify the subset of positive values the manifestation of which is susceptible to move us.

In the first approximation it is fair to say that the positive values in question are those that are particularly *important* and *central* to us: it would seem odd if one was moved by something one does not care about. A fruitful way to progress in our characterization here consists in distinguishing, at a psychological level, *core* values from other kind of values. “Core values” may be said to be those that a moral community treats as possessing “transcendental significance” which preclude comparisons, trade-offs, or indeed any mingling with more mundane values (Tetlock et al. 2000).<sup>12</sup> Compare family bonds with wine. While it seems fine to put a price on a bottle of wine (say, asking someone how much he would sell it for), putting a price on family bonds (say, by asking someone his price for leaving his wife) is less so. Similarly, trade-offs are easier for wine than for family bonds. If you can save two bottles of fine wine by breaking one, this may be a fair deal. However, this is not so straightforward in the case in which you could make up with two members of your family by breaking a relationship with a third.

Admittedly, whether a value is a *core* one in this sense will vary across subjects depending on their individual sensibilities, precluding any extensional definition or list of *core* values.<sup>13</sup> It is also true that, within a single person’s hierarchy of values, there might not be one property unifying this person’s different core values. Be that as it may, the present strategy requires just that the distinction between core and other values has enough psychological validity to be used in a psychological

<sup>12</sup> In fact, Tetlock et al. (2000) call these values “sacred values”. The religious implications of the term “sacred” are unnecessary and misleading in the present context, however. We shall thus use the expression “core values” instead.

<sup>13</sup> For example, *piety* or *chastity* might constitute core values for some people, while playing no role at all in the life of others.



account of the phenomenon of “being moved”. With this distinction in hand, we can now say that the formal object of being moved involves a positive *core* value.<sup>14</sup>

This specification of the formal object of being moved leads us to elaborate and refine what we said about the particular objects of being moved. We proposed that the particular objects of being moved involved *situations* or *events* such as getting married, attending the baptism of one’s nephew, the end of the hostilities or the last words of a dying mother to her children. These are some of the many paradigmatic cases one could mention (and, for the first two, precisely the kind of cases subjects most often report when asked about what moves them). These seem indeed to constitute possible particular objects of this emotion. However, in the case at hand, it is fruitful to distinguish the target of the emotion from its focus.<sup>15</sup> While the events or situations just listed are clearly possible *targets* of the candidate emotion, the affected subject, if moved, is *focusing* on the particular values these targets exemplify. If witnessing the wedding of a good friend, the reconciliation of estranged friends or the sacrifice of the soldier move us, it is because they are framed by the subject undergoing the emotion as standing out, namely as striking manifestations of, say, love, friendship, and courage. In sum, then, the intentional object of being moved—its intentional focus—is a particular core value while its formal object is one of its instances *standing out* in particular circumstances.<sup>16</sup>

## 2.2 Phenomenology

We have succeeded in talking quite a bit of a phenomenon we claim to be an emotion without evoking at all how it feels to go through it. It is time we address this issue. Indeed, a third criterion for being an emotion appeals to phenomenology: does the psychological state under scrutiny have its own characteristic phenomenology? In other words, is there something ‘it is like’ to undergo this kind of experience and is it peculiar to it? It is notoriously difficult to come up with satisfactory descriptions of the phenomenology of affective states in general but, in the case we are concerned with, the relevant phenomenology is closely tied to the feeling of underlying bodily changes. And so these provide us with a good starting point.

Recalling episodes of the state under discussion and attempting to introspect them from this vantage point, it seems right to say that a person who feels very moved feels not only an acceleration of her breathing and her heartbeat, a heaving of her chest, but also a tightening of her throat, maybe a slight trembling of her lips,

<sup>14</sup> The distinction between *core* values and non-core values should not be confused with the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental values: although all core values have intrinsic value, something can have intrinsic value without being a core value. Thus, certain kinds of pleasure may have intrinsic value without it being the case that trade-offs involving these pleasures are ‘taboo’. This is why the notion of *core* value cannot be assimilated, for example, to the psychological notion of *needs*, as defined by Maslow (1943): in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, one finds such things as water, food, and resources, that clearly are things for which many would accept trade-offs.

<sup>15</sup> For a similar distinction, see de Sousa (1987, Chap. 5). See also Helm (2009).

<sup>16</sup> Once again, it is interesting to note that our analysis of being moved is consonant with what Levinson (2006) observes about music-induced chills. They are, he says in conclusion of his study, “usually the first sign that one has registered something of depth or significance in the music”.

and above all she may start to feel herself welling up. These introspective verdicts are partly confirmed by the reports of our participants: whether in response to positive values only, or to positive values mingled with negative ones, the main feelings mentioned in connection with being moved are warmth in the chest and the heart, increased heart rate, lump in the throat, and tears.<sup>17</sup>

At this stage, two observations are in order. First, although the phenomenon of being moved appears to involve a sense of being taken by force, it does not always have the intensity suggested by the reports just presented. The idea rather is that, when at its peak, the moved subject is in the state resembling what the descriptions provided suggest.<sup>18</sup> Second, it is worth stressing that, though the relevant phenomenology may well resemble that of some episodes of sadness (in particular in the presence of tears and of a lump in one's throat), at least in their initial phase, it stands apart for the following reason. While its intrusive nature prevents us perhaps from describing it as pleasant, it is nevertheless far from unpleasant.<sup>19</sup> In general, and unless it is neither the time nor the place, we like to be moved, and this observation takes on its full meaning when we think of the relevant phenomenology in a more holistic manner.

Moving away then from the atomistic approach to bodily phenomenology that has driven our characterisation up to now, we may try to apprehend the relevant phenomenology in the form of a felt global attitude directed at the world.<sup>20</sup> There is a feeling of depth in being moved that directly echoes the depth of what is apprehended by the emotion. Being moved by something is, either unexpectedly and in the form of an eye opening experience or alternatively in a gradual *prise de conscience*, having one's attention drawn towards its object in a way that calls for one to dwell on it—something important, rather than frivolous or superficial. We are not moved by what we deem unimportant, or if we are, we know we shouldn't be. Compare this with joy: it is perfectly appropriate to feel joy at rather shallow events, like finding money in the street, the rain ceasing, or victory in a video-game. Joy can be (though it needs not be, as we shall see) light or superficial. By contrast, there is no such thing as being 'lightly'

<sup>17</sup> To determine which felt physiological changes were characteristic of the experience of being moved, we asked our participants to rate the intensity with which they felt a series of sensations on a scale ranging from -4 ('not at all') to 4 ('very much'). These sensations were: a 'warm' chest, a lump in the throat, high energy, increased heart rate, chills, feeling light or bouncy, laughter, relaxed muscles, a 'rising' or 'open' chest, tensed muscles and tears. We compared the answers of participants who described an entirely or partly positive situation with the answers of 60 new participants, recruited in the same way, who were asked to remember a situation in which a really good thing happened to them (a standard way of eliciting joy). Using the 'joy' condition as comparison, we found that participants in the 'being moved' condition were significantly more likely to report 'tears' (1.11) than those in the 'joy' condition, and less likely to report feeling 'light or bouncy' (0.73), 'laughter' (0), 'high energy' (1.98), and 'increased heart rate' (1.78). Items rated more intensely were 'warm chest' (2.27), 'high energy' (1.98), 'increased heart rate' (1.78), 'lump in the throat' (1.41), and 'tears' (1.11).

<sup>18</sup> It is plausible to regard the expression "I am touched" as designating an attenuated form of the phenomenon of being moved.

<sup>19</sup> In fact, participants who remembered entirely or partly positive situations found being moved mostly pleasurable (3.2 on a scale ranging from -4 to 4).

<sup>20</sup> For more on this way of conceiving of the emotions' phenomenology, see Deonna and Teroni (2012, Chap 7).

moved. Frijda, while trying to capture the phenomenon—although in a slightly different context—speaks of it as one in which we feel both “knocked over” and “deferential”, a complex state that is partly experienced through one “weeping silently” (Frijda 2007, pp. 38–39). This, we believe, is not far off the mark if it is understood as capturing both the invasive depth of the feeling of being moved, but also the concomitant sense of satisfaction or contentment, a state of relief perhaps, one that explains why we on the whole care for being in that state. Note finally how consistent this picture of the phenomenology of being moved is with the picture of its intentional and formal objects drawn above: it is the deferential emotional attitude that something as important as a core positive value deserves.

### 2.3 Action tendencies and function

Finally, let us examine the two last related criteria which serve to evaluate whether or not being moved amounts to a distinct emotion: does it have a distinctive function, and does it have distinctive action-tendencies? These two questions are tightly connected insofar as the action-tendencies of an emotion (its effects) are often a good cue to its possible function (the effects it has been selected for).

Trying to determine whether the phenomenon of being moved fulfils this double criterion while focusing only on the bodily disturbances that are involved in experiencing it could easily lead us to a negative conclusion. For example, Claparède, an astute observer of the phenomenon, declared that it is “entirely unclear what adaptive relation might exist between the situation felt to be ‘moving’ and the behaviour of the pure emotion, or how the behaviour adjusts the subject to the circumstances that moved him”. Such a verdict is a natural upshot of trying to compare the phenomenon of being moved to emotions such as fear or anger. In the latter kinds of emotions, the body seems instantaneously mobilised in preparation for certain actions whose goals fulfil precisely the function for which these emotions have been selected by the process of evolution. In the case of being moved, no such observation can be made. The bodily disturbance typical of this state seems to produce shock or a blissful paralysis rather than any discernible adaptive course of action.

This conclusion is somewhat hasty. Just like shame and sadness, being moved might be an emotion characterised by a retreat without any easily discernible action-tendencies but with beneficial features that are more diffuse and have their effect over a longer horizon, due to a new and reinforced attachment to core values (Fessler 2004; Deonna et al. 2011). Additionally, recent approaches in emotion research, such as the “broaden-and-build” theory of positive emotions, have emphasized the fact that most positive emotions lack distinct action tendencies insofar they tend to generally *broaden* our “thought-action repertoire”. By contrast with most negative emotions that *narrow* the range of potential behaviour by fostering quick and definite reactions to challenging situations, positive emotion serve to *build* enduring personal resources (such as new dispositions to act or new values) (Fredrickson 2001). Starting with the first person perspective, being moved consists, as we saw, in one’s focusing on the importance of a particular core value. At a general level, this typically leads to a reorganization of one’s priorities, and

makes room for the promotion of this value within one's life. If we now zoom in a little, it means that the effects of the experience of being moved will depend on the particular value the given experience is about. The one who is moved by courage will be motivated to act very differently than the one being moved by, say, family bonds. This is why it makes little sense to look for particular action tendencies associated with being moved.<sup>21</sup> Given this irreducible multiplicity of behavioural tendencies, the effects of 'being moved' must be characterised in terms of *cognitive* effects rather than in terms specific *action tendencies*. From this point of view, being moved operates first as a powerful reminder of the values that we hold most dear and take ourselves to be governed by. It attracts our attention to things that are important to us but which we have come to take for granted and no longer notice or appreciate. This role is not confined to the function of validating our current beliefs, for it might also trigger conversions or reconversions by bringing to light important values which we were no longer sensitive to, at least at an explicit and personal level.

This being said, it would be a mistake to think that for these reasons the experience of being moved cannot teach us anything new. Because the experience of 'being moved' is primarily directed at values, and only secondarily at the particular situations that exemplify them, it allows for being moved by the manifestation of these values in places where we did not expect to find them, or had stopped expecting them, thus creating novel horizons of concerns. Thus, the general function of being moved considered from a first personal standpoint consists in the reorganization of one's hierarchy of values and priorities.<sup>22</sup>

However, it might be thought that merely having a function is not sufficient for being a sui-generis emotion. Some will surely ask for an *evolutionary* function that would explain how and why this emotion came to be selected in our phylogenetic history. Thus, we may wonder about the nature of the evolutionary function, if any, of the experience of being moved. Although our suggestion in this domain is at best a tentative one, and while we would not wish to commit ourselves to a particular evolutionary story or even for that matter to the idea that such a story must be

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<sup>21</sup> These predictions are coherent with the results of our study. As we saw earlier, participants reporting partly or entirely positive situations were mostly moved by situations involving either (i) concerns about family, friendship, and social bonds or (ii) success and achievements. A third important category of situations involved (iii) acts of generosity. Consequently, we should expect participants to have the relevant action tendencies, that is: (i) being with one's family, (ii) achieving success and (iii) helping others and being a better person. A series of questions probed to what extent participants felt more like doing certain actions, on a scale ranging from -4 ('much less') to 4 ('much more'). Analyzing the answers of participants who reported partly or entirely positive situations, we found high scores for the following action tendencies: 'being a better person' (3.05), 'doing something good for another person' (2.95), 'taking care of your family' (2.70) and 'achieving success' (2.47). That the moral aspirations of these participants were not only empty words was shown by the fact that these participants were willing to give significantly more of their potential reward to UNICEF than those in the 'joy' condition (\$4.15 vs. \$3.21).

<sup>22</sup> Some empirical studies indeed suggest that being moved by fiction can alter personality traits to some extent. See for example Djikic et al. (2009).

provided for all emotions, a friend of evolutionary accounts will have no difficulty thinking of being moved as a tool for solving certain cooperation problems. From the single organism's point of view, co-operation can bring many benefits provided certain conditions are fulfilled, among which are (i) that this organism attracts other co-operators by signalling itself as good co-operator, and (ii) that it manages to maintain cooperation without itself succumbing to free-riding. As far as the latter point is concerned, we saw how the experience of being moved could lead individuals to reorganize their priorities in a way that reinforces attachment to values such as generosity or friendship and thus encourage the organism to continue to cooperate. Concerning the former point, the experience of being moved can actually constitute a signal revealing the values to which an individual is attached, manifesting his potential as a co-operator and, to the extent that the external manifestations of being moved involve hard-to-fake cues, such as tears, it is a much more reliable signal than others.

A proponent of group selection might also claim that this emotion has been selected for its power to reinforce the links that tie a community together by signalling to its members the importance that a given individual attaches to the most fundamental values sustaining that community. Thus, the subject who never seems to be moved by the values his community shares (for example, being indifferent to the national anthem) will at best arouse suspicion, at worst be ostracised and perhaps sacrificed for the unity and cohesion of the group. Such a proposal would predict that we are particularly prone to being moved by displays or symbols of group belonging, emphasizing, as it does, the potential of such experiences to create feelings of 'oneness'. Whether such predictions are actually borne out by the experience of being moved is debatable of course. Be that as it may, what matters is that, for both types of evolutionary explanation, the function of the experience of being moved is consistent with its role: foregrounding the place that certain core positive values have in our lives.

In this section, we have argued that being moved satisfies five conditions that might be thought necessary in order to qualify as a distinct emotion: it is directed at intentional objects, it has a distinct formal object and a particular phenomenology, and it is associated with particular action tendencies that fulfil a well-defined function. Thus, we conclude that being moved is a genuine and distinct emotion that has been overlooked for too long.<sup>23</sup> Yet, this claim is not without difficulties. In the next section, we examine two issues that lead us to slightly complicate this picture.

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<sup>23</sup> An interesting question is whether being moved is not only a distinct emotion, but also a basic one. The notion at stake here being notoriously fraught with difficulty, let us only say that the evolutionary explanation provided should convince friends of the distinction between basic and non-basic emotions that 'being moved' might very well belong to the former category. The fact that 'being moved' is perhaps unique to humans (something true of disgust as well for example) and that it is typically triggered by complex cognitions (this is true of many episodes of fear), should not be viewed as decisive considerations against the idea that, at least in some respectable taxonomies of the emotions, being moved is a basic emotion.

### 3 Neither sadness nor joy

In the preceding section, we were forced to revise our first hypothesis regarding the nature and formal object of being moved because of the existence of cases which are reactions to purely positive values. Here, we confront the opposite challenge: the possibility of being moved by purely negative cases. As might have been expected perhaps, reflecting on their own uses of the expression “I was moved by”, some of our participants reported cases that seem at odds with our account of being moved, such as a cat being run over by a bus or a hungry person asking for food. Moreover, these answers are coherent with dictionary entries that present “moving” situations as preferentially eliciting sadness and sympathy. In fact, it is common to hear people say that they have been moved by the misery or distress of others. Does the account on offer imply then that nobody can in fact be moved by Primo Levi’s account of his Auschwitz ordeal in *If this a man* for example? This then is our first difficulty: how can we account for such cases, given that distress, suffering and death are clearly not core positive values?

A first possible answer is that some of these cases are genuine instances of being moved in the sense we favour in this article. Some episodes of compassion undoubtedly feel like episodes of being moved in the relevant sense. But this, we claim, is again the result of some core positive value which stands out in the context of the pain and the misery that trigger compassion. If we feel the kind of compassion we are tempted to describe by using the expression ‘being moved’, it is because the person suffering also strikes us in a positive sense through the perseverance, dignity, or even perhaps only the will to live she displays. In the absence of these, or other core positive values, we may feel distress, anguish or discouragement, but we are not moved! As we argued earlier, such values become especially salient against a negative backdrop.

Note however that we are not saying that compassion is an instance of being moved; rather, according to this hypothesis, the same event succeeds in triggering compassion and in moving us. We can dissociate these phenomena by pointing out that there are cases of compassion that are clearly not moving: I can feel compassion for someone who was badly injured without being moved, and of course, as we saw for purely positive cases, we can be moved by cases involving no compassion. Thus, according to the present proposal, the idea that we use the expression “being moved” to refer to cases of compassion is only the result of a conflation arising from the fact that some states of affairs elicit both affective episodes. In reading *If this is a man*, for example, we alternately feel sympathetic, saddened, revolted, sickened and moved. Although these feelings tend, at the phenomenological level, to blend with one another, they can and should be distinguished. In the case at hand, when we are moved, it is because such values as resistance, resilience, solidarity, humanity, dignity, succeed fleetingly and against all odds in making a stand. As shown earlier, these values would become especially salient against the awfully negative backdrop with which we are concerned here.

Some are bound to resist this solution, however, and will claim that we are sometimes moved by events construed in an entirely negative way, from which no redeeming aspect emerges. Are we not sometimes moved by the suffering of

someone, they will insist, even when there is no offsetting positive aspect to it, no display whatsoever of, for example, the virtues we just claimed to be at the source of those kinds of episodes of being moved?

There is a second (and compatible) possible answer: the expression “being moved” does typically refer to the distinct emotional phenomenon we have been describing, but is also used to refer to and describe affective states that, despite being essentially distinct, are phenomenologically similar. As we have tried to argue, wretchedness, desolation and misery, i.e., entirely negative situations, either sadden or distress us, but they do not move us. Yet, one natural explanation of why subjects sometimes report such cases in answer to questions about what moves them is that this kind of sadness or distress is phenomenologically very close to the experience of being moved, and thus easily confounded with it.

This is not just speculation on our part. Recall that among the bodily feelings associated with being moved were the following: increased heart rate, lump in throat, and tears. Now although purely negative instances of being moved share to a large extent these key features with positive instances, they differ in other key respects, notably in regard to warm and pleasurable feelings in the chest.<sup>24</sup> When this is made clear, it becomes possible to say that we are not in fact moved by events that instantiate only negative values, or at least not in the same sense that we are moved by a birth or a wedding, though both experiences share certain phenomenological features. We feel disgusted by sordid or petty spectacles, outraged by injustice and contempt towards cowardice, but these are not instances of being moved, and the same is true of sadness! Serious and focused experience of loss is cause for despair. Lighter experience of loss is perhaps cause for melancholia, but it is not a cause for being moved. That we might think so in some cases, however, is easily explainable. As we have just argued, the way sadness feels, is close to the way being moved feels, and that is reason enough to confuse the two phenomena.

Finally, a third possible response to the objection must be mentioned. As we have seen, some cases of sadness—like some cases of compassion—are naturally thought of as instances of being moved. Here we are not thinking of sadness over a cat having been run over by a bus or sadness at the sight of a beggar, but, say, sadness over the death of someone close. Indeed, as time goes by, sadness often leads to reflection over the good qualities of what has been lost, such reflection potentially occasioning episodes of being moved. Now, once again, if there is a temptation to view such episodes of sadness as instances of being moved, it is because there is a redirecting of the subject’s focus on a core value, say, in this scenario, to the true significance of a now lost friendship. That there is such a focus is shown by the fact that not all cases of sadness (or compassion) qualify as episodes of “being moved” in ordinary language. For example, we do not think of the distress or empathy we feel over someone having cut her finger as an instance of “being moved”. Rather, we use this

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<sup>24</sup> Analyzing the answers of participants who reported cases they did not perceive (even partly) as positive, we found that the feelings that were rated the highest were ‘lump in throat’ (3), ‘tears’ (2.21), ‘muscles tensed’ (2.15), and ‘increased heart rate’ (1.7). And, crucially for these purely negative cases, ratings for ‘warm feelings in the chest’ were significantly less reported than for participants reporting at least partly positive situations (−0.75).

expression when sadness is caused by the loss of something truly important, where the person concerned is apt to start to dwell on the positive traits of what she has lost rather than the calamity that this loss represents. And note once again that the suggestion is not that some cases of sadness are in fact cases of being moved. Rather, when sadness is caused by the loss of something truly important, it will typically and over time occasion episodes of being moved. To sum up, then, so-called negative cases of “being moved” are not related to the phenomenon of being moved as we describe it in this article only by virtue of their phenomenological kinship, but also their disposition to redirect attention towards what we care deeply about.

Now, faced with our emphasis on the positive dimension of being moved and given our reasons to reject purely negative cases as not real instances of this emotion, one might be tempted to regard what we call being moved as constituting a particular case of the archetypal positive emotion: joy. The thought is that even if it is granted that some episodes of joy, due perhaps to the shallow and frivolous character of their objects, cannot be instances of being moved, the idea that all episodes of being moved are episodes of joy is still a live possibility. Perhaps being moved is a particular kind of joy that distinguishes itself from other kinds in virtue of its object, (i.e. being moved would be joy triggered by a positive core value standing out), or of a particular intensity (i.e. being moved would be the highest form of joy). Discounting these suggestions then constitutes our second difficulty.

The hypotheses we are considering are buttressed by the fact that they respect (and perhaps account for) some of our ordinary uses of the word “joy”. Indeed, at least some episodes of being moved we mentioned might be properly described using the word “joy”, the birth of one’s child being perhaps the clearest case. Be that as it may, these linguistic observations do not warrant the conclusion that being moved is not a genuine and distinct emotion since the range of emotional experiences to which “joy” may be applied are numerous. Indeed, while psychologists have come to use the term “joy” in a very specific way, which is entirely distinct from what we call here “being moved”, the ordinary use of the term is broader and covers a greater diversity of emotional states, including what we call here being moved. In psychology, the term “joy” is typically used to refer to “the pleasant state experienced when people have made progress towards important personal goals, especially when that progress is better than expected” (Fredrickson 2009). Finding one’s missing watch after a day-long search is a paradigmatic instance. Now, the difference in nature between this kind of experience and others that would also be properly described as “joy” in ordinary language is easy to see. For example, like many mystics, the French philosopher Pascal repeatedly used the term “joy” in his famous *Memorial* to describe his experience of divine rapture. It is clear that such experiences cannot be assimilated to the experience we feel when we recover our watch, or win the lottery. It seems, then, that not all the phenomena that can adequately be described as “joy” in ordinary language are instances of the same emotion, and certainly not the emotion that psychologists refer to with this term. A preliminary conclusion then is that the mere fact that some instances of being moved can be referred to using the word “joy” does not show that they thereby



belong to the same emotional category as other instances of “joy”, and even less so to the category psychologists refer to when they use this word.<sup>25</sup>

We have thus seen no good reason to accept that being moved is a subcategory of joy as this term is understood by psychologists. And the fact that there are no such reasons can be established by considering the two hypotheses mentioned earlier: episodes of being moved would only be episodes of joy singled out for their intensity or, alternatively, for the specific type of objects they are directed at. We have grounds for rejecting the first hypothesis, since episodes of being moved have phenomenological properties and action tendencies that we would not expect to occur in episodes of joy, even if more intensely felt. It is doubtful that tears and a lump in the throat accompany all strong episodes of joy. One can easily imagine someone who, on learning that she has won a small fortune in the lottery, begins to jump and dance around, shouting wildly. These behaviours would be a natural manifestation of extreme joy, but not ones that we would associate with being moved. This suggests that being moved cannot be defined simply as a strong experience of joy. One might then turn to the idea that being moved is a type of joy that is characterised by its intentional object: a core positive value. This is problematic too however. As we pointed out, mixed cases in which positive values display themselves by standing out against a background of negative values can be deeply moving, but they are hardly cases in which we would say that we feel joy. A sacrifice made to save others may certainly be moving; it would be odd however to regard the case as an appropriate occasion for joy. And even if we do, what moves us is not what elicits joy: in this case, joy would be a reaction to the lives saved while being moved would be a reaction to the hero’s sacrifice or, more precisely, his or her courage and devotion—strange objects for joy.

Both difficulties have now been overcome. First, purely negative cases are not genuine counter-examples to our proposal. Naturally they show that the linguistic expression “being moved” is sometimes applied to cases other than the distinct emotion we have described under that name; yet, this use of the expression is only intelligible if we posit a central and prototypical phenomenon which other instances only resemble. Second, although there are emotional experiences that are, in ordinary language at least, cases of both “being moved” and “joy”, it is a mistake to identify the two emotion types, or to regard the latter as a subclass of the former.

#### 4 Being moved and the threat of sentimentality

A final test for our account must relate being moved to the question of sentimentality. Given the intimate links between our capacity to be moved and

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<sup>25</sup> As pointed out by an anonymous referee, some instances of the emotional episode referred to with the expression “crying for joy” are clear cases of “being moved”. Thus, one interesting thing to do would be investigate the stage at which children begin to “cry for joy” so as to reach an understanding of the developmental pattern of being moved. To our knowledge, there is no empirical evidence related to this question (though there is much evidence about when and how children cry in sadness; for a review, see Rottenberg and Vingerhoets 2012; Vingerhoets 2013). Research on this topic would be most welcome.

our capacity for being sentimental, a correct account of this emotion must shed light on questions related to this trait. In the recent philosophical literature, discussions of sentimentality have focused on questions about whether and why it should be considered a vice.<sup>26</sup> Without taking sides on this question, we propose to show how our account of being moved can help make sense of the intuition underlying two critiques often levelled against sentimentality: that it gives rise to false emotions, and that it constitutes a form of hypocrisy.

What is this thing sentimentality that philosophers are so often keen to criticise? First, sentimentality may be regarded as a disposition to be disproportionately moved by moving situations. More specifically, sentimentality seems to be a disposition to be moved by a situation that fits this emotion's formal object, but without the right *intensity*. Or differently put, sentimentality might be considered the disposition to be moved with *exaggerated intensity* by an object towards which a more moderate experience of this emotion would be appropriate. Now being sentimental in this sense might well be a vice, but, if so, it seems venial and rather innocuous: we find sentimental people frivolous or, at worse, ridiculous. Besides, most people's tolerance for those prone to choking up in this way is higher than their tolerance for those who are cold-hearted or indifferent, that is, for those who systematically fail to be moved by those objects which are moving and that merit the recognition involved in this emotional response.

There are still other ways to understand sentimentality that make it a potentially more serious vice. From this different standpoint, the problem with sentimentality is not connected with whether being moved is properly or improperly attuned to its object, but has to do with the proper or improper enjoyment of this very same experience. In this stronger sense, sentimentality is not just a case of letting oneself be overwhelmed by the significance of the object, but one of being preoccupied with taking pleasure in the actual experience of being moved irrespective of what it presents us with. Because emotions are linked to the world in (at least) two different ways—they reflect how we take the world to be, and they drive us to change it in distinct ways—we may distinguish two forms of this latter type of 'active' sentimentality. The first affects the way we take the world to be and characterizes people that are willing to distort their perception of the world to make it more 'moving'. Think of the poet (or rather pseudo-poet) who is willing to make a dying flower a symbol of noble values being assaulted by a cruel world. In this sense, the sentimental contrasts with the no-nonsense down to earth individual for whom things are just and only what they are. The confrontation of these character types is a classic and endless source of comical situations.

The second form weakens the link between emotion and action. This sort of sentimental individual is someone who seeks the experience of being moved and indulges in it, but does not genuinely care about the value presented by the experience. For example, consider an individual who is moved while reading a novel that describes a father struggling to take care of his children, but who mistreats his own children once the book is closed. Or someone moved by a movie

<sup>26</sup> See for example Peterson (1976–1977), Jefferson (1983) and Solomon (1990).

displaying a protagonist helping a disabled person, but who has never thought of helping, nor has any inclination to help, her own disabled neighbor. There is a tension in the attitudes of both these individuals: they are moved by a value, but do not follow it up with the relevant actions. Their behavior corresponds to what Oscar Wilde had in mind when declaring that “a sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it”. Sentimentality, in this sense, is a disposition to care more about the experience of being moved (and its enjoyable aspects) than about what this experience reveals (the core value that constitutes its intentional object).

Sentimentality in this final sense is the more obvious candidate for being a vice, and the target of most criticisms. First, it is accused of being disconnected from any form of self-improvement or re-evaluation of one’s life values that we considered to be characteristic of the experience of being moved. Rather, it uses this experience as a selfish quest for emotional gratification. Second, the tendency seems to lend itself to the charge of hypocrisy: being moved by a value suggests that one takes this value seriously, hence the deferential attitude and feeling of depth associated with it. But indulgence in the emotion just for the sake of it, i.e. in the absence of even trying to exemplify or promote the relevant value, is a case of cheapening what may be counted as among our most precious experiences.

This tension between the cognitive content of the experience of being moved (which presents the value as important and worthy to be honored) and the behavior of the sentimental individual (who does not even try to act as the value recommends) is what lies behind the idea that certain episodes of being moved are ‘false’ and what explains the reservations we may have with regard to the phenomenon. A perfectly genuine emotion in the ordinary sense counts as ‘false’ when the behavior it is supposed to motivate is conspicuously absent.

Seeking the experience of being moved for its own sake is thus the principal problem its critics perceive to be at the heart of what we have called ‘active’ sentimentality. The sin consists in overlooking the values revealed by the experience of being moved and focusing rather on the emotional experience itself. However, the existence of such ‘misuses’ of the experience of being moved does of course not tell against our claim that ‘being moved’ is a precious experience that can help us discover or rediscover what gives our lives significance. This is precisely why sentimental people seek it: to feel as if their lives have depth and significance. However, they are, the critics of sentimentality will say, looking in the wrong place, for it is the value the experience gives access to that lends it importance, not the experience itself.

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