5-2021

An Ethics of Amusement

Ashley Caroline Mobley
University of Tennessee, Knoxville, amobley3@vols.utk.edu

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Ashley Caroline Mobley entitled "An Ethics of Amusement." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Philosophy.

Kristina Gehrman, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Jon Garthoff, Clerk Shaw, Garriy Shteynberg

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

AN ETHICS OF AMUSEMENT

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Ashley Caroline Mobley
May 2021

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I cannot sufficiently thank my advisor, Kristina Gehrman, and committee members, Jon Garthoff, Clerk Shaw, and Garriy Shteynberg for all they have done and contributed to ensure the success of this project. Thank you all for your advice, criticism, suggestions, and kindness, and especially for making time to provide all of these things despite the general chaos wrought by the anomalous events of 2020 and 2021. Very special thanks to Kristina, whose guidance, insight, and encouragement not only made this dissertation possible, but a joy to work on. And a special, much overdue thanks to both Jon and Kristina for helping me from the moment I arrived at UTK and for believing I had the chops to make it this far in the first place. Thank you also to Georgi Gardiner, who made me feel at home from day one (even though she was not yet on faculty!), and who continues to help and inspire me personally and professionally.

I want to thank my wonderful husband, Derek Darnell, for everything. But in particular, thank you for listening, supporting me, telling me what you really think, and *always* making me laugh. I could not have done this—or very much at all—without you.

Thanks to my parents, Barry and Lori, and my brother, Dan, for fostering both a strong sense of ethics and a solid sense of humor from an early age. Thank you for your love and encouragement throughout my life and for teaching me that laughter is not merely a pleasure, but an essential feature of the good life. Special thanks to my Dad for *always* showing, bringing, and sending me articles and books, which has both demonstrated and inspired a life-long pursuit of knowledge and improvement. Thanks to my in-laws and extended family for continued support and encouragement.

Thanks to Naomi Rinehold, Linh Mac, Brittany Hentzell-Pannekoek, Kaitlin Mitchum, Alex Richardson, Yuanyuan Liu, Jordan Baker, Casey Elvidge, Brittany Clark, Ashley Briggs, Clayton Carden, Jacob Smith, Ida Mullaart, Tylor Cunningham, Scott Biss, Sheila Lintott, Frédéric Gagnon, Jeffrey Pannekoek, Mary Helen Brickhouse-Bryson, Anne Merrill, Josh Watson, Joseph Dartez, Michael Ebling, Jonathan Finnerty, Troy Polidori, Sarah Segal, Les and Cindy Baker, and Caleb Clanton. Your various forms of support—ranging from friendship to a helpful conversation—helped me complete this project. Special thanks to Naomi and Linh for listening

ABSTRACT

We often hold one another morally responsible for what we find funny or fail to find funny. Though this practice is common and so demands philosophical attention, it remains underexplored in the literature. The purpose of this project is to devote attention to this practice by developing an ethics of amusement.

In chapter 2, I argue for why amusement is an emotion according to incongruity theory—the dominant theory of humor and amusement. With this in mind, I argue in chapter 3 that we are responsible for our emotions insofar as we have emotional agency. In particular, while we cannot change our emotions at will, we still exercise various forms of control over them in specific moments and over time. To the extent that we can do otherwise with respect to our immediate emotions and our long-term emotional tendencies, we are responsible for them.

In chapter 4, I develop three criteria that individuals must meet for their emotions to be fitting. In some cases, an instance of fitting emotion may be praiseworthy: if it comes from a morally good character or a correct shift in values. In some cases, an instance of an unfitting emotion may be blameworthy: if it comes from a character flaw.

Based on the criteria in chapter 4 and the discussion of incongruity theory in chapter 2, I develop three criteria for fitting amusement in chapter 5. Using the same grounds for praise, I examine examples of fitting immediate amusement and show why praise is or is not appropriate. I also consider when failing to find something funny is fitting and praiseworthy in some cases: when offense comes from a good moral character.

Finally, in chapter 6, I analyze unfitting immediate amusement and unfitting tendencies for amusement. Applying the criteria from chapter 5 to various examples, I show under what circumstances we may blame individuals for unfitting amusement. Lastly, I discuss why failing to be amused may be unfitting and blameworthy in some cases: when offense comes from a character flaw. I conclude with a brief discussion about some practical applications for the criteria I developed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I. Why We Should Care About Amusement

Humor is important in and to human life. Humor and joking can better or worsen our emotional states, improve or impair social bonds, and relieve or increase tension. They can also help or prevent our seeing and understanding perspectives different from our own. Since humor is clearly significant to human beings, it is both odd and surprising that it has received rather limited attention in philosophy. Over the last 2000+ years, a few Western philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Kierkegaard have had something to say about humor and joking. However, it was not until the turn of the 20th century—starting with Henri Bergson—that philosophers began taking up humor as a primary subject of genuine investigation and argument.

The literature can be divided into two categories: the nature of humor and the ethics of humor. The nature of humor literature focuses on what humor is and why we find things funny. The vast majority of the ethics of humor literature focuses on when and why some jokes, etc. are morally wrong. But there is a significant aspect of the ethics of humor that is largely missing from the discussion: an ethics of amusement—an ethics of finding funny.[1] Are people morally responsible for what they find funny and fail to find funny? If so, when, under what conditions, and on what basis can we praise and blame them? The purpose of my project is to take some first steps toward answering these questions and thereby developing an ethics of amusement.

Again, my project helps fill a gap in the ethics of humor literature and so makes an important academic contribution. My project also makes a public contribution. Consider that we often judge one another and hold one another responsible for what we find funny or fail to find funny. We also cultivate senses of humor. We teach our children that some things are

---

[1] Discussions of amusement in the literature include: book IV, chapter 8 of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*; Berys Gaut's "Just Joking: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humor;" Robert C. Roberts's "Humor and the Virtues;" Aaron Smuts's "The Ethics of Humor: Can Your Sense of Humor be Wrong?"; and Ronald de Sousa's "When is it wrong to laugh?" All but the first were written in the 20th and 21st centuries.

serious, threatening, and harmful, and so are not funny. These are very common practices. It is

clear that we all take amusement to be morally important in some way at some time or other.

Moreover, in America, we find ourselves in an interesting, remarkably difficult, and precarious

position regarding the morality of amusement. Consider how members of different groups—

especially different political and generational groups—often argue about and accuse one

another of either gross insensitivity or gross over-sensitivity to jokes and humor.[2] These

criticisms, which are often made without giving much justification, are frequently issued

publicly as well as privately. I will offer two examples to illustrate.

One example is former President Donald Trump's joke at a 2019 campaign rally in

Michigan that suggested Rep. John Dingell, who had passed away earlier that year, is in hell.

Trump told the crowd that Rep. Debbie Dingell, Dingell's widow, told Trump that she was

exceedingly grateful he lowered the flags to half-mast: "She calls me up 'That's the nicest thing

that ever happened. Thank you so much. John would be so thrilled. He's looking down….'"

(Frazin). Trump went on: "Maybe he's looking up. I don't know. … But let's assume he's looking

down." In response, Rep. Debbie Dingell tweeted to the president, "…You brought me down in

a way you can never imagine and your hurtful words just made my healing much harder." A

number of politicians from both parties demanded an apology from Trump, who they believe

stepped over the line. Trump's press secretary at the time, Stephanie Grisham, defended him

by saying he was merely "riffing on some of the things that had been happening in the last few

days" and noted that he was "under attack." Trump himself did not respond to the criticism of

his attempt at humor, but shortly thereafter made the same joke about President Lyndon B.

Johnson.

Another example is illustrative of differences in interpretation. In 2019, a high school

teacher posted a warning sign on their door; one student found the sign Twitter-worthy. The

sign specifically addressing students began by explaining that the teacher was waiting to see

Avengers: Endgame with their brother, who was out of town. The rest of the sign read: "DO

---

[2] It is worth noting that political disagreement about joking tends to fall along party lines. I suspect this is due largely to a tendency for people to *use* humor as a means of separating themselves along party lines rather than asking genuine questions.

NOT discuss ANYTHING about it anywhere near my classroom UNTIL THIS SIGN COMES DOWN. You know how much I love Marvel Comics. So help me Jeebus, if any one of you spoils a single frame of this movie for me, I promise I will make you wish that Thanos snapped your narrow a** [sic]." Later, the student who posted the photo of the sign defended the teacher because a number of commenters took the threat seriously: "WE TOOK NO OFFENSE TO WHAT THE TEACHER SAID. PLEASE STOP SAYING ITS BULLYING OR WHATSOEVER. ITS ALL HUMOR GUYS! [Sic.]"

These examples of conflict—and countless others—come to us by way of social media. Now that more conversational content is publicly available through social media and other media outlets, we simply find ourselves with more situations to analyze. Moreover, as I mentioned, we are clearly invested in the moral significance of amusement. Thus, there is clearly a need for an ethics of amusement that is practically useful for everyone—not just academics. Therefore, while I make helpful contributions to the literature by showing why we may blame and praise individuals for their amusement or failed amusement, I also provide practical guidance in the form of helpful questions to raise when we consider whether we *ought* to blame or praise someone for her amusement or lack of amusement.[3]

II. Background, Scope, and Terminology

Before discussing the project further, I want to provide some background, articulate the scope of the project, and discuss terminology. First, some background: Aristotle held that joke-telling and joke-listening are the two primary features of wit, a social virtue (*Nicomachean Ethics*, IV, 8). A person who possesses this virtue—the witty person—makes the right kinds of jokes in the right kinds of circumstances and she laughs because she is amused when it is appropriate for her to laugh and to be amused. She is not a buffoon who jokes and laughs at everything, including herself, no matter the cost (e.g., Fyodor Karamazov in Fyodor

---

[3] Note that my understanding of praise and blame is not Strawsonian or Scanlonian or anything else-ian. I borrow a description from chapter 3 to explain: "To *blame* is to hold someone morally responsible for what she has done, said, or felt and to reject it in some way, whether verbally or internally. It is to hold a person accountable for some wrong. To *praise* is to hold someone morally responsible for what she has done, said, or felt and to affirm it in some way, whether verbally or internally. Someone can blame and praise others and herself without ever verbalizing or communicating what she is doing. For the rest of this dissertation, I am talking specifically about blame and praise with respect to emotions and emotional tendencies" (36).

Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*). Nor is she a boor who never jokes and never laughs (e.g., Severus Snape in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series).[4] Aristotle's notion of the witty person provides a useful picture of fittingness or appropriateness with respect to humor and amusement. This idea has inspired much of this dissertation in that it suggests that we can reconcile the fact that 1) amusement's fittingness or unfittingness depends heavily on context and the character of the individual experiencing the amusement with the fact that 2) fittingness and unfittingness are nevertheless determined through objective criteria.

Though this is the case, I do not focus on Aristotle explicitly in this project for a number of reasons. One reason is that I do not take wit or fitting amusement to be virtues. Instead, I expand and build on a broadly Aristotelian view. My view is ultimately that we are morally responsible for our amusement because we actively shape our emotions, like amusement, and character over time. I wish to note explicitly here that while it is true that amusement reveals character and this makes it morally significant, this is not the main reason why amusement is morally significant; rather it is an emotion, which is part of our character—not merely reflective of it.

Additionally, I make use of myriad examples throughout this dissertation. Some are based on things that have happened to me or people I know, and some are entirely fictionalized. I rely heavily on examples both to illustrate the criteria and conditions I develop and to demonstrate why those criteria and conditions are true. I wish to draw attention to two types of examples I use throughout this project and explain why I use them. I discuss multiple examples that involve people who are self-absorbed. I do so because self-absorption is one of the most clearly morally problematic character traits. It is therefore quite useful for illuminating the way in which character is connected to amusement. The self-absorbed person—whether she loves herself too much or truly hates herself—puts herself at the very center of everything that happens in and to her. I discuss this vice in more detail in the final chapter. I also discuss multiple examples involving living under the rule of dictators. This may seem odd, but there is a

---

[4] A lesser known but perhaps better example of a boor is *Seinfeld*'s "library cop" character Lt. Joe Bookman, featured in "The Library" (season 3, episode 5) and played by Philip Baker Hall. It is clear from Bookman's actions, demeanor, and his own words that he is a *characteristically* serious person. (Additionally, in Bookman's case, he is amusing *because* he is so very serious.) Thanks to Derek Darnell for this example.

purpose. We have a general understanding of what a society, an economy, and general living conditions are like under a dictatorship. That is, we have a more or less ready-made concept of an individual's context. Since context matters so much for my view, discussing life under a dictatorship provides a sort of shorthand for understanding a person's context and so how her circumstances affect her emotional life. These types of examples also help illuminate the extent to which individuals and their character may differ even when living and developing morally under strikingly similar conditions.

Second, I narrow the scope of this dissertation by focusing on amusement rather than laughter. The communicative role of laughter deserves its own dissertations. I focus on what occurs *on the inside* when we find something funny, not whether or how we express amusement. When I occasionally discuss laughter, I do so to clarify something important about amusement.

I further narrow the scope by focusing only on the experiences of human beings. I do think that non-human animals experience emotions in the same sorts of ways as humans. In fact, my criteria for fitting emotions and amusement could apply to any animal with the requisite mental capacities. Though such a topic is interesting and important, I do not have space to discuss the implications of my view for non-human animals in this dissertation. Thus, I focus only on amusement in humans. Additionally, I occasionally use the word "person" to mean "human" for the sake of variation.

Third, I must address more terminology I use throughout this dissertation, as some of the terms may differ from what others have in mind. A person's *character* is composed of many different features, including various dispositions, tendencies, capacities, and mental states. Mental states like past and current emotions, choices, beliefs, and judgments, as well as the capacities for these mental states and for moral sensitivities like empathy and sympathy, make up those dispositions and tendencies. These things are all connected to and affected by one another in complex ways. For instance, beliefs and judgments sometimes contribute to the generation of emotions we have. All three of these things affect choices we make in a moment or tend to make. Emotions can call beliefs and judgments into question. Beliefs affect judgments and vice versa. Emotions affect moral sensitivities and vice versa. All of these things

play important foundational and constitutive roles in our character and all of them affect one another in complex ways.

Choices are decisions between one or more alternatives that one makes for reasons. Beliefs are truth-apt representational states; they function to represent reality to a subject accurately.[5] Judgments are mental states one has in response to reasons. In chapter 2, I will argue in more detail about what I take an emotion to be: mental states that are always about an object (and may be directed at something) where we always experience some feeling or affect in conjunction with and because of that object. Lastly, borrowing a definition from Jon Garthoff, though I apply it somewhat differently in later chapters, representation is a capacity by which a mind references reality. I discuss this in more detail in chapter 4. With all of this background information in mind, I will now introduce and briefly discuss the content of this project.

III. Summary of the Project

This dissertation makes a singular, cumulative argument. By the end, I show when and why we can praise people for fitting amusement and fitting offense and blame people for unfitting amusement and unfitting offense—not merely that it is possible to praise and blame people for these things.

The foundation of this project begins in chapter 2. Chapter 2 articulates the nature of emotions and shows why amusement, according to incongruity theory, counts as an emotion. Incongruity theory continues to be the leading theory of humor and amusement in the literature, even despite recent attempts to undermine it. The idea is that in order to find something amusing, someone must identify an incongruity between two things—essentially any two things—and take that incongruity to be pleasant. I include the stipulation that someone must find the incongruity to be pleasant because incongruities can also be the object

---

[5] This is inspired by Tyler Burge. See his book Origins of Objectivity for a comprehensive account of representation. I should also mention explicitly that I do not think beliefs necessarily require that the belief-haver has the capacity for language or the capacity for propositional thought even though beliefs are often best described propositionally. Essentially, a subject need not represent a belief to herself or be able to describe it propositionally in order to have it. She need only have concepts (which may be akin to demonstratives like "this" and "that") and the ability to put them together (e.g., concepts for "this" + "ouch").

of horror or anxiety. Interestingly, an individual cannot find an incongruity to be pleasant at the precise moment she also finds it threatening, painful, harmful, tragic, or dangerous. She may feel them in rapid succession, but she cannot feel them at the same time. This is because she cannot attend to what is threatening, etc. about the incongruity *and* what is pleasant about it at the exact same moment. I call this the Not Funny Principle, which is especially important for later chapters where I develop criteria for fitting amusement.

Now, based on the description of amusement provided by incongruity theory and criteria for emotion developed by Deonna and Scherer (2010) and Cova and Deonna (2014), I show why amusement is, in fact, an emotion. Amusement is always about something (an incongruity), it is phenomenologically distinct (has a distinct affect), it is associated with the same sorts of tendencies, and serves the same general functions. I also explain the common view that emotions are fundamentally evaluative.

In chapter 3, using Nancy Sherman as a starting point, I argue for why we are morally responsible for our emotions at least to some extent. In particular, I focus on what I call the emotional feedback loop. Our immediate emotions—the ones we experience in a moment—develop into tendencies to feel certain emotions in the same sorts of circumstances. Moreover, our emotional tendencies contribute to immediate emotions we feel down the road. This is an inescapable fact about human beings: our emotions *do* work this way. Perhaps more importantly, we can always do something about our emotions, whether it is in a moment or over time. We actively contribute to the development of our emotional tendencies and our immediate emotions. We can choose to guide them or not. Either way, we shape our emotional lives in significant ways. Thus, to the extent that it is possible for us to do otherwise, we are morally responsible for our emotions. We ought, then, to aim and strive to have fitting immediate emotions and good, fitting emotional tendencies. Developing these things requires commitment, reflection, and hard work, but we ought nevertheless to try to become good emotional agents. These goals that we ought to have clarify why we can hold people responsible for their emotions, including amusement.

In chapter 4, I articulate what fitting and unfitting immediate emotions and emotional tendencies look like. As I discuss in chapter 2, emotions are fundamentally about something

7

and so are fundamentally representational. They are also fundamentally evaluative because they take an object in a particular way and this manifests in how we feel about it. Lastly, they are fundamentally affective—they are felt. In light of this, for emotions to be fitting, an individual must first represent the object of her emotion in a given set of circumstances with sufficient accuracy. By "circumstances," I mean context and environment. By "sufficient accuracy," I mean an individual must represent what is necessary in order to meet the second criterion. The second criterion is that she must detect and attend to what is actually important (including morally important) about the object-in-its-circumstances such that she evaluates it properly. Third, she must feel her emotion in proportion to what is important about the object-in-its circumstances, and relative to other mental states she might have. Meeting all three of these criteria makes for a fitting immediate emotion.

Failing to meet any of these renders the immediate emotion unfitting. Not all failures to meet these criteria are moral failures, but when they are or could be, we must consider whether the individual who failed to feel their emotion fittingly is blameworthy for that failure. Whether and how much we blame that person depends on whether there are mitigating immediate or long-term considerations. Since blame is about holding people responsible, when there is evidence that they are not fully responsible for their unfitting emotion, we ought to hold them less responsible. Thus, we look to whether the failure is a one-off or part of an unfitting emotional tendency.

An unfitting emotional tendency is a tendency to fail to meet any of the three criteria for fitting immediate emotions. Tending to meet these criteria is a fitting emotional tendency. Note again that tending to meet them requires having well developed capacities for attention, representation, attention value, judgment, and belief, as well as well developed moral sensitivities, and these are essential features of our character.

Now, if someone's moral failure to meet the criteria is part of an unfitting emotional tendency, to determine the extent of her blameworthiness, we then ask whether that tendency is due to a moral character flaw, such as self-absorption.[6] In a case where we were unsure

---

[6] As I said, I use many examples of self-absorption throughout this dissertation. On a related note, it is interesting that sometimes the funniest characters in fiction are very self-absorbed people. One example is the character

whether failing to meet one of the criteria amounted to a moral failure, determining that the failure is due to a moral flaw renders the failure a moral failure. If the tendency is due to a character flaw, we further consider what is reasonable to have expected of that person regarding the character flaw. In particular, we consider whether she knew it about it and whether it is reasonable to expect her to know about it. If she did know, we also consider what we could expect her to do or have done about the moral character flaw.

Lastly, we can praise someone for fitting immediate emotions or fitting emotional tendencies when it comes from either a good moral character or a change of heart or value—however brief. Notice how the extent to which we ought we blame and praise reflects the process of becoming a good emotional agent: we do not expect people to be ideal. Rather, we consider the extent to which we can expect them to aim and strive for fitting emotions.

It should be clear where chapter 5 is going. I slightly modify the criteria for fitting emotions to become criteria for fitting amusement in light of what we know about amusement from incongruity theory. First, in order for amusement to be fitting, one must represent the incongruity-in-its-circumstances with sufficient accuracy. Again, sufficient accuracy here means representing what is required to meet the second criterion. To meet the second criterion, an individual must detect and attend to what is important about an incongruity-in-its-circumstances such that she evaluates it as pleasant when it is appropriate to do so. In light of the Not Funny Principle discussed in chapter 2, this means she must take the incongruity-in-its-circumstances to be pleasant when it is *not* seriously threatening, painful, harmful, dangerous, or tragic. Third, she must feel the pleasantness in proportion to what is important about the incongruity-in-its-circumstances and relative to other mental states. This means she will not

---

Selina Meyer of *Veep* played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus: "All I'm saying is that there are going to be difficult choices to make, you know? Like *Sophie's Choice* choices, except more important 'cause it's gonna be about me" (season 2, episode 9: "Running"). Another example is the character Mona Lisa Saperstein of *Parks and Recreation* portrayed by Jenny Slate. In one instance, she asks her boss to leave early from work: "My shrink got me and him tickets to a Pitbull concert, and I already committed to that, so if you tell me I can't go, it's like you're taking something away from me." When her boss denies her request, she replies, "I totally hear you. Um, I also *don't* like what you're saying, so if you say no, I *will* start a fire in the bathroom" (season 5, episode 16: "Bailout"). I suspect we are amused by such characters because they represent the worst of humanity; they do and say what we typically consider to be off-limits for decent people.

feel amusement more or less than she should in view of what is important about the incongruity-in-its-circumstances.

A fitting tendency for amusement is, essentially, a tendency to meet these criteria as a result of well developed capacities for attention, value, judgment, and belief, as well as well developed moral sympathies. Someone with a fitting tendency for amusement is likely to have a morally good character given what is required for a fitting tendency for amusement. Fitting immediate amusement is praiseworthy when it comes from a fitting tendency for amusement that is part of a good character. Or, if an individual suddenly assesses some incongruity as pleasant when it is appropriate for her to evaluate it as such and she does so as a result of a change of heart, she can be praised for it. Some instances of fitting amusement are not praiseworthy; for instance, when there is nothing morally important for an individual to attend to or detect.

We can also praise someone for being offended rather than amused. More specifically, when someone takes offense because she detects and attends to what she ought about some incongruity-in-its-circumstances, she may be praised.

The final chapter concerns unfitting amusement, unfitting offense, and blame. There are many ways to fail to meet the criteria discussed in chapter 5. We can fail to represent with sufficient accuracy. We can fail to take something as important when it is such that we assess an incongruity as pleasant instead of seriously threatening, painful, dangerous, harmful, or tragic. We can take something as important when it is not such that we take offense rather than find it pleasantly amusing. We can fail to feel the pleasantness or amusement as strongly or weakly as well developed judgment and taste would dictate. We can fail to feel some other emotion or experience some other mental state more or less than our amusement as a result of failure of attention or value. Tending to fail at any of these consistently is an unfitting tendency for amusement.

When the failures that render our immediate amusement unfitting are *moral failures* or they might be, we engage in the same process of determining blame as discussed in chapter 4. We consider mitigating immediate circumstances that would render the failure a one-off. If the failure is indeed a one-off and not part of an unfitting tendency, blame is significantly reduced.

If, however, the failure which rendered the amusement unfitting was part of an unfitting tendency for amusement, we must ask whether it is the result of a moral character flaw. Again, if we were unsure about whether the failure had moral content, it clearly does if the failure comes from a moral character flaw. From there, we determine whether there are any mitigating long-term conditions. For instance, we look at the circumstances of the emoter's emotional development. This helps us to determine the extent of blame—how much we should hold someone responsible for their unfitting amusement.

I also show that we ought to consider the same sorts of things to determine whether someone is blameworthy for failing to be amused. In particular, I show that if someone's taking offense comes from a failure of criterion two—incorrectly taking something to be morally problematic when it is not—as a result of a character vice such as self-absorption, we may blame that person. Moreover, if an individual takes the right things to be morally important but does so in the wrong way, she may be blameworthy as well.

I conclude the project with a brief discussion about what my findings mean practically speaking. In particular, the way we ought to determine praise and blame for amusement and failure to be amused are much more complex than our typical theories and practices appreciate. Moral responsibility has much more to do with how we are and what we do over long periods of time than is often considered in the literature and in the world. In light of this, and since we are all at different stages of moral development, we have good reasons not to jump to conclusions about other people's amusement or failure to be amused as often as we do.

Now that I have laid out the major features of this project, I now turn to chapter 2 on incongruity theory and argue for why amusement is an emotion.

CHAPTER TWO

WHY AMUSEMENT IS AN EMOTION

I. Introduction

The three main theories of humor and amusement (i.e., finding something funny) are superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory. Roughly, the superiority theory is that amusement is the result of feeling superior to someone else. Relief theory, roughly, is that laughter is the release of nervous or pent up energy. The incongruity theory, which I will detail in section II, is, roughly, that amusement is perceiving some incongruity between two things and taking it as pleasant. Since superiority and relief theories have many obvious problems and counterexamples, most philosophers of humor currently do not embrace them. Incongruity theory, however, remains a popular theory of humor and amusement.

According to John Morreall, one of the most influential philosophers of humor today, "The view that amusement is an emotion…is a common one. It is found in Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, and Beattie; in our own century in the work of Sully, Eastman, and Monro; and in many contemporary psychological studies. (It is especially prevalent where laughter at humor is not distinguished from other kinds of laughter, as in the Superiority Theory and the Relief Theory)" ("Humor and Emotion," 213). However, the view that amusement is emotion does not appear to be common according to incongruity theory. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to argue that amusement ought to be considered an emotion even according to incongruity theory. What this ultimately means is that regardless of which of the three main theories of humor one takes to be correct, amusement is generally best understood as an emotion. In the course of this discussion, I will also explain just what amusement is on my view.

In section II, I will describe and explain incongruity theory. While there are many stripes of this theory, I will focus on giving a general account. Incongruity theory has many detractors, but my aim is not to defend the view or show why we ought to take it to be true. I will only defend the theory against one (and perhaps the most common) objection. I include this defense

because 1) it is a fair objection; 2) incongruity theory has clear resources for handling it; 3) the discussion will be especially relevant in later chapters.

With this account of incongruity theory in mind, in section III, relying on Deonna and Scherer (2010) and Cova and Deonna (2014), I will apply to amusement the five criteria of an emotion. Both psychology and philosophy literature show agreement on these five criteria of emotions. The criteria tell us that emotions are: "(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" (Cova and Deonna, 449). These criteria sound roughly right to me, though I will make a suggestion when discussing i and I will raise and address some issues with iv and v. Ultimately, however, I will show how amusement, according to incongruity theory, easily meets these criteria and so why it ought to be considered an emotion.

II. Incongruity Theory

Presently, the dominant theory of humor and what I am calling amusement (finding funny) is incongruity theory. There are many different stripes of this theory. For instance, Francis Hutcheson held we are amused by incongruities between concepts and images which contrast with one another (32). Kierkegaard held that an amusement was the result of perceiving a contradiction. Schopenhauer held that amusement is felt after "the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation…." (95). That is, amusement is experienced when one subsumes some object(s) under some concept where there is incongruity between the two. A more modern take on incongruity theory comes from John Morreall: we see or identify something as funny when it violates beliefs or concepts, patterns of thought, orders of events, etc. And so, "[w]hat an individual will find funny depends on what his experience has been and what his expectations are" ("The Variety of Humor," 61).[7] None of these views is, by itself, a complete

---

[7] For more on the varieties of incongruity theory, see chapter 3 "The Incongruity Theory" of Morreall's *Taking Laughter Seriously*; section II.D. of Patricia Keith-Spiegel's "Early Conceptions of Humor: Varieties and Issues" from *The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues.* Also, "Traditional Theories of Laughter and Humor," Part I of Morreall's *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, discusses the views of incongruity theorists (among others) in more depth.

account capable of explaining every instance of humor. However, if we understand the theory more broadly, we can explain everything that amuses us in terms of some incongruity—this is the appeal of incongruity theory.

The broader view of incongruity theory I give and make use of in this dissertation is the following: the object of our amusement is an incongruity that we identify between two things and we find it or take it to be pleasant or enjoyable. Considering it this way, incongruities can be between just about any two things. Either item of the incongruous pair could be a concept, image, gesture, belief, sound, expectation, and so on. What matters for the theory is that we identify the incongruity between the items and we take it to be pleasant or enjoyable.

Consider the following example to clarify the theory. Say we are walking downtown and come across a pig in a birthday party hat and we find this funny. We do so because the pigs we have seen before are not usually wearing hats of any kind, as hats are human accessories and the pigs we have seen before are not usually downtown. Experience tells us that downtown is not a proper place for a pig, a pig's head is not the proper place for a hat, and pigs do not celebrate birthdays (probably). So, seeing this pig in this hat right now is amusing to us. The incongruity lies between an image and our expectations which are informed by our experiences.[8] We might become *more* amused by considering whether the pig is on her way to a party—another incongruous idea.[9]

Consider another example. Around Halloween, my sister-in-law's neighbors erected a massive 12-foot skeleton decoration in their yard. To her (and our) surprise and delight, the neighbors have not yet taken it down. Instead, they dress up the skeleton for various holidays. At Christmas, the skeleton held a candy cane and a large "sack of toys" while donning a Santa hat and beard. For Valentine's Day, the skeleton held a rose, wore a heart-shaped wreath, and had small Cupids hanging from his arms. Currently, the skeleton is dressed as a leprechaun

---

[8] For a detailed taxonomy of just about every kind and category of thing we could imagine as funny—from insults to puns, from practical jokes to slapstick comedy—explained in terms of incongruity, see John Morreall's "The Variety of Humor" in *Taking Laughter Seriously*.

[9] Note how this is the foundation of riffing—stretching something into newly incongruous directions; the more incongruous, the funnier. The pig is on her way to a birthday party. The party is for the Duke of York. She is the guest of honor. She is downtown to catch the train. But she has lost her party pearls, and we found her here in search of them. She will make jokes about pearls before swine in her birthday toast to the Duke.

holding a pot of gold and the Irish flag.[10] There are *several* incongruities which make this amusing. One is that the image of a skeleton is incongruous with the image of a leprechaun. We tend not to think of the mythical leprechaun as something that can die—we think of gold, rainbows, and delicious cereal. There is general contrast between a joyous little mythical being and the seriousness of death. Another incongruity is between expectation and reality. We expect people to remove outdoor Halloween decorations after the holiday passes rather than integrate the decorations into the basic design of their outdoor space. Another incongruity with our expectations of people here is their genuine commitment. They are committed to an object we would not typically expect people to be committed to (likely because we do not typically think it *merits* this level of commitment). Yet for the homeowners, the skeleton is not just an object, but part of an ongoing project they engage in for the sake of enjoyment. To enjoy any or all of these incongruities is to be amused.

The broader view of incongruity theory I gave above includes the stipulation that we must find the incongruity to be pleasant or enjoyable. This is because proponents of incongruity theory today need not, and many do not, purport that identifying an incongruity is *sufficient* for amusement.[11] This is an important response to a common object to incongruity theory: not everything that is incongruous is amusing. Often, what we find creepy, disturbing, and disgusting is also incongruous with our experience of the world. Most horror movies operate on this understanding. Chucky, for example, is a doll who comes to life and kills people. This is at least creepy because dolls are, in our experience, objects of play and enjoyment for children. Dolls are not alive, much less intent upon murder. The conceptual distance between children's non-living plaything and living murderer is quite far—these concepts are clearly incongruous, but they are disturbing instead of funny. Not all incongruity is funny. But even in this case, some people can find this *kind* of disturbing to be *entertaining* (though not amusing) because it is clearly fictional or because it does not pose an actual threat to them. Some people enjoy being scared, so long as the threat of harm is not understood to be sufficiently real at a given

---

[10] Special thanks to Alison Darnell for telling me about this and supplying me with photos for accurate descriptions.

[11] See Michael Clark's "Humour and Incongruity," especially sections V and VI, for a more detailed analysis of why incongruity is necessary but not sufficient for amusement.

moment. So, for this kind of incongruity, so long as the creepy, disturbing, or scary thing does not actually threaten us, it may be entertaining in some cases.[12] Additionally, according to cognitive dissonance theory, when we experience inconsistency in our beliefs—a kind of incongruity—we are often pained and anxious.[13]

Again, the common response is that incongruity is necessary but not sufficient for amusement and we can stipulate that incongruity theory includes a feeling of pleasure or enjoyment in response to identifying the incongruity. Additionally, we may supplement incongruity theory with what I call the Not Funny Principle. We can only find something funny when we do not take it to be seriously threatening, painful, harmful, tragic, or dangerous. Ultimately, we cannot attend to an incongruity's seriousness *and* its funniness at the exact same moment. We can attend to the seriousness or the funniness of incongruity in rapid succession, but not at precisely the same moment.[14]

This idea is found in numerous places, including the work of Plato, Aristotle, Kierkegaard, Hazlitt, and Bergmann.[15] Consider the following from Hazlitt's discussion on tragedy and comedy: "as long as the disagreeableness of the consequences of a sudden disaster is kept out of sight by the immediate oddity of the circumstances, and the absurdity or unaccountableness of a foolish action is the most striking thing in it, the ludicrous prevails over the pathetic, and we receive pleasure instead of pain…." Here, Hazlitt highlights the significance of attention—our attention is directed to certain things *about* the items in the incongruity such that we can take it as pleasant rather than painful.[16] Note that taking something a particular way has to do with evaluation. I will discuss this later in this chapter and in chapters 4-6.

---

[12] See Noel Carroll's "Horror and Humor" for more on this. His discussion is parallel in some ways to some of the conclusions I draw in this dissertation.

[13] See Leon Festinger's *A Theory of cognitive dissonance* (1957).

[14] I thank Sheila Lintott for helping with this locution.

[15] In particular, Plato's *Philebus*; chapter 5 of Aristotle's *The Poetics*; Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*; William Hazlitt's "On Wit and Humor;" Merrie Bergmann's "How Many Feminists Does It Take to Make a Joke? Sexist Humor and What's Wrong with It."

[16] Now, I do not think the "immediate oddity of the circumstances" is the only thing which can block our taking some incongruity to be seriously threatening, painful, dangerous, tragic, or harmful. Distance can function similarly. For instance, two podcasters talking about the Black Death in medieval Europe can make jokes about it because it is so temporally distant that there is nothing they or anyone else can do about it. In this case, there is

Consider, for instance, that the death of a human being is rather serious. It is at least tragic, and many philosophers reasonably argue that death is a harm to that individual (e.g., Thomas Nagel). Yet, often, we are amused by it. We appreciate that it is serious, but we do not attend to its seriousness at the same moment we attend the funniness of some incongruity about it. In fact, amusing incongruities about death often rely on our conceptions of death as serious.

Of course, there is plenty of humor that depends on our attending to something as painful, but in such cases, we also know that the pain is not serious. The humor of *The Three Stooges* is painful slapstick humor, but we do not take it seriously because we know it is an act. We know that a person could not survive most of what the Stooges walk away from with merely crossed eyes or a lump on the head—in fact, this is what makes it incongruous. It is made clear that their pain is not real and so it is not serious. For even if we feel pain for Curly when he slips and falls down the stairs, we do not take his pain too seriously because we reasonably believe that his pain is not too serious. But if Curly were to slip and fall down the stairs, hit his head on an anvil, and then bleed profusely, we would reasonably find it alarming and upsetting instead of funny.[17] This would take us out of fiction and out of typical Stooge circumstances because it would suggest that Curly's pain is real. So, even if we are able to and actually do find some painful or harmful things to be funny, we only do so if we do not take anything to be truly or actually serious about that pain or harm.

In sum, according to incongruity theory, we are amused when we identify an incongruity and take it as pleasant. This is a widely endorsed account of amusement in the philosophy of humor literature.

Before moving on, we must consider some counterexamples to incongruity theory. First "it's funny because it's true" is a fairly common expression in at least American society that we use to explain why something amuses us. We might think the object of amusement in such cases is a *lack* of incongruity—something *is* the case and so it is funny. However, I think the

---

nothing odd about a plague but there is distance (and even different kinds of it) between the disaster and the people discussing it. (I thank Jon Garthoff for a helpful discussion about distance.)

[17] Merrie Bergmann uses a similar example of being amused by someone slipping on a banana peel—it is funny when the *people* in the episode are not real. When they are real, it is not funny (78-9).

expression captures something else: namely, that some object conforms so strongly to some stereotype that it becomes incongruous. Consider that it would not be particularly funny to see an environmental activist pick up trash on her walk home from work. We would expect this of her. On the other hand, an environmental activist who does not bathe often and does not use deodorant is perhaps amusing because she is not expected to conform *that much* to stereotypes about environmental activists, especially since the stereotype is not necessarily representative of actual environmental activists, much less their ideology. Working to conserve natural resources and improve the environment is not incompatible with bathing or the use of deodorant. Plenty of environmental activists are not like this; I suspect most are not (at least, the ones I know are not like this). Someone who *is,* however, may be found to be amusing because they so strongly conform to the stereotype.

A second possible counterexample is amusement in response to something we have heard before. The following example—and a classic instance of a Dad joke—comes from Kristina Gehrman. Whenever someone says something about ears or hearing in her father's presence, he says, *"What?"* He has done this for 40 years—it is the same pattern and the same joke. Embracing this, after he makes his joke, he always sings, "so predictable in every way" to the tune of Nat King Cole's "Unforgettable." Where is the incongruity if she has heard the joke for decades? In this case, she can be amused by the *same* incongruity: the contrast between hearing and her dad's playful pretending he cannot hear. It is a pattern of *the same incongruity.* Additionally, his commitment, his embracing his commitment through song, and the incongruity in the song itself are independent incongruities and so can be the actual source of her amusement when the pattern repeats itself. All that is needed for amusement is identifying an incongruity and being pleased by it, which precisely explains her amusement.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning here that identifying an incongruity and taking it to be pleasant require certain abilities. In particular, it requires the ability to represent objects in the world, the capacity for attention, and the ability to value things and take things to be important. In the next chapter, I will show why these abilities and the capacities which enable them are importantly tied to our emotions and so what shapes and is shaped by our character. In the following chapters, I will show how this is the basis for our moral responsibility for what

we find funny. For now, I will show why amusement is an emotion even according to this cognitive account of amusement.

III. Applying Criteria for Emotion to Amusement

Now that I have discussed what it is to be amused according to incongruity theory, I will argue for why it is an emotion. To do this, first we must ask: what is an emotion? This is a difficult question without clear answers. The primary consensus in the philosophy and psychology of emotions literature is that there is no complete consensus about what exactly an emotion is (Palencik, 427-8; Deonna and Scherer, 49; Fredrickson and Cohn, 778).

Deonna and Scherer point out that repeated efforts to redefine the concept of an emotion for the purposes of interdisciplinary analysis are often unproductive, even if quite common. What we ought to do, they suggest, is focus on the shared components of different conceptions of emotions (50). While I do not think that redefining emotions is an utterly futile enterprise, I do think that focusing on the features of an emotion that philosophy and psychology typically agree on is useful for our purposes, especially given the lack of consensus. Deonna and Scherer go on to argue that there are five features of emotions that should be included in any *minimal* consensus about what an emotion is and Cova and Deonna clarify them in their application of these criteria. Emotions: "(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" (Cova and Deonna, 449). For the remainder of this section, I will apply these criteria to amusement to show that amusement meets these criteria and so amusement ought to be considered an emotion.[18] I do take issue with part of criterion i and criteria vi and v. I will address those issues as they arise. I will begin by discussing the first criterion.

---

[18] I am not the first person to apply Cova and Deonna's criteria to amusement. In 2017, Steffen Steinert wrote a dissertation on amusement; in part 3 of chapter II, he argues that amusement is an emotion and makes use of Cova and Deonna. But he fails to demonstrate that criteria iv and v apply, and he does not apply any of the rest of the criteria to amusement in the level of detail necessary to sufficiently demonstrate that amusement is an emotion. Nor does he make use of Deonna and Scherer to clarify criterion i when he ought to do so.

III.A. Criterion I

The first criterion is that emotions are "intentional states directed at, or about, certain particular objects (events, states, processes, etc.)" (Cova and Deonna, 450). Deonna and Scherer say emotions are intentional in the sense that "…they take objects beyond themselves. …[A]nger is anger *about* something or *at* someone, jealousy is *directed* at a rival *over* someone, shame is shame of oneself *because* of some trait or act, and so forth. The language of emotions is ample testimony to the fact that emotions point in this way beyond themselves and onto the world" (44). This seems straightforwardly true. Emotions always do have some relation to objects beyond themselves.

Here I would like to note, as Palencik does, that there is no agreement in the philosophical or psychological literature about the objects of emotions (428). There is a great deal of debate about the nature of the objects of emotions and the nature of the relationship between emotions and their objects. But Cova and Deonna, in the spirit of Deonna and Scherer, do not take a particular stand on this issue and instead include a variety of possibilities: that emotions can be *about* objects, *directed at* objects, *because of* objects, and *over* objects. In this same spirit, I will not argue for much of a specific position on this matter either, though I do think we can and should improve the accuracy of what Cova and Deonna and Deonna and Scherer have said here (though not at the expense of maintaining appropriate inclusivity). In particular, I think we ought to simplify the phrasing and say that emotions are always about an object and sometimes can be directed at an object.[19]

First, "about" captures both "because of" and "over." Jealousy over X amounts to jealousy about X. Shame because of X amounts to shame about X. Aboutness simplifies but does not narrow our understanding of the relationship between emotions and their objects.

Second, consider that emotions are not *always* directed at an object. Joy and awe, for instance, are not always directed at anything. Consider also that when emotions are directed at something, they must be about something first. I cannot direct my anger without being angry

---

[19] Note that the view discussed here, that emotions can be about, directed at, because of, and over objects is captured using a single word: intentional. Emotions are, in light of this description, intentional states. I do not use this word because it muddles the discussion. So, my suggestion is meant to be more of an alternative description or locution.

about something first. I am first angry about losing a game and then direct it at the person who won. In fact, it seems as though an emotion must *always* be about something. Anger about losing a game; sad about the loss of my loved one; fear about the bear I see on a hike; joy about the birth of my nephew; pride about my having fixed my sink; shame about my behavior toward a loved one. All of these considerations indicate that while emotions need not be directed at an object, they are always *about* an object.[20] The idea that emotions are always about an object and can be directed at an object improves and is consistent with Cova and Deonna here and the spirit of their broader, inclusive conception of emotions' relationships to their objects.

According to incongruity theory, amusement is always about an object: an incongruity. As discussed above, that incongruity can be between just about any two things. Identifying an incongruity is subject-dependent, and the subject takes it as pleasant.

Even in situational humor, amusement is still about an incongruity—it is just that the incongruity is found within a state of affairs. For instance, say a bakery is working to meet a deadline for a massive wedding cake. They have worked tirelessly for hours on this gigantic beauty; they are so proud of it and themselves when they finish. After they carefully move the cake on to a cart and carefully move the cart down to the delivery truck, they discover the cake is far too large to fit into the delivery truck. At least to an outside observer (perhaps the delivery person) this may be hilarious. What is funny here is the incongruity between their extraordinary efforts with the fact that their effort is rendered futile as a result of a singular, non-baking related oversight. Note that this may not be funny at all to the bakers; but it is likely that with some distance and the passage of time, it is likely to *become* amusing.[21] So even in amusing *situations* where it may seem that there is no clear object of amusement, we may still

---

[20] It is also worth noting that emotions which can be directed may be directed at objects that are not what the object of the emotion is about. Consider that "don't shoot the messenger!" is a request for someone not to direct her anger at the wrong or inappropriate object.

[21] I suspect that some things which are not funny in a particular moment can become funny over time because the threat of it in a moment decreases over time. More *distance* makes it funny. The cake situation, for instance, may be embarrassing (e.g., no one bothered to measure the delivery truck) and so threatening. Or it may be that the bakers take their work very seriously and the fact that their work has been undermined cannot be funny until the seriousness of their work wears off.

say that incongruity exists between facts of the matter. Amusement, then, meets the first criterion; it takes objects beyond itself.

III.B. Criterion II

Amusement also meets the second criterion, which is that there is an emotion-type insofar as each instance of the emotion has "the same formal object (or core relational theme)." This simply means that "Different instances of an emotion-type will have different particular objects…, but the formal objects will remain that same….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 guilty about" (Cova and Deonna, 450).

According to incongruity theory, the formal object of amusement is always an incongruity, which can be between an extraordinary diversity of items. Yet, I will always see as enjoyably incongruous what amuses me.

III.C. Criterion III

The third criterion is that each instance of affect shares the same distinct phenomenology. The way something feels—or what it is like—is a significant feature of any emotional experience and the particulars of this phenomenology are at least part of what helps us distinguish emotions from one another. Unfortunately, as Cova and Deonna note, it is exceedingly difficult to develop solid accounts of phenomenological experiences. They therefore focus on "the relevant phenomenology [that] is closely tied to the feeling of underlying bodily changes" (455). They go on to describe specific bodily changes of the emotion they consider to show that it meets this criterion. Amusement is also closely tied to *feelings* of underlying bodily changes, especially smiling and laughing. I will begin my discussion of phenomenology with bodily changes in cases of amusement as well. I then discuss what I take to be amusement's distinct phenomenology.

According to Palencik, there are clear bodily changes that occur when we experience amusement. "Changes in heart rate, blood pressure, and the nervous system are actually very common when we feel amused" (430). This likely explains why many of us tend to feel warm when we are amused—aside from the warmth generated by muscle movement during

laughter. This also suggests some consistency of bodily changes and associated feelings in instances of amusement.

Additionally, if we smile or laugh, our bodies go through even more felt changes. The muscles in the face contract to form a smile. When we laugh due to amusement, the respiratory system and laryngeal system are engaged *together* (Luschei, et al.). The muscles around our rib cages expand and contract as our lung volume is decreased due to compressed airways and we gasp for air (Filippelli, et al). We all know what this feels like. Sometimes, when we laugh very hard, our tear glands are activated and we cry. In my experience, and likely others' experience, this feels relevantly different from laughter due to discomfort or nervousness. Nervous or uncomfortable laughter tends to be a sort of chuckling or other low-intensity expression; it seems to be produced by the use of one's voice rather than involuntary respiratory contractions.[22] These differences in *felt* experiences of these types of laughter are surely due to differences in the feelings that move us to laugh in the first place. Again, this demonstrates to us that the phenomenology of laughter due to amusement (as opposed to other forms of laughter) is distinct to amusement, which supports the claim that amusement is a distinct emotion.

Of course, not all amusement results in laughter and so we must also consider the *distinct* phenomenology of amusement where there is no laughter. It seems to me that there is a distinct feeling associated with amusement—it is a sort of enjoyment or pleasant, good feeling that comes from seeing something in a particular way. But how is it distinct from other enjoyments or pleasures? Unfortunately, as Cova and Deonna point out, it is difficult to articulate. It seems the best way to demonstrate this distinction is to appeal to the readers' own felt experiences. Think of an instance in which you found something funny but did not laugh—perhaps you smiled or suppressed a smile. I suspect that pleasure you experienced is different from the pleasure of the sun on your skin on a lovely spring afternoon. I suspect it is different from the pleasure of a great conversation with someone you care about, and from the

---

[22] And although this is not a matter of phenomenology, a relevant difference between the two is that laughter due to amusement tends to gauge or reflect how amused we are and laughter due to discomfort or nervousness does not tend gauge or reflect how uncomfortable or nervous we are.

pleasure of eating a well-cooked meal, and from the feeling of pleasure after accomplishing a difficult task. I doubt, however, that the pleasure of amusement you have in mind is much different from other instances of pleasure due to amusement—aside from the addition of laughter generated by this particular feeling of pleasure. That is, the only felt differences among instances of amusement would be the feeling's intensity and whether that feeling generated laughter due to intensity. Amusement-pleasure is surely of the same quality in each instance of our experience of it and it is surely a distinct experience from other types of pleasure or enjoyment.[23] In light of all I have said here, it seems clear that amusement has the same distinct phenomenology.

III.D. Criteria IV and V

The final two criteria for a minimal consensus of what an emotion is are as follows. Emotions are "(iv) associated with the same type of action tendencies, and (v) serve the same general function." Cova and Deonna note that "These two [criteria]…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)" (457). There is much to say about these criteria before applying them.

Cova and Deonna explicitly note that "some will surely ask for an *evolutionary* function that would explain why this emotion came to be selected in our phylogenetic history" (458). And for this reason, they suggest that we ought to be able to give an evolutionary history for a particular state if we are to count it as an emotion. Critically, however, we should not assume that the functions of an emotion—especially a positive emotion—can only be understood in terms of its evolutionary functions. In particular, they argue that their candidate for an emotion (being moved) does not have clear action tendencies. Leaning on Barbara Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, they suggest that most positive emotions do not have clear action tendencies either. Positive emotions "tend generally to *broaden* our 'thought-action repertoire'" and "*build* enduring personal resources" while negative emotions

---

[23] The fact that the degree of pleasure of amusement varies within instances of amusement is not a problem for my view. Degrees or levels of intensity of enjoyments of a particular sort are common, as this is a feature of enjoyment and pleasure in general. For instance, when I eat a delicious meal, I may enjoy it thoroughly, but not as much as I enjoyed a similar meal on a day when I had not eaten. Still, I enjoy the meals similarly.

tend to produce specific action tendencies that limit our behavior (457). Ultimately, Cova and Deonna argue that the primary function of being moved is a cognitive one: it "consists in the reorganization of one's hierarchy of values and priorities." (458). Again, this is not an evolutionary function as such, but they argue that it promotes cooperation, which is evolutionarily advantageous. In essence, they aim to find the primary function(s) of the emotion and secondarily develop an evolutionary history.

Although I do not wish to endorse the broaden-and-build theory, I do roughly agree with Cova and Deonna's approach—aiming to find the primary function(s) of the emotion—even if for somewhat different reasons.[24] While it is worthwhile to consider an emotion's (or any mental state's) evolutionary history, it is a mistake to aim *only* at identifying evolutionary functions of mental states rather than other valuable functions, such as social or linguistic functions. This mistake undermines the enterprise of trying to understand mental states like emotions because it unnecessarily constrains our perspectives and so limits our understanding, which begets more mistakes down the road.

Part of why this mistake continues to be made, I suspect, and it appears Cova and Deonna also suspect, has much to do with traditional analysis of emotions. Historically, many theories of emotions have depended primarily on analysis of negative emotions.[25] Fear and anger, for instance, have been overused in philosophy and psychology literature to develop principles of the nature of emotions. It is clear that these examples—and other more basic emotions—have clear action tendencies that actually do contribute to Darwinian fitness. So, what we are left with is a mistaken tradition that considers action tendencies too narrowly: as contributions to Darwinian ends. However, as we expand our analysis of other emotions to include not just positive emotions—such as emotions with neutral affect (e.g., awe), and much more complex emotions (e.g., pride)—we find that understanding action tendencies merely as

---

[24] Perhaps I ought to explain why I do not endorse broaden-and-build theory. While it seems true that positive emotions *can* broaden our perspectives and enable us to develop and engage in personal growth, I think it wrong to say that they *tend* to do so. Positive emotions just as often prevent us from seeing challenges to our worldviews and recognizing the pain of others, which serve as motivators to grow and broaden our understanding; positive emotions also frequently encourage complacency, especially of thought.

[25] For a helpful history of how philosophers have thought about emotion, see Robert Solomon's "Philosophy of Emotions" in *Handbook of emotions, third edition*.

what contributes to Darwinian fitness is too narrow to capture our emotional experiences and especially their functional value. Moreover, we start to see a richer picture of our mental lives unfold. Thus, while the functions of emotions I discuss in this section may have some evolutionary value, I do not focus on this type of value, as it is not what matters most for a discussion on the function of emotions.

First, an essential function of emotions is that they function to be evaluative. Again, emotions always have objects. Emotions draw our attention to an object or they are about objects which already have our attention. Through affect, the emotion gives us information about that object.

Positive emotions (which have positive affect) tend to take their objects as good or good for someone or something. For instance, joy about the birth of a child; pride about a child's graduation; gladness about taking time off of work. Negative emotions (which have negative affect) tend to take their objects as bad or bad for someone or something. For example, fear about a bear; sadness about the loss of a job; indignation about having been wronged. Essentially, an emotion's affect tells us if the object is good or bad—it evaluates the object. Significantly, whether an individual experiences a positive or negative affect depends a great deal on what a person already takes to be important—what they value. Emotions are evaluative because they are connected to what is valuable to or important to an individual—they track what someone values.

Consider criterion ii. Cova and Deonna note that when we experience a distinct emotion, we will always take some object of that emotion in a particular sort of way. I will always take the object of my fear as threatening. I will always take the object of my pride to be worthwhile. I will always take the object of my amusement to be pleasant. This only makes sense when we consider that the way we take an object depends on what we value (what we judge as and believe is valuable). What we value directs our attention. Specifically, we attend to what we find important in any given context and what we attend to as important depends on

what we value and the nature of the given context. The affect we then experience gives us information about the object of our emotion.[26]

Additionally, we tend to respond to this information. Certainly, this happens extremely quickly, but it happens nonetheless. In fact, this is the basis for iv. What a particular emotion tends to make us do distinguishes it from other emotions. As Cova and Deonna noted, however, we ought not consider only physical actions. In fact, it seems we should simplify and merely claim that different emotions tend to incite different sets of responses, whether they be mental or physical. So, when I apply criterion iv, I will use the phrase "response tendency," even though in the case of amusement, I think the most common response tendencies are actions.

I would also like to note here that when we respond to an emotion, we seem to be treating it like a judgment. As I mentioned in chapter 1, a judgment is a mental state we have in response to reasons. We make judgments in light of facts about the world we take as reasons and we respond to them in various ways all the time—often in ways we do not recognize. Emotions work similarly. While we do not come to a considered judgment about the object of our emotion when we experience our emotions, we treat the assessments of objects by our emotions like reasons by responding in some way to them accordingly; and we often do not recognize how, when, and to what extent our emotions shape our responses. Additionally, we can take our emotions as reasons and so make judgments based on what our emotions tell us. Again, emotions and judgments function similarly but they are not the same thing; judgments are not constitutively affective.[27] All of this is to point out explicitly that emotions have an evaluative function and function like judgments but are not judgments themselves. This will be especially important to chapter 4, where I discuss emotional fittingness and unfittingness.

---

[26] For more on how affective experiences affect judgment, see Gerald L. Clore's work on affect-as-information framework in social psychology. See Schwarz and Clore's "Feelings and Phenomenal Experiences" in *Social Psychology. A Handbook of Basic Principles* (2007). Storbeck and Clore's "Affective Arousal as Information: How Affective Arousal Influences Judgments, Learning, and Memory" (2008).

[27] Additionally, sometimes emotions involve judgments, especially the more sophisticated emotions like grief and indignation. In these kinds of cases, the emotion seems to be *about* some judgment. For example, my grief may involve negative feelings about the judgment "my loved one is gone forever" while my indignation may involve negative feelings about the judgment "I have been wronged." But not all emotions involve judgments. Fear, for instance, can be experienced by animals which lack judgment, such as frogs and mice.

Now, the project of the rest of this section is to identify the most common responses associated with amusement in particular, discuss what other functions those tendencies serve, and show why those functions are valuable or important (independent of their evolutionary value, or at least noting that their value does not bottom out at their evolutionary value). So, it is now time to apply criteria iv and v to amusement.

Amusement has at least two clear response tendencies. Surely the most common response tendency must be laughter. Something is funny and we laugh. Another common tendency is intentionally sharing amusement with others. It is exceedingly common to share with others jokes and amusing anecdotes. These response tendencies serve communicative, social, and even therapeutic functions. These functions are valuable in and of themselves.

First, I will discuss laughter. Laughter indicates, signals, or even broadcasts amusement to others in social contexts and so has a communicative function. More importantly, broadcasting or communicating amusement to others usually reveals commonalities and brings people together, or it reveals differences which can be difficult to overcome. In short, laughter often functions to show us who is in "our group" and who is not. These are the communicative and social functions of laughter.

When I hear someone laugh at something I also find funny, I discover a commonality. This often generates a sense of affirmation and belonging—even if minute—because it suggests to us that we have something in common *aside* from the fact that we both found the same object funny (e.g., shared experience, understanding, perspective, belief, or value). Such commonalities are the cornerstone of any community. Morreall himself points out in "The Variety of Humor" that the "appreciation of humor of incongruity depends on an appropriate conceptual background. … Adults from different cultures often fail to appreciate each other's humor because they don't have the same picture of the world and so do not find the same things incongruous" (61). There must be commonalities to enjoy a joke together and it is these commonalities that often unite us. These can serve as the basis for the development of or reinforcement of social bonds; I will discuss this shortly when I address shared amusement.

Before I elaborate on shared amusement, I must briefly mention the other side of the laughter coin: laughter can also communicate to us that we do *not* have something in common

with someone else. Many instances of failed or unshared laughter—intentional or accidental—signal information to us about each other and can reveal our differences in values and beliefs. And, in some cases, more significant differences can upset pre-existing social bonds, or prevent social bonds from developing further or at all. In these ways, unshared laughter has both communicative and social functions.

These dual aspects of the communicative and social functions of laughter suggests another social function of amusement as a kind of social sorter. It can reveal to us those with whom we have commonalities and those with whom we have differences. These commonalities can, as I will discuss shortly, help us establish or reinforce bonds with others whom we agree. On the other hand, laughter can also reveal those with whom we have serious differences and can break or undermine established social bonds.[28]

I will now elaborate on shared amusement and its connection to shared laughter, which will illuminate more about the social functions of successful amusement discussed above. Shared laughter creates opportunities for shared amusement. Through shared amusement, we can establish new social bonds and reinforce preexisting social bonds (I will argue this in depth in a moment). The more important the commonality revealed by amusement, the more significant the bond can be (e.g., shared religious beliefs). We ought to note that there is a distinction between 1) the shared amusement communicated by laughter—a common response-tendency of amusement—and 2) shared amusement communicated intentionally—another common, but distinct, tendency.[29] Shared amusement of either form can both establish and reinforce preexisting social bonds.

Consider the following case for 1). Say I am in a waiting room with one other person while my car's oil is changed. We are both watching the television, some joke is told, and we both laugh. Neither of us aimed to make one another laugh or to have a shared experience of

---

[28] I do not elaborate further on the point that laughter has this function, nor on how unshared amusement can destroy or prevent the development of social bonds, as I am here discussing the esponse tendencies of *successful* amusement.

[29] To clarify 2), I mean our tendency to share with others amusing anecdotes we experience and funny jokes we hear. These others are typically family and friends, but they may be strangers (e.g., social media). Again, this is what I take to be the second response tendency of amusement.

amusement; the shared amusement is essentially accidental. We discover, accidentally, that we have something in common.[30] This does not have to lead to the establishment of some significant social bond, such as a friendship, but it may. For instance, if the joke contains a particularly dated reference to an object familiar to those from a particular region of the country, the experience of shared amusement may demonstrate that the stranger and I share something very specific in common; perhaps this stranger is a rare find and we develop a friendship that lasts a long time as a result. These sorts of stories are not particularly uncommon—especially where the context is more social, such as a party.

Even if the experience of shared amusement does not result in some significant relationship—and it seems more likely that this would be the case, especially in the auto shop example—shared amusement at least communicates shared humanity.[31] In general, fellowship with other human beings where we recognize one another *as* human beings is good for us.

So, we can see how social bonds of varying degrees may be established through these accidental shared experiences of humor. They reveal to us those with whom we share things in common regardless of whether we aimed to find them.

Accidental shared experiences of humor can also reinforce preexisting social bonds. For instance, say I am visiting my brother at Christmas and, to escape the chaos of many people and pets in close quarters, we quickly run an errand to the pharmacy. As we walk through the store, we notice that something is off about the advertisement posters lining the walls. Looking closer, we see that all of the people on all of the posters have had googly eyes pasted over their eyes. We laugh together and discuss how we would like to meet the person who has done this; perhaps we could see our cousin doing something like this. In this instance, my brother and I are *reminded* of what we already have in common—an appreciation for the absurd (and shared perspectives on our cousin).

---

[30] Of course, this is because we take another's laughter as an honest signal of commonality. This seems justifiable since laughter is typically difficult to control or suppress unless one is already committed to doing so prior to an experience of amusement. I thank Garriy Shteynberg for this point.

[31] It is worth noting that other emotions do this as well; this fact lends support to the claim that amusement is an emotion.

Now, instances of *intentionally* shared amusement—2) above—where someone aims to share amusement with someone else can also reinforce and establish social bonds. And as mentioned above, this occurs in the same sorts of ways as in instances of accidental or circumstantial shared amusement communicated through laughter. This is because telling a joke or amusing anecdote is often a sort of social or cultural ask; it is asking, "do we share X?" where X is some understanding, perspective, belief, value, etc.[32] It is *asking* if we have something in common. The joke listener's amusement answers the question in the affirmative, which aids in the establishment or reinforcing of social bonds.

For an example of how intentional sharing can reinforce preexisting bonds, say my brother and I return home from the pharmacy and share our experience of the googly-eyed poster people with our spouses and parents. They all laugh, especially when we show them the photos we took. In this instance, we have aimed to make them laugh, to share in amusement with them. By inciting this experience of shared amusement, we reinforce our family bonds by finding commonalities. Maybe my mother says, "That seems like something your cousin would do!" and we all laugh, agree, and my brother and I tell her we had the same thought. This reminds us and shows us what we have in common—or perhaps more simply reminds us that we have something in common. This can serve as a powerful reminder of why we ought to *try* to get along with our families when we get together. Moreover, this story may become one for the family treasury and so reinforce bonds through multiple retellings. We may tell this story again the next time we get together, which will remind us of old times and so old bonds, which may encourage us to engage with each other once more.

Of course, intentionally sharing amusement can also establish social bonds for the same sorts of reasons we have been discussing: it shows us what we have in common and this provides a basis for a relationship. Consider also that common contexts for intentionally sharing jokes with people we do not know very well are first dates with a potential significant other, and first days at a new job with new coworkers. These are contexts in which we are *looking* to establish a bond and shared amusement provides us a very quick avenue. Again, it shows us

---

[32] I would like to thank Garriy Shteynberg for this point.

what we have in common which then serves as a basis for establishing trust, and trust is required for successful romantic relationships as well as successful professional cooperation.[33]

Shared laughter and amusement, then, clearly have significant social and communicative functions. And, again, whether those functions explain why humans can experience amusement in the first place (i.e., provide a phylogenetic history) is not especially important, as these functions have independent value to human beings. *Good* relationships, and *good* experiences of social engagement and human contact (which generate and contribute to good relationships) in general are necessary for living *full* lives, not merely surviving.

There is an additional *therapeutic* function of amusement that is linked to sharing amusement. Amusement, as a matter of fact, helps us cope with an absurd and often inhospitable world. As previously discussed in section II, what is seriously threatening cannot be funny in the exact same moment. When terrible things happen to us—things which threaten who or what we care about most—amusement can help us deal with them one way or another. One of the simplest ways amusement helps us cope is that it can distract us from terrible things such that we ignore them until we can deal with them at another time. But this is not the only way amusement helps us cope.

Amusement often helps us see and understand terrible events as far less threatening than they may feel at a given moment. For instance, as COVID-19 became widely recognized as a substantial threat in the United States, Americans quickly began making jokes about the virus and the circumstances it created. One example of a joke about the virus itself is a tweeted photo of a marquee sign that reads "I wanted/ zombies/ this virus sucks" (see Price). Sharing in amusement with others has enabled many of us to cope with the actual live threat the virus poses and the extreme uncertainty we all face. This is because when we are amused by a proper object of fear (e.g., COVID-19), we are essentially engaging a *second* emotional option: we are amused rather than afraid. The object of our fear is transformed to an object of

---

[33] Moreover, different degrees of cooperation are required for different relationships. This means that frequency or intensity of shared amusement can vary as well. I do not need to share amusement over too many things to establish the level of trust I need to cooperate with my coworkers such that we successfully do our jobs to achieve our mutual goals. We need only laugh at Jim for consistently jamming the copier. I do need to establish more trust in a relationship with a potential long-term romantic partner in order for the relationship to succeed; thus, I am more likely to incite more instances of shared amusement to build and maintain trust with this person.

amusement because the joke suggests we think of the object in a different and/or broader context. Amusement is taking up that suggestion and seeing the object in a new way. The threat is reduced. This further supports the Not Funny Principle.

Additionally, amusement about a proper object of fear enables us to feel some control over ourselves in response to situations where we utterly lack control; this also helps us feel the reduction of a threat. *Shared* amusement can further reduce the threat because, again, it demonstrates a collective attitude toward a threat which unites us. From a social psychology perspective, it seems likely that this can encourage cooperation *to reduce* the threat of the common enemy.

Amusement similarly helps us deal with *individual* difficulties or tragedies—past or present; it has tremendous individual therapeutic value. Joking about and being amused by a tragic event acknowledges that it has transpired, but it also creates distance by transforming the object of fear to an object of amusement, which can enable an individual to accept it (ideally) or at least acknowledge the reality of the event such that the individual may carry on. Joking about the tragic event is a way of telling others about personal pain and it often functions as an ask for a second opinion about the response to the tragic event: "is it alright to be amused by this?" Shared amusement in response is confirmation of the appropriateness of the joke-teller's response. In other words, it shows the joke-teller that other people (the audience) think this event, as told in this instance, can be a proper object of amusement and that it is okay to laugh at it. (This is a communicative function, of course.) In ideal circumstances, this shared amusement may affirm the joke-teller. But even in non-ideal circumstances, at the very least, shared amusement communicates to him that he is not alone and that, at least for a moment, he has another emotional option and he does not have to feel pain about his tragedy.

The legendary stand-up comedian Richard Pryor is known for many things. One of those things is his deeply tragic childhood; another is his extraordinary ability to make jokes about it. Early in Pryor's career, he felt that he could not joke about his early life at least partly because the audience would not be able to handle the reality of his experiences, much less be able to laugh about those experiences. Eventually, however, Pryor concluded that he had to be himself,

which included talking about his real life in order to deal with it.[34] Most any later recording of Pryor's stand-up includes jokes about his horrifying experiences; it became part and parcel of his comedy. Comedy gave him an opportunity to talk about his life and sharing in amusement with others about it made it possible for him to endure.[35]

There are clearly many ways that amusement enables us to cope with the wide variety of negative experiences and circumstances in which we find ourselves. The ability to cope with such things is essential for our well-being. Without engaging another emotional option—the option to be amused instead of afraid or sad or otherwise upset—we can become easily overwhelmed by these circumstances. It is easy to become overwhelmed and stressed. When we are overwhelmed or stressed for long periods of time, our quality of life degrades and we often fail to treat ourselves and others as we ought. Amusement's therapeutic function is clearly significant to human beings; its value ought not be overlooked.

I have also shown that amusement's response tendencies of laughing and sharing amusement have social and communicative functions. In particular, shared laughter communicates shared amusement and so can help us recognize those with whom we share something in common. Shared amusement—whether intentional or accidental—can establish and reinforce social bonds, which are significant to human life. In all of this, it should be clear that amusement meets criteria iv and v.

IV. Conclusion

After describing and articulating a broad view of incongruity theory, I argued that amusement, according to incongruity theory, meets the five criteria of an emotion supported by Cova and Deonna and argued for in Deonna and Scherer. Amusement always has an object and it tends to take the same formal object: an incongruity between two things. I shall add here

---

[34] For more, see the ABC News documentary *The Last Days of Richard Pryor*.

[35] In an article for *The Orlando Sentinel* three days after Pryor's death, Leonard Pitts writes: "His comedy was shaped by his pain, fueled by his desperation, given life by his rage. It was authentic, it was naked, it was pure, it was unfailingly human. … [H]is comedy wasn't an act. It was a survival mechanism, a way of understanding the world and the harshness that sometimes dwells therein. It was, in the largest sense, a lesson in how to be. Honest enough to acknowledge how hard this life sometimes is. Brave enough to laugh anyway."

that this point is useful for showing that amusement is not a mood—some feeling that has no object.[36]

Amusement also has the same distinct phenomenology. The pleasure or enjoyment of amusement is not the same as other kinds of enjoyment. The laughter that results from amusement is not the same as laughter that results from nervousness or discomfort. This point is useful for showing that amusement is not a mental state divorced from feeling, such as a judgement, as some have argued (e.g., Robert Solomon, 1976). The phenomenology of amusement is essential to the experience of the mental state.

Amusement is associated with the same kinds of response tendencies, such as laughing and sharing jokes or amusing stories with one another. These tendencies reveal the communicative, social, and therapeutic functions of amusement. They show us what we have in common, they establish and reinforce social bonds with others which are important to human life. They also help us cope with an often hostile world in a number of ways.

Amusement thus meets these criteria of an emotion and is best understood as an emotion, even according to incongruity theory. Additionally, since it is often understood as an emotion according to superiority and relief theories, we have good reason for thinking that amusement is an emotion, no matter how we slice it.

In discussing and arguing for these points, I have also demonstrated that there are three significant elements of all emotions: they are representational (they have representational contents—namely, the objects of the emotions); they are evaluative; and they are felt (affective). These three features will be especially important in chapters 4-6. In the next chapter, however, I argue that we are morally responsible for our emotions, including amusement.

---

[36] This distinction between an emotion and a mood here is well supported by the psychology literature. For instance, in "Positive Emotions," Barbara Fredrickson and Michael Cohn state that: "Positive emotions also resemble positive moods. Yet emotions differ from mood, in that emotions are *about* some personally meaningful circumstance (i.e., they have an object), are typically short-lived, and occupy the forefront of consciousness. In contrast, moods are typically free-floating or objectless, are more long-lasting, and occupy the backgrounds of consciousness (Oatley and Jenkins, 1996; Rosenberg, 1998)."

CHAPTER THREE

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR EMOTIONS

I. Introduction

Chapter 2 and this chapter lay the groundwork for the central position of this dissertation. Namely, we can be morally responsible—and be *held* morally responsible—in at least some cases for what we find funny and fail to find funny because there are many ways in which we can do otherwise with respect to our emotions. In the previous chapter, I argued that amusement is best understood as an emotion. In this chapter, I extrapolate from Nancy Sherman's conception of emotional agency to demonstrate how human beings are, at least to some extent, morally responsible for our emotions and emotional tendencies; since this is the case, we can be blamed and praised for our emotions and emotional tendencies. In the chapters that follow, I will discuss when amusement is fitting and unfitting and how we can hold people (ourselves and each other) responsible for both fitting and unfitting amusement. But for now, I focus on moral responsibility, blame, and praise, for emotions and emotional tendencies.

Before I provide an overview of this chapter, I would like to clarify a few terms I use throughout. First, whenever I talk about blame and praise, I am not invoking or making use of Strawsonian concepts or lines of argument. I am going for something much broader. To *blame* is to hold someone morally responsible for what she has done, said, or felt and to reject it in some way, whether verbally or internally. It is to hold a person accountable for some wrong. To *praise* is to hold someone morally responsible for what she has done, said, or felt and to affirm it in some way, whether verbally or internally. Someone can blame and praise others and herself without ever verbalizing or communicating what she is doing. For the rest of this dissertation, I am talking specifically about blame and praise with respect to emotions and emotional tendencies.

Second, by *immediate emotion* I mean an emotion that occurs in a moment. I borrow "immediate" from Nancy Sherman. Immediate emotions shape and are shaped by emotional

tendencies. Third, by *emotional tendency*, I mean a tendency to feel a particular emotion in response to the same sorts of objects in the same sorts of circumstances. An emotional tendency is a *disposition* that is not static but mutable in the ways that other characterological dispositions are mutable.[37] Note that this is consistent with Julia Annas's conception of a disposition (2011, 14). The idea that immediate emotions contribute to and affect emotional tendencies which affect and produce later immediate emotions downstream is captured by what I call the *emotional feedback loop*.[38]

Now that I have clarified these terms, I turn to my overview of the chapter. In section II, I present the main opposing argument to the position I argue for here. The opposing argument is essentially that because we lack total control over our immediate emotions, we lack responsibility and so moral responsibility for our emotions. In section III, I articulate Nancy Sherman's response: we are responsible for our emotions *even though* we lack total control over them because we are emotional agents. We have the ability to cultivate emotional tendencies as well as the features of our character that are connected to our emotional experiences. Essentially, we are morally responsible because we play an active role in our emotions and the development of our emotional tendencies over time.

In section IV, using Sherman's view as my foundation, I expound on the ways in which we play an active role in our emotional lives. I discuss how we can do otherwise with respect to our immediate emotions as well as our emotions and tendencies in the long-term. We can engage in what I call *immediate emotional guidance*, where we intervene in or regulate or otherwise do something about how we feel in a moment—whether it is preempting an emotion or simply directing our attention away from the object of an immediate emotion. We also engage in what I call *diachronic emotional shaping*, which occurs unintentionally but may also

---

[37] I wish to acknowledge that there are conceptual similarities between what I am calling an emotional tendency and other concepts in the philosophy of emotions literature. In particular, Bell and Ben-Ze'ev (2017) talk about "affective attitudes" in a similar way. Bell, for instance, says that "To have an affective attitude *a* towards *x* is to respond to *x* with distinctive patterns of affect and attention: it is to see *x* as *a*" (451). While this is remarkably similar to my view, Bell includes "optimism, racism and trust" in the category of affective attitudes. However, these are not *emotional* tendencies or dispositions. Rather, they are attitudes that shape one's emotional tendencies, but are not identical to them.

[38] I thank Naomi Rinehold for helping me develop this term. Both immediate emotions and emotional tendencies are equally important to the emotional feedback loop.

be engaged intentionally. Diachronic emotional shaping is, essentially, how we shape emotional tendencies in the long-term via immediate emotions we have at different times over time; the capacities that are connected to our emotions, such as representation, attention, value, belief, and judgment; and, our moral sensitivities. These emotional tendencies we develop end up shaping our immediate emotions downstream. When we intentionally engage diachronic emotional shaping, we are intentionally trying to shape and cultivate our emotions and emotional tendencies over time; this includes not just engaging immediate emotional guidance but also reflecting on and striving to improve our values, beliefs, judgments, choices, and the capacities which enable these things. But regardless of whether we intentionally engage diachronic emotional shaping, we still actively shape our emotional tendencies. More specifically, by *not* intervening or reflecting, we still actively shape our emotional tendencies and so our immediate emotions downstream. These categories of emotional activity— immediate emotional guidance, intentional and unintentional diachronic emotional shaping— are what I take to be the essential features of emotional agency that show the many ways in which we are morally responsible for our emotions.

In section V, I continue to expound and elaborate on Sherman's view. I show that Sherman's Aristotelian view gives us what we need for a description of what a *good* emotional agent looks like. I take from her view that the good emotional agent is one who aims to have fitting immediate emotions and fitting emotional tendencies and who tries her best to develop both. Such a person engages in diachronic emotional shaping after making long-term commitments to emotional improvement, which in turn motivates her to engage immediate emotional guidance. Borrowing from Julia Annas's metaphor of virtue as a skill, I compare the process of developing fitting emotional tendencies to the process of developing skills. It requires sincere commitment, practice, and time to achieve mastery of a skill and to develop a fitting emotional tendency. But where ought a good emotional agent aim? My own view is that we ought to aim at fitting emotional tendencies, which generate fitting immediate emotions. I articulate what I think these must be in section VI.

Again, this chapter and the next lay the groundwork for what I will argue throughout the rest of this dissertation. Before we get there, however, we must now turn to some *prima facie*

considerations in favor of the view that we are responsible for our emotions, and consider a common problem people have with this view in spite of these considerations—a problem Sherman addresses. Then, we will see how it is that we are emotional agents and so are, in fact, morally responsible for our emotions and emotional tendencies.

II. Situating Sherman's and My View

Following Nancy Sherman and Edward Sankowski, I would like to begin by discussing the following considerations. We actually *do* hold people, including ourselves, morally responsible for their (our) emotions. We commonly express negative evaluations of others' emotional states. We even issue injunctions when we think others ought to have a different emotion: "you should be happy for me," "you have no reason to be angry," "pull yourself together," "why aren't you more upset?" It is also common to express positive evaluations of others' emotional states; for example, "go ahead; let it all out." We often evaluate the emotional states of others as good or bad, correct or incorrect, morally appropriate or inappropriate. It would be awfully strange for us to speak this way if we did not actually believe that there is some sense in which we are morally responsible for our emotions.

Additionally, a wide variety of courses, therapeutic practices and treatments, and support groups exist to help us deal with our undesirable emotions like anger and grief. And sometimes an individual may even be sentenced by a judge to participate in anger management courses, suggesting that the legal system acknowledges some sort of emotional responsibility as well. It also suggests that we hold one another responsible not just for how we feel in a given moment, but for emotional tendencies as well. These observations should not only illustrate the plausibility of the claim that we are responsible for our emotions, but also show that it seems that we already act as though the claim is true.[39]

In spite of these considerations, there exists a common (especially historically speaking) theoretical position that emotions are states to which we are entirely passive. On such a view,

---

[39] It is also worth mentioning that Aristotle thought that virtue governs both actions *and* feelings (emotions). That is, there is a right way to feel at the right time and these may or may not be concomitant with our actions, but they ought to be. For example, a generous person feels good about giving her resources when she can. A generous person does not give begrudgingly. She must have generosity of spirit along with her generous actions. On his view, then, how we feel is morally significant and morally evaluable.

emotions are considered states we cannot control because we are not free to choose or to change them at will. So, it is thought that we are not responsible, and so cannot be morally responsible, for our emotions.[40] This is an impoverished, overly simplistic conception of emotions.

Philosophers who argue that we *are* morally responsible for our emotions typically challenge some feature or combination of features of the overly simplistic picture of emotions outlined above. For instance, they may challenge the notion of passivity (e.g., Robert Gordon); or they may accept that we are passive with respect to emotions, or that some emotions are involuntary, but argue that we are nevertheless morally responsible for them (e.g., Robert Adams).[41] The more common strategy is to argue that we are morally responsible for our emotions because there is some morally significant way in which we have some degree of control over or ability to alter or shape our emotions (e.g., Nancy Sherman, Edward Sankowski, Tom Roberts, Justin Oakley, Robert Solomon, Aaron Ben-Ze'ev <1997>).

In what follows, relying on and extrapolating from Nancy Sherman, I join this latter group by arguing that we are morally responsible for emotions because we play an active role in developing and shaping our emotional tendencies, not just our emotions in a given moment. I begin section III by articulating Nancy Sherman's response to the view that we lack control over our emotions in a given moment. I also detail some features of what she calls emotional agency, which I develop in section IV to show why we are at least sometimes morally responsible for our emotions and our emotional tendencies.

III. Sherman's Response and View of Moral Responsibility for Emotions

To reiterate, the common view that needs to be addressed here is that, essentially, we are totally passive to our emotions: emotions merely happen to us; we cannot control them because we cannot choose or change how we feel at will, and so we must not be responsible or morally responsible for our emotions.

---

[40] Nancy Sherman suggests "that many of our reports of emotions as passively experienced may themselves be unconscious ways of avoiding responsibility in the face of uncomfortable conflict" (299). This interpretation does not seem too far off to me.

[41] Additionally, John Sabini and Maury Silver are not philosophers but social psychologists who take up this line of argument.

Now, it is true that it is often very difficult to alter one's emotions in a given moment. I may be able to restrain my *expression* of my anger by not yelling or contain my *expression* of my amusement by not laughing. But it is much more difficult to *stop feeling* angry or amused at a given time. Nancy Sherman uses "immediate control" to mean control in a particular moment and I will use this throughout the chapter. It seems true that we do lack total immediate control over our emotions. But it does not follow from this that we cannot be morally responsible for our emotions. To show how this is so, I turn to Nancy Sherman.

Sherman thinks we lack total immediate control over our actions and so cannot require it for responsibility for actions. But we do not need it. We do have *some* control over our actions: we play an active role in developing them over time. This is the sense in which we are responsible for them. And this is similar to the sense in which we have control over our emotions. We have agency over our emotions in the long-term. It is therefore not a problem for emotional responsibility that we lack total immediate control, as it is not necessary for emotional responsibility.

She begins by arguing that performing an action—from basic actions like whistling and snapping fingers to more complex actions and sequences like baking and doing philosophy—requires a building up of ability and skill (301). For a beginner, the performance of even the most basic action can require a great deal of practice and effort. Sherman says that "…our will, even in the case of physical action, is not a wish that magically works wonders. It is subject to the limitations of materials, techniques, past trials, and the receptivity of the interpersonal world." Essentially, our will is often, perhaps even always, constrained in some way by our past willings and actions, which have to do with us, and by conditions that have little or nothing to do with us. I take the important point here to be that we rarely, if ever, have total immediate control over *anything* we do, so it does not make much sense to require it for responsibility for actions.

All of this seems to be the case for *emotional* agency as well. While our emotions do often depend on circumstances outside our control, they also depend on how we have

cultivated our emotions and emotional tendencies over time.[42] For instance, in cases where someone has a morally problematic emotion, one may voluntarily "expose them to critique, be open to conversation with those who may not always agree with one's opinions, and so on" in order to alter or change one's morally objectionable emotions (301). There are ways we can modify our emotions, even if we cannot always do so immediately or with total immediate control. I will return to and develop this point in the next section.

Ultimately, "We become by doing or not doing. And this is also true in the case of emotions, of having states of character with certain emotional dispositions. The more general point is that if direct willing is not a necessary condition of responsibility for actions, then there is little reason to impose it in the case of emotions" (302). So, ultimately, it does not matter that we lack total immediate control over our emotions. It simply is not necessary for moral responsibility.

What *is* important for moral responsibility for our emotions is what Sherman calls emotional agency. There is what she calls a "retrospective" element and "a prospective element" to emotional agency: "There is a sense that I have comported myself objectionably and that I could have done otherwise [retrospective], but also perhaps more strongly, a sense that I can take steps in the future that make doing otherwise more likely [prospective]" (299). So, emotional agency concerns not just *what* we feel in a moment or *how we shape* what we feel in a moment, but how we contribute to our emotional tendencies and more broadly our emotional development—and so our character—over time.

"Though emotions are receptivities, there is an enormous amount we contribute to make those receptivities functional and morally responsive" (304). Our emotions track what we take to be important about what we experience and this includes what we take to be morally important. Thus, capacities we have for representation, attention, value, judgment, belief, empathy and sympathy heavily shape and are heavily shaped by our emotions and emotional tendencies. Emotional tendencies, then, do not merely reflect our character; they are important parts *of* our character. So, to summarize briefly, Sherman's view is, ultimately, that

---

[42] Note that the fact that emotions often depend on circumstances outside our control will be relevant to blame and praise.

because we play an active role in our emotional development and because our emotions constitute our characters in morally significant ways, we are morally responsible for our emotions.

In the section that follows, I will elaborate on and extrapolate from these features of Sherman's position discussed above both to clarify and to articulate in more detail how I understand our active role in our emotional and so characterological development. In particular, we exhibit emotional agency in both immediate emotions and emotional tendencies, though the latter is more morally significant because of the stronger sense in which we can do otherwise.

IV. Elaborating on Sherman's View: Emotional Agency

We experience and play an active role in what emotion(s) we experience in a moment (i.e., immediately). We play an active role in how our emotional tendencies develop over time (i.e., diachronically) and we do so intentionally and unintentionally. We can choose to reflect on our emotional experiences when we are moved to do so from the outside as well—when something interferes with our emotional experience, we can take time to consider why. In short, we contribute to our emotional development and so actively participate in shaping the character of the emotions we tend to have. We are emotional agents. In the rest of this section, I will discuss the many ways in which we *are* emotional agents: through what I call immediate emotional guidance, and intentional and unintentional diachronic emotional shaping. These categories of emotional agency will illuminate our active roles in our emotional development and reflect the aforementioned complexities of our character, especially the emotional feedback loop.

I begin with *immediate* emotional guidance. I do this solely for explanatory clarity, not because I think immediate emotional guidance is more important for emotional agency and so moral responsibility for emotions. I also discuss immediate emotions before emotional tendencies for the same reason. Doing so simply makes more sense of the emotional feedback loop, the connections to character, and so good emotional agency.

When Sherman says we can modify our emotions immediately, I take her to mean that we have some ability to immediately shape, guide, or interfere with our emotions. We can

sometimes do *something* about an emotion in a moment. And I am (and suspect Sherman would also be) very open-minded about what those somethings can be.

For instance, I may turn off my radio because the program is making me angry. In this moment, I determine that the content is upsetting me and I physically intervene in order to emotionally intervene.[43] Or, I might change the radio station the moment the introduction to the program begins because I believe it will make me angry. In this case, I prevent the anger before it occurs. Or, if I have been concerned about my frequent experiences of anger, I may pause and ask myself, "is my anger here fitting or appropriate?" and so consider whether my anger is appropriate given the object. I may even ask this question in order to distract myself from the felt quality of the emotion. There are many ways we can guide our emotions while we have them, and even head them off if we are sufficiently in tune with our tendencies. This is not control in the strong sense, but it is an active form of emotional *intervention* and in some cases emotional *regulation* that occurs in a moment. In light of this, I hesitate to call it immediate control, as Sherman does. Instead, I call it *immediate emotional guidance*, as a catch all for the various ways we can alter, guide, interfere with, prevent, and regulate our emotions in a particular moment. This ability we have is thoroughly intertwined with the development of our emotional tendencies over time and so what we end up feeling in a moment down the road. And when and whether we engage it is essential to our long-term emotional development and the development of the capacities connected to our emotional capacities, which of course partly constitute our character. I will now articulate why this is so.

As both Aristotle and Sherman suggest, we make enormous contributions to our *long-term* emotional tendencies. We do this in a variety of ways regardless of whether we do so intentionally or unintentionally. I call it *diachronic emotional shaping*.[44] And it is more morally

---

[43] For a discussion about why physical intervention like this (which could easily be enacted by a third party) is still attributable to me, the agent, see Maura Tumulty's "Two(ish) Kinds of Self-Control." She also mentions that in the case of recalcitrant emotions, physically acting may be *necessary* for emotional regulation (7-8).

[44] It will become clearer later in this section why I have chosen "immediate emotional guidance" and "diachronic emotional shaping," but I should say a quick word on it here. I chose the words "guidance" and "shaping" because of what I take them to connote. In my view, what we are able to do in a moment to modify or alter our immediate emotional experiences is better captured by the word "guidance" because it connotes more intentional doing and immediate emotional guidance is, as I have said, about what we can *do* to intervene, etc. Think of a tour guide or a guide dog—they actively direct us. Diachronic emotional shaping, on the other hand, can be done intentionally or

significant than immediate emotional guidance ultimately because it is done *over time.* I will discuss this in more detail at the end of this section.

Here is an example of intentional diachronic emotional shaping. Say a person realizes he has a problem with anger. There are many ways he could come to realize this but let us say he has been prompted to reflection after a friend points out his tendency to become easily enraged. He decides to take an anger management course. If he is sufficiently dedicated, this person can develop skills necessary to aid him in his quest to calm down. He learns breathing exercises and mantras he can deploy, and eventually questions to ask himself when he starts to feel angry in a moment. This is how immediate emotional guidance plays a role in intentional diachronic emotional shaping. The more he deploys these tactics immediately, the less angry he *tends* to feel. By asking himself why he is angry, he may begin to recognize what are fitting and unfitting objects of anger. Perhaps he will even be able to recognize the roots of his deeper anger such that he can overcome them. For instance, perhaps he comes to learn that due to some events in childhood, he understands the world as a hostile place and so reacts with hostility before he can be threatened or injured. Once he is able to get his immediate feelings under some control, he can then address this problem properly by working hard to change the relevant beliefs and judgments he has about the nature of the world and his place in it. In this way, he also intentionally aims to alter the capacities that help him interpret the world around him and so shape his emotional responses in a moment. Undergoing such a project is difficult, but it is worth it to him, especially since he believes that if he can get his beliefs and judgments where they ought to be, his emotions will fall in line.[45]

---

unintentionally and so "shaping" better connotes what occurs here. Clay is shaped whether a person makes an ashtray out of it or whether it falls on the floor because of an earthquake. It still happens. Of course, not everyone may agree with my choices to use "guidance" and "shaping," and this is not a major issue. You may use whatever words to substitute "guidance" and "shaping" you prefer.

[45] This example is, admittedly, less common because it is more ideal in the sense that this person simply *is* taking moral responsibility for his emotional tendency to be angry and it seems he has achieved some success in altering this tendency. Still, the example is not unrealistic.

An interesting analogy is the process of sobriety that people recovering from alcohol and narcotics addiction undergo. They must make a long-term commitment to change that must be strong enough to motivate and continue to motivate them to act according to their commitments in a variety of circumstances. It takes a great deal of time, effort, and reflection to address their compulsions and impulses developed over time. More is required to address those compulsions and impulses *while* trying to understand addiction, identify any underlying causes, and address those causes. To do all of this, a person must *want* to change from the inside in order to be

In this example, the man engages immediate emotional guidance due to and as part of his commitment to diachronic emotional shaping. He is intentional about improving his emotional tendencies over time. Moreover, he works to learn, understand, and change underlying causes or features about himself that cause or contribute to his emotional problem. This is the sort of goal-directed activity of intentional diachronic emotional shaping that leads to developing *fitting* emotional tendencies, which are required for good emotional agency. I will discuss these concepts in section V.

Of course, a person need not take a formal course to intentionally shape her emotions over time. Nor is it the case that intentionally shaping emotional tendencies must concern only ridding oneself of an undesirable emotion—one can aim to develop fitting emotional tendencies.

For instance, say a person, call her Louise, realizes that she frequently struggles to find the jokes her fellow administrative assistants make about their jobs to be funny. The jokes tend to be about their shared plight as underpaid, overworked employees; she just does not see what is particularly funny about them. However, Louise would like to be able to share amusement with her peers—she does not want to be the wet blanket or the fuddy-duddy. Through reflection and consideration, she eventually notices that she tends not to be amused because she takes her job seriously. Of course she has noticed the terrible inefficiencies, the last minute deadlines she is forced to work under, the credit she never receives, that her promotion continues to be postponed even while she is forced to take on more responsibilities. But she has understood this as part of the job. This is just what she has to endure and she does. She is intense and she gets her work done. But over time, her seriousness has caused her a great deal of stress; she lacks the appropriate attitudes about her job required to be amused at the sorts of jokes her coworkers make. She asks herself if her work actually demands the

---

successful. Even so, a person may fail a few times before staying sober for the rest of her life. Similarly, successful improvement of emotional tendencies requires self-motivated commitment, taking responsibility, overcoming impulses developed through habit, trying to understand the nature of the problem, and addressing any underlying causes. A person may also fail for a while before they succeed. Moreover, both of these processes include a commitment that lasts a long time. It is not something one can fix and never think about again. To do it right takes reflection even after one has achieved some success. This is precisely why I use the word "intentional." What matters for morality here is that there is an intentional commitment to a goal that requires further intending. It is a *striving.*

seriousness with which she takes it. She decides it does not. She then commits to shifting her beliefs about her work and how she values it for her own sake, but also so that she can be amused when she wants to be and share laughs with her peers. After all, work need not consume her life or be a particularly significant feature of her identity. She is thus able to loosen up and eventually come to be amused by at least many of the same objects of amusement as her peers and so is able to achieve her goal.

Note that in both of these examples, the emotional experiences and tendencies of each person are also clearly connected to each person's character. In the first case, the angry man's anger had much to do with his perspective of the world as hostile. This colored many of his other beliefs and judgments about other people, what he took to be important or important, and this colored his emotional life. And, of course, his emotional tendencies colored many of his beliefs and judgments in return. It is difficult, after all, to determine what is morally important in a given case when one is enraged; it is difficult to see the world without confirmation bias in a moment when one is already hostile toward it. In the second case, the woman's seriousness about her work prevented her from seeing what could be amusing about it. Her beliefs about the significance of her work and her role were out of proportion and so she was unable to be amused as she believed she should have been.

Again, these examples above show us what *intentional* diachronic emotional shaping looks like, how this is intertwined with immediate emotional guidance, and how a person's character is tied up in both. But this is not the full extent of our active involvement in our emotional and characterological development. More specifically, we actively cultivate and shape our emotions and emotional tendencies *unintentionally* over time as well. This may be somewhat surprising, especially since we tend to experience emotions in a sort of "autopilot" type of way. When we are not engaged in programs of emotional self-improvement as above (i.e., attending to modification and so attending to ourselves), it may not feel as though we are actively shaping our emotions in a moment or our emotional tendencies over time. But this does not mean we are not doing so.[46]

---

[46] And, of course, this phenomenological point is likely responsible for the common and mistaken claim that we are totally passive with respect to our emotions.

Emotional tendencies develop over time without intentional shaping. Recall Sherman here: "We become by doing *or not doing*" (302, emphasis added). I shape my emotional tendencies and so my immediate emotions down the road even if I do nothing intentionally to change them. If I see no reason to change my emotional tendency, I still shape myself. If I see no reason to engage immediate emotional guidance which would have caused me to reflect on my emotions and tendencies, I still shape them. So, even if I do nothing intentionally, I still shape my emotional tendencies (and my immediate emotions down the road).

This is because immediate emotional experiences (guided or not)—along with other features of our character—shape our emotional tendencies. Together, they build up tendencies to feel the same ways about the same types of things. It is a sort of cumulative engraining, we might say. Our immediate emotional responses over time and the capacities involved in those emotional experiences—such as attention, representation, and value—add up to *tendencies* to feel X emotion in response to Y in Z circumstances regardless of whether we do something to shape those tendencies or not.

For instance, say a high schooler takes her grades to be the most important part of her life and she works hard in school accordingly. Because of what she values, whenever she gets what she takes to be a deficient grade, she will tend to become frustrated. Frustration is emotion type X, what she takes to be deficient grades are object type Y, and discovering she has gotten a deficient grade in some subject are circumstances Z. A second example is the angry man discussed above before he noticed he had a problem and intervened. He feels angry (X) about what he takes to be hostility (Y) in order to stave off fear in whatever circumstances cause him to take the word to be hostile (Z). In both examples, both parties repeat these immediate emotions without guidance and without reflection, yet they are still actively doing so and there is a strong sense in which they could do otherwise.

Regardless of whether we know about it, we actively contribute to our emotional tendencies and so are actively shaping our diachronic emotional development. These diachronic emotional tendencies also shape what we feel in a moment down the road. Clearly, we are *still* emotional agents even when we do *not* engage in immediate emotional guidance or do *not* intentionally engage in diachronic emotional shaping.

Diachronic emotional shaping and immediate emotional guidance are the means by which we are agents of our own emotional lives. They describe how we are (whether we realize it or not) actively involved in cultivating our emotions and emotional tendencies. They, in turn, describe our involvement in cultivating the mental states and capacities that affect and are affected by emotions and emotional tendencies; they show us the many ways in which it is possible for us to do otherwise with respect to our emotions. Because this is the case—because we are emotional agents—we are morally responsible in important ways for our emotions and emotional tendencies.

Lastly, I mentioned above that diachronic emotional shaping is more morally significant than immediate emotional guidance; it should now be clearer why this is so. The sense in which we are agents of our emotional tendencies is far stronger than the sense in which we are agents of our immediate emotions. We have far more control over our emotional tendencies over time than we do over our immediate emotions, at least insofar as there is a much stronger sense in which we could do otherwise because we have more time, more opportunities, and more data to work with to show us when we *ought* to do otherwise. There is always *something* for us to notice, to detect and attend to as important, to hear from a friend or even a stranger that ought to lead us to reflect on our emotional tendencies; and there is always something we can do to change as a result of that reflection. There simply is more to do differently and so more over which we have moral responsibility.

Having discussed all of this, I will consider in the next section what a *good* emotional agent looks like. In particular, I focus on what she aims at and whether and how she works to improve her emotions and tendencies. This discussion then clarifies for us what is reasonable to expect of individuals and so how we can determine praise and blame for emotions—something which Sherman does not explicitly address.

V. Elaborating on Sherman's View: The Good Emotional Agent

Sherman's Aristotelian view supplies us with normative claims about how we *ought* to be since she thinks we should aim to become good, morally virtuous people. With this in mind, it seems clear that we ought to make long-term commitments to improving ourselves through habituation. So, with respect to emotions, we ought to intentionally reflect on our emotions,

aim to improve our emotional lives, and take action to improve our emotional lives through cultivating fitting emotional tendencies. As I see it, we ought to have the right aim and we ought to try our best to improve accordingly. To try our best—to strive—requires engaging both intentional diachronic emotional shaping and immediate emotional guidance. Bear in mind also that intentionally engaging diachronic emotional shaping can and often does involve other activities that shape our emotional dispositions. This includes but is not limited to: reflecting on and perhaps altering beliefs, judgments, choices, values; developing our abilities to empathize and sympathize; and, improving our capacity for attention as well. We ought to be concerned with these features of our character (and especially moral character) that are connected to our emotions and emotional tendencies. I take it, then, that aiming and striving to develop fitting emotional tendencies are the two most essential features of the good emotional agent.

As I have said, emotional tendencies are dispositions which are part of our character. They are not static. They can and do change over time. In Julia Annas's "Virtue as a Skill" and her book *Intelligent Virtue*, she argues that virtues are analogous to skills. I will borrow from this analogy (without making use of or endorsing all features of her view) to show the ways that developing *fitting* emotional tendencies is similar to developing a skill. This will further illuminate the ways in which aiming and striving are necessary for good emotional agency. I would like to note here, however, that *good emotional agency* is what we ought to expect from ourselves and others rather than *perfect emotional agency*. Perfect emotional agency would be having only and all fitting emotional tendencies and so only and all fitting immediate emotions. This may be helpful for human beings to aim at or regulate ourselves by. It is not, however, a reasonable expectation of human beings, as it is far too demanding. This is particularly relevant to the discussion of blame in the next chapter.

Like Sherman, Annas says in *Intelligent Virtue* that to master a skill (or in our case, an emotional tendency) requires aiming at mastery of that skill as a goal while building up one's abilities over time through practice and habit. According to Annas, skills are "essentially developmental" (9). We must engage in activities that masters of a skill also engage in and work on them overtime. To become good at the piano, we must play the piano. Beginners and

masters both play the piano—the difference is in the *doing* and one only becomes a master through correct practice (13-14).

Similarly, people genuinely working to develop a fitting emotional tendency reflect, engage immediate emotional guidance, and work on shaping relevant features of their character over time. Additionally, those who have achieved a fitting emotional tendency have been engaging in these activities long enough to learn what works and what does not when and why. Such persons are masters of an emotional tendency because they know what to do when and they often know why they are doing it. What they do is self-directed, it is aimed at the right goal, and they are striving to get it right.

According to Annas, skills are also "learnt always in an embedded context" (52). A person is always embedded in a family, a society, a country, etc. A person is always as a matter of fact embedded. Thus, mastery may look a bit different from person to person insofar as different things may be more important to her in light of her embeddedness and she learns this through practice. She cannot learn how to apply her skills in her embedded life without learning how to *exercise* them in her embedded life. This is also true of developing fitting emotional tendencies. Someone cannot develop them without seeing how they are fitting in her own life as she practices the activities that generate them.

This leads me to a point of contention with Annas here. In "Virtue as a Skill," Annas is emphatic about the idea that someone must have sufficient intellectual grasp of "all the relevant elements in the field" or purview of the skill to be mastered (231). Someone has to know rationally why she is doing what she does whenever she does it. While this may be important for virtue, it need not apply to skill. For instance, a singer with perfect pitch who sings often but cannot read music can correct herself without knowing why, theoretically, the correction is correct. She just knows. She does something differently and it works. So, while skills may *often* require an intellectual grasp, it is clearly not a requirement of mastery of a skill. The same is true for mastering an emotional tendency. Someone may know why she is engaging what she is engaging in order to develop an emotional tendency, but she may not. She may only know that *it has worked before and it will likely work again.*

51

The last significant way mastering a skill is similar to mastering a fitting emotional tendency that I shall discuss is that one must continue doing the activity well to maintain mastery. A master piano player must keep playing the piano masterfully, and most of this will come from habits she has developed. She will make mistakes from time to time, she will reflect on them and determine if they are indicative of a problem. She will address the problem if she believes she ought and will not if she believes she ought not. Similarly, a person with a fitting emotional tendency will produce fitting immediate emotions most of the time from habit but may occasionally mess up. She will also reflect and consider whether her mistakes are indicative of a problem and she will address or not address it as she sees fit. Again, mastery of either a skill or an emotional tendency does not mean *perfect* mastery.

Clearly, developing a fitting emotional tendency is very much like developing a skill. It requires commitment, it is incremental, and so takes much time and effort. This accords with Sherman's take on what is most important about emotional agency and what I have called good emotional agency. To be good emotional agents, we must aim and we must strive to develop fitting emotional tendencies that generate fitting immediate emotions down the road. We must, therefore, engage immediate emotional guidance and intentional diachronic emotional shaping.

VI. Conclusion

I have argued that we do have emotional agency. We play an active role in the development of our emotional experiences in a moment and our emotional tendencies. We therefore play an active role in the development of our moral character. This means that even though we lack some control over our emotions and emotional tendencies because we are not in full control over our receptivities and the capacities that enable them, and even though other factors out of our control play a role in our emotional development (e.g., who our parents are, where we live, etc.)—and in the development of other features of our character—there is a surprisingly strong sense in which we *can do otherwise* with respect to our immediate emotions and diachronic emotional tendencies. This is, roughly, the sense in which we are morally responsible for our emotions and our emotional tendencies.

The good emotional agent is one who aims to develop fitting emotional tendencies and strives to develop them using immediate emotional guidance, intentional diachronic emotional shaping, and by shaping her own values, beliefs, judgments and certain other capacities properly. This process is very much like developing mastery over skills. It requires commitment and time to habituate oneself properly. Of course, even masters make mistakes and we cannot expect ourselves to be perfect emotional agents. We must, in a sense, give ourselves and each other some grace in light of human limitations.

To further clarify good emotional agency, I will discuss what fitting and unfitting immediate emotions and emotional tendencies look like in the next chapter. This will inform under what circumstances we ought to blame persons for unfitting emotions or emotional tendencies and under what conditions we ought to praise persons for fitting emotional tendencies.

CHAPTER FOUR

FITTINGNESS, BLAME, AND PRAISE

FOR IMMEDIATE EMOTIONS AND EMOTIONAL TENDENCIES

I. Introduction

As I argued in chapter 2, emotions are always about an object, which means they are fundamentally representational. They function to evaluate and so are fundamentally evaluative. They are also constitutively felt and so are fundamentally affective. Using these three fundamental features of emotions, I develop criteria for fitting emotions. Additionally, in developing the concept of a fitting immediate emotion, I focus on what is required of the *individual* doing the emoting because an emotion surely cannot be evaluated for fittingness outside of the individual who is experiencing it or outside her context.

In order for someone's immediate emotion to be fitting, she must meet three criteria. First, she must represent the object of her emotion in its circumstances with sufficient accuracy. Second, she must detect and attend to what is *actually* important (including morally important) about the object in light of its circumstances such that she takes it in the right way (i.e., evaluates it properly). Third, she must feel her emotion in proportion to what is important about the object in its circumstances and feel it appropriately relative to other mental states she may have, including other emotions. In other words, she ought not feel too much or too little affect about the object of her emotion in light of its circumstances and her own mental states.[47] If she fails to meet any of these criteria, the emotion is not fitting.

However, having an unfitting immediate emotion need not be a moral failure. If someone fails to meet one of these but that failure does not concern anything *morally* important, it is morally neutral and there are no grounds for blame. If, however, the failure is morally valenced, the failure amounts to a moral failure and so may be grounds for blameworthiness. To determine whether and to what extent an individual may be

---

[47] I will use "object-in-its-circumstances" throughout the rest of this chapter. This helps capture the idea that an object cannot be evaluated properly without being considered in light of its circumstances.

blameworthy, we must consider a wide variety of mitigating conditions which I discuss at some length. The most important is whether the person's failure is atypical for her or part of an unfitting emotional tendency. If the failure is atypical, we may blame her far less. If her failure is due to or part of an unfitting emotional tendency, it is likelier that it will be something for which she is blameworthy.

The same three criteria required for a fitting immediate emotion above apply to fitting emotional tendencies, except that the criteria are *tendencies* to do these things. That is, someone must tend to represent an object-in-its-circumstances with sufficient accuracy, tend to detect and attend to what is actually important such that she evaluates an object-in-its-circumstances properly, and tend to feel the affect of her emotion in proportion to what is important about the object and relative to other mental states she may have. I emphasize that they tend to do so in order to be compatible with a flexible notion of character according to which one can have dispositions towards different things in degrees. Note that all three of these criteria require well developed capacities for representation, attention, value, judgment, belief, and well developed moral sensitivities. These are, again, all parts of our character, as are emotional tendencies. Thus, someone becomes fully blameworthy for an unfitting emotional tendency when it is the result of a flaw of moral character that someone could reasonably have been expected to address or correct but has failed to address or correct.

Lastly, I briefly discuss when a fitting immediate emotion or tendency is praiseworthy. In short, when it comes from a morally good character, it is praiseworthy. There is a perhaps surprising exception. An immediate emotion can also be praiseworthy even if it does not come from a morally good character. If it is fitting because someone evaluates properly because she detects and attends to what is actually important as a result of a change of heart or value— however brief—her immediate emotion can be praiseworthy.[48]

---

[48] According to Aristotle, we acquire virtue developmentally. In particular, we practice doing and saying what is morally right until we eventually come to understand and appreciate the reasons why what we have practiced is morally right such that we are motivated by the right reasons to keep doing those things. We come to feel the right things as we do the right things for the right reasons. See Nicomachean Ethics, book II, chapters 1-4. (See Annas's "Virtue as a Skill" and Sherman's "Habituation of Character" as well.) Analogously, when someone experiences a change of heart or value shift such that she identifies what is important in a given situation, she has taken an important step toward developing a fitting emotional tendency. This is not *why* her fitting immediate emotional

II. Fitting Immediate Emotions

It is unsurprising that different theories of emotions—such as perception theories, conative theories, cognitive theories, and desire theories—give us different ideas for what an appropriate or fitting emotion looks like.[49] As I explained in chapter 2, I do not adhere to a particular theory of emotions but to a far more general concept. This is useful at least because my account of fittingness avoids the problematic reductionism of many theories of emotion.[50] I do, however, take emotions to have two jointly constitutive elements—emotions are always about an object and they have a distinct affect. They also serve an evaluative function (which requires capacities for attention and value) and involve representations. Moreover, as I discuss them in this dissertation, they are experienced *by individuals*. In order to understand the fittingness of an emotion, we have to understand the emotion in terms of the individual experiencing the emotion rather than understanding them as, for instance, substances or mere tokens of a type. In this section, therefore, I do not give an account of a fitting emotion *qua* emotion. Rather, I develop a concept of fitting emotions in terms of criteria that an individual experiencing the emotion must meet. That is, *my view has the advantage of understanding fitting emotions in terms of the individuals who have them.* It does not make sense to evaluate an emotion outside an emoter and it does not make sense to evaluate it outside of the context or circumstances in which the emotion is experienced Furthermore, the fittingness of an

---

experience is praiseworthy, however. Rather, it is because she has properly evaluated an object-in-its-circumstances for the right reasons.

[49] For helpful overviews of theories of emotion and notions of fittingness, see Scarantino and de Sousa's *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry "Emotions," as well as section 1.2 of chapter 1 of Christine Tappolet's book *Emotions, Values, and Agency*.

[50] Tappolet (7) and de Sousa (1987, xvi) mention that it is common for accounts of emotions to reduce emotions to something else better studied or "better understood" like judgments, feelings, perceptions, or desires. They also hold, as I do, that this is a mistake. In particular, I argued in chapter 2 for why emotions are not the same things as judgments even though they function similarly. Additionally, emotions are not perceptions because they are not constitutively felt, while emotions are. Emotions do not amount merely to feeling or affect alone because they are always about something. Lastly, an emotion is not a desire because a desire is fundamentally directed *at* an object, while emotions may be directed at an object but are not constitutively so.

Ben-Ze'ev (2017) highlights the incredible subtlety of emotions, saying, "…we should be suspicious of simplistic definitions of emotions, which are more typical of [a] thing, substance, or entity than of function, state, or attitude. Explaining emotions requires the use of conceptual tools that are sensitive to dynamic diversity and complexity and include multidisciplinary perspectives" (1). I think this is right; I also think explaining *fitting* emotions requires the same level of complexity, which is evident throughout this section.

emotion does not render it morally right or wrong. Rather, as I will articulate in this section, for immediate emotions and emotional tendencies, there is a distinction between fittingness and morality. I will now articulate my view and will, as I did in chapter 3, begin with the *immediate.*

A fitting immediate emotion is an immediate emotion someone has about an object in a set of circumstances that *is appropriate to that object in light of its set of circumstances.* "Circumstances" refers to relevant features of the given context in which the object of the emotion that is experienced occurs. The list of what counts as "circumstances" is, appropriately, rather long and inclusive. For instance, if the object of an emotion is a physical object, "circumstances" includes the physical environment of that object, the spatial relationship the emoter has to the object and to other features of the physical environment. Other relevant features of an object may include who is nearby when the emotion is felt and whether the emoter knows them and how they might respond to the object. Broadly speaking, a fitting immediate emotion is one that fits the object in the given situation.

Below, I provide three criteria for a fitting emotion. Before going into detail, I wish to give a brief account of the criteria. As I discussed in chapter 2, emotions function to be evaluative—they give us information about our objects. Proper or appropriate evaluation of the object-in-its-circumstances is required for an emotion to be fitting. Of course, one must also represent what is necessary for proper evaluation in order to evaluate it properly or take it in the right sort of way. That is, one must represent the object and its circumstances with whatever degree of accuracy is necessary for proper evaluation.[51] For example, it is not necessary to represent the precise number of teeth a snarling dog has when it bares its teeth; it is, however, necessary to represent the teeth, that the dog is baring them, and that it is snarling

---

[51] Note that this feature of the view sounds a great deal like rational sentimentalism: "the view that human sentiments are subject to and responsive to a particular rational assessment, and that moral or evaluative concepts depend upon sentiments that are rational in this sense" (Brady 465). The most significant difference between these types of views and mine is that on my view, sentiments do not constitute the *entire* evaluation. Rather, certain values we hold, assessments, and judgments we have made in the past which reinforce those values also determine the affect of the emotion (i.e., the sentiment). Moreover, whether our values align with what is objectively valuable is essential for my view but does not appear to be for rational sentimentalism. In fact, this part of my view helps me avoid a problem discussed in footnote 56.

in order to properly evaluate the dog as threatening. Lastly, one ought to feel rightly about the object-in-its-circumstances based on that proper evaluation.

Thus, in order for an individual to have a fitting emotion, three criteria must be met. If someone fails to meet any of these criteria, the emotion is not fitting. An immediate emotion is fitting if the following is true of a given emoter. 1) The emoter represents the object of her emotion and its circumstances with sufficient accuracy. 2) The emoter detects and attends to what is objectively important (including what is morally important) about the object of her emotion in its circumstances such that she evaluates it properly. 3) The emoter feels the affect of her emotion in proportion to what is actually important about the object-in-its-circumstances and relative to other simultaneous mental states (e.g., other emotions).[52]

Some may object to my picture of a fitting immediate emotion because it depicts emotions as frequently *un*fitting. Ultimately, I do not think this is a problem, as at least my own experience suggests that many of my immediate emotions actually are frequently unfitting. There are many ways for an immediate emotion to fail to be fitting on my view. However, such failures are not necessarily *moral* failures. In fact, my view actually clarifies the distinction between moral and non-moral failures and so prevents us from blaming when we ought not. This will be discussed in section IV.[53] I shall now discuss the three criteria of a fitting immediate emotion in detail.

II.A. Criterion One: Sufficient Representational Accuracy

First, a fitting immediate emotion requires representational accuracy. An individual must represent the object of her emotion as well as the object's circumstances with sufficient accuracy. In his book *Origins of Objectivity*, Tyler Burge helpfully parses the distinction between representation and perception; perception is a sort of species of representation. In short,

---

[52] Note that these criteria can be applied to humans and non-human animals alike. For the purposes of this project, however, I focus on the emotions and emotional tendencies of human beings.

[53] Another potential objection is that in using three different criteria I am actually using three different notions of fittingness for emotions and this seems like cheating. There are different ways to evaluate emotions, but ultimately, it is a mistake to limit the evaluation of emotions only to one feature of emotions. The three criteria are generated by the three elements of an emotion I focus on, which also include considerations of function. Thus, even if my view is a combination of fittingness conceptions found in the literature, I see no reason why these three should not be used together.

representation is a capacity by which a mind references reality.[54] Perception, the original

representational capacity, "is a sensory capacity for objectified representation" (317).

Perceptions have representational contents. Burge also holds that other mental states like

beliefs, judgments, and thoughts also have representational content. Such content is normed

by what he calls veridicality. I use "accuracy." On my view, which borrows from these concepts,

to represent accurately is to represent an object—whether physical, conceptual, or otherwise—

as it is.

Now, we do not always represent objects with total accuracy. In fact, we frequently do

not. For this reason, I require *sufficient* representational accuracy rather than complete

representational accuracy. It is not the case that someone must have a perfectly developed

capacity for representation, as this surely does not exist. Still, an individual must represent

certain features of the object and its circumstances in order to evaluate it properly, as in the

second criterion. Thus, on my view, "sufficiently accurate" representation amounts to

representing what is necessary for an individual to meet the second criterion which concerns

appropriate evaluation of an object of emotion. Recall the example of the snarling dog and its

teeth above. Note that meeting criterion one is not contingent on successfully meeting two;

one can meet one and then fail two, as will be clear in the next section.

Sufficient accuracy looks a bit different for different emotions. This is because different

emotions are about different sorts of objects in different sorts of circumstances. For instance,

indignation is always about a judgment about an injustice while sadness *can* be about an image.

The natures of these objects are quite different. In the case of indignation, sufficiently accurate

representations require some grasp of injustice and relationships among the individuals or

entities involved. Sufficiently accurate representation of an image, on the other hand, need not

require grasping injustice or any other particularly sophisticated cognitive ability.

To illustrate criterion one and forecast criterion two, consider the following. In order for

someone's fear of a bear in front of her to be fitting, she must represent the object of her

emotion—a bear—*as* a bear in order to take it to be threatening or dangerous and so to-be-

---

[54] This definition is also borrowed from Jon Garthoff, though I am applying things a bit differently.

feared. The object in this case is a physical object and so requires representing a physical object-in-its-circumstances and so what *about* that object-in-its-circumstances is threatening or dangerous and so an appropriate object of fear. Let us say that what the person represents as a bear is, in reality, a bullfrog. In this case, then, she fails to represent what is necessary for proper evaluation of the object, as there is nothing about a bullfrog which is threatening or dangerous in the way a bear would be for her to represent and evaluate. This is an instance of failing to meet criterion one.

II.B. Criterion Two: Fitting Evaluation

The second criterion of a fitting immediate emotion is that the emoter must detect and attend to what is *in fact* important about the object-in-its-circumstances in order to evaluate it properly. Recall from chapter 2, section III.D. that emotions are evaluative. Whenever someone experiences an emotion, she takes something to be important about the object-in-its-circumstances. She evaluates it. Her attention is directed by what she takes to be important which is based on what she values—and what she values is connected to her judgments and beliefs. For an emotion to be *fitting*, however, the individual must detect and attend to what *is* objectively important (including morally important) about the object-in-its-circumstances. This of course requires representing what needs to be attended to so that proper evaluation is possible.

For instance, say I am glad about my friend's coming to stay with me for a holiday weekend. The object of my gladness is my friend's visit and the features most important here are my friend herself, my friendship with her, and the time I will get to spend with her. In this case, these things are objectively important. All of these are essential parts of the good life; they are objectively valuable. I ought to value them, I do, and this is clear through my gladness about her visit and in light of these features of the object. This is the sense in which a *fitting* immediate emotion assesses or evaluates its object *appropriately*. This is also a case where I evaluate what and as I ought as a result of attending to what is *morally* important. Of course, what is morally important is included in the broader category of what is important. Not every instance in which an emotion is felt, however, will include morally important content for the emoter to detect and attend to.

There are two ways to fail to meet criterion two such that an immediate emotion is unfitting. First, someone could represent precisely what she needs to represent in order to evaluate an object-in-its-circumstances appropriately, but nevertheless fail to evaluate it properly because of a poorly developed capacity for attention or a failure of value or belief or judgment. Meeting one is not enough to guarantee that one will also meet two.

Second, consider the bullfrog-bear example: an individual represents the object-in-its-circumstances insufficiently. She *cannot* detect and attend to what is necessary for a proper evaluation of a bear as threatening because she represents a bullfrog which lacks these characteristics. Even if she had a well developed capacity for attention and had appropriate beliefs, judgments, and values she could not meet criterion two because she failed to represent what was necessary for proper evaluation. In this case, failure to meet one guarantees failure to meet two. Again, however, meeting one does not guarantee meeting two.

This criterion clearly requires multiple well developed capacities which are features of someone's character, and especially moral character. This will be especially important later when I discuss the connection between fitting immediate emotions and fitting emotional tendencies.

II.C. Criterion Three: Fitting Affect

I shall now move on to the third criterion. The *affect* of emotion—how it feels—is strongly tied to the evaluation of the object. In fact, typically, the evaluation seems to play a causal role in the nature of the emotion's affect, even if it does not wholly determine it. Again, as I discussed in chapter 2, section III.D., positive evaluations feel positive; negative evaluations feel negative because they are tracking what they ought. Additionally, the affect of emotion is often what motivates us to act or to consider something. The feeling of fear moves us to freeze, fight, or flee; the feeling of joy moves us to reflect on what is good about the object of our joy.[55] Surely, given its significance, a fitting emotion must be *felt* properly as well.

Consider an example of fear about a bear where it is fitting. Say an individual is on a hike and sees a bear that exists in reality. The individual must evaluate what it is about the bear that

---

[55] This is a reminder that, as I said in chapter 2, I do not think negative emotions only move us to act physically and I do not think positive emotions only move us to respond non-physically.

is threatening in order for fear to be fitting, which of course requires representing those things with sufficient accuracy. Let us stipulate that she meets criterion one. The fact that the individual's affective experience is negative, and specifically fear, tells us she has evaluated it properly. There is still, however, a distinction between the fact that her affective experience is fear, which is fitting, *and the extent to which she feels that affect*. Thus, the third criterion concerns the extent of affect.

When someone has a fitting immediate emotion, she experiences its affect in proportion to a) what is actually most important about the object in light of its circumstances *and* b) to other mental states she may have at the same time. These states include those which I have mentioned before: other emotions, concerns, judgments, beliefs, etc. More specifically, a) concerns what is needed for proper evaluation. I include b) because we often feel more than one emotion at the same time and we often experience multiple mental states at one time. There must, therefore, be a right way for us to feel multiple emotions at any given time. On my view, we ought to prioritize certain objects over others in certain contexts. In the case of the bear above, that individual ought to experience fear to a great extent and primarily in this moment, as her life may be at stake. It would be inappropriate for her to say, wonder whether she has time to finish editing her dissertation chapter by the deadline. Doing so would render her emotion unfitting even if she had met both criteria one and two. Whether this failure has moral content would depend on further considerations on which I elaborate later in this chapter.

For an example of failure to meet criterion three where the failure is a moral one, let us return to the example of my gladness about my friend coming to stay for a holiday weekend. Note that this failure is due to failing to meet criterion two. Say that while I am glad, I am also concerned about the state of my house. I want it to be clean and nice for my friend's visit. Let us stipulate that my friend is a messy person herself and that my house is not particularly dirty. I just need to make sure to go over a few things in the kitchen and put clean sheets on the bed, but the house is generally quite clean. I ought not be too concerned. But *I am*! And my concern about the cleanliness of my house prevents me from feeling much gladness about my friend's trip. In fact, as I vigorously scrub the bathtub, I almost resent my friend's coming even while I

look forward to seeing her and spending time with her. As I scrub, my gladness is greatly reduced by these concerns (and possibly even unfitting resentment).

In this particular case, my gladness is not proportional to what is most important and so this makes my gladness unfitting. What is most important about the objects of my gladness (my friend, our friendship, our time) is more significant than what is important about the state of my house in connection to my friend's trip (her comfort). I am therefore failing to prioritize what is objectively more valuable over what is objectively less valuable. I ought to prioritize the goods of friendship first. While that includes properly caring for my friend, it does not include an ongoing, overly zealous concern for comfort and cleanliness. I failed to meet the second criterion and so parts a) and b) of the third criterion. Thus, my emotion is unfitting on two counts and so it is clearer how evaluation and proportional and/or relative affect are connected.

Note that I can come to have fitting gladness later on through various means of immediate emotional guidance. For instance, perhaps, while I scrub the tub, I attend to the fact that my friend is messy and so would not care about the state of my house. This decreases my concern such that I can experience my gladness proportionally. Yet, as we all know, emotions do not always respond to reasons and, fortunately, we do not have to say they do in order for an emotion to become fitting. Perhaps once I finish the tub, I decide to take a break from cleaning and distract myself with other preparations. For instance, maybe I go to the store to procure her almond milk. Buying it reminds me she is coming and I feel proportionally glad. For either route, I do something to direct my focus to what is good about her visit; and in doing so, I attend to what I ought and so shift into gladness as my primary emotion. Of course, I do not necessarily need to direct my focus in the right way to alter my emotion in the right way. For instance, perhaps I decide to clean everything to my own comfort level in order to stop worrying about it. All this does is reduce my concern such that I can come to feel gladness proportionally later on. My point here is that engaging immediate emotional guidance— regardless of how one does it—can help one come to have fitting immediate emotions.

A second example connecting criteria two and three is as follows. Say a parent is attending her only daughter's high school graduation. Presently, she is proud of and happy for

her daughter, but sad for herself because her daughter is leaving. The mother's emotional background is also relevant here, as all three of these emotions are about her daughter's development and she ought to value different features of her development appropriately. It is appropriate to be proud of her daughter's success. Pride is always about a judgment and the judgment that her daughter has succeeded is correct. Happiness for her daughter is also appropriate, as she considers what lies in store for her daughter during her next steps into adulthood. Sadness about her daughter's growing up is also perfectly acceptable. The nature of their relationship will change and they will spend less time together; a certain era is over and this is a loss for the mother. Sadness about a loss is appropriate. Let us stipulate that the mother feels these things in the right moments because she appreciates what is good and about her daughter's development and what is good for her as well. She feels happy for her daughter when her daughter discusses upcoming events. She is sad when she is by herself, as she has time to reflect. She generally tries to hide her sadness from her daughter so as not to dampen her daughter's own emotional experiences, but she still lets her daughter know she will be missed. Let us stipulate, then, that the mother feels these things as a result of a deep integration of what is good for her daughter and good for herself. She tends to feel these different emotions in the right ways because of her character, including a well developed capacity for judgment.

The graduation event itself is designed to celebrate student success and achievement. In light of this, and the fact that others are doing precisely this, the mother *should* attend to her daughter's success and achievement and so primarily experience positive emotions even if she is still just a little bit sad at the same time. She must rightly prioritize what is most important in this context such that her positive emotions overwhelm her sadness in order for all three emotions to be fitting. The mother *does* this. In this case, then, her evaluation of the objects of her various emotions are properly influenced by the environment and facts about her daughter, which she attends to because of her appropriate values. She prioritizes rightly. The third criterion, then, is clearly connected to the second.

In summary, someone experiences a fitting immediate emotion when she: 1) represents the object of her emotions and her circumstances with sufficient accuracy; 2) takes to be

important *what is actually important* (which includes what is morally important) about the object-in-its-circumstances such that she evaluates properly; and 3) feels her emotion in proportion to what is actually important about the object and circumstances *as well as* relative to whatever else she experiences at a given moment.

II.D. Fitting Emotional Tendencies

I will now discuss fitting emotional tendencies and explain the relationship between them and fitting immediate emotions. At the end of section IV in chapter 3, I said that an emotional tendency is a tendency to feel X affect about Y object in Z circumstances and to tend to feel similarly about similar objects in similar circumstances. This is because someone tends to take the same things about Y in Z to be important and X is felt in response.

On my view, a *fitting* emotional tendency is one whereby someone: 1) tends to represent Y in Z with sufficient accuracy thanks to well developed capacities for representation and attention; 2) tends to detect and attend to what is actually important about Y in Z so that she evaluates the object of her emotion properly, thanks to well developed capacities for representation, attention, value, judgment, and belief as well as well developed moral sensitivities; and 3) tends to feel X in proportion to what is important or valuable about Y in Z *and* relative to other mental states she has—this is thanks to the same capacities as those in 2).

For example, say someone has a fitting emotional tendency to feel shame when she ought. This means that she tends to feel shame about things which are actually shameful. Such an individual would tend to rightly evaluate her actions or feelings as shameful when they actually are shameful (i.e., she feels shame where shame is appropriate). For instance, it would be shameful for her to refuse to help a friend for no reason when she could have easily done so at little cost to her. It would be shameful to mock someone just because others are doing so. After doing or saying shameful things, on reflection, she would detect and attend to what is morally important about her shameful failures such that she felt shame about these particular kinds of failures. This would be a fitting emotional tendency. Of course, we must note that she would not feel shame more often than she should. Once again, no one is perfect, and perfection is not required for good emotional agency on my view.

One may wonder at this point if it is possible on my view for someone to have only one fitting emotional tendency and no more. If it is possible, it seems unlikely to me that such an individual would have only one for very long. That is, it is more than likely that she would either have or quickly develop other fitting emotions. By definition, a fitting emotional tendency is a tendency to have fitting immediate emotions about certain object types in certain types of situations. In light of what is required of an individual to have a fitting immediate emotion, it seems unlikely to me that such an individual would then *lack* what is required for other fitting immediate emotions and fitting emotional tendencies. After all, both fitting immediate emotions and fitting emotional tendencies require much from the individual doing the emoting. In particular, they demand a wide variety of well developed capacities and sensitivities. Moreover, as discussed in chapter 3, these are essential features of our character. In fact, fitting emotional tendencies—and fitting immediate emotions by extension—*depend on* features of our *character* and make up our character as well.

Now, it is true that these features of our character both shape and are shaped by our immediate emotions and so it is also true that we shape how our character and emotional tendencies develop, regardless of whether we aim or strive to do so. But developing *fitting* emotional tendencies *does* require intentional diachronic emotional shaping and engaging immediate emotional guidance. It requires that we *aim* and that we *strive* to be good emotional agents—that we aim and strive to shape our character by shaping capacities and so our emotional tendencies properly such that we have fitting immediate emotions. More specifically, we must aim and strive to value the right things, attend to them, practice good judgment, and have good reasons for our beliefs. We can see how aiming and striving in these ways is essential to good emotional agency as well as good (moral) character. I will further elaborate on this in the next section.

To summarize the account I have given here in section II, an immediate emotion is fitting when an individual feels what she does because of and in proportion to what is most important about the object of her emotion in light of its circumstances (which she represents accurately) and relative to other mental states. Fitting immediate emotions are frequently generated by fitting emotional tendencies because of the well developed capacities that are

required for fitting immediate emotions, such as those for representation, attention, value, judgment, and belief, as well as well developed moral sensitivities. Fitting emotional tendencies are tendencies to have fitting immediate emotions because of those well developed capacities. With all of this in mind, I now turn to when and why we ought to blame someone for *un*fitting immediate emotions and emotional tendencies, and when we ought to praise them for fitting ones.

III. Blame and Praise for Immediate Emotions and Emotional Tendencies

I begin this section by discussing unfitting immediate emotions and unfitting emotional tendencies and from there move to discussing blame for these emotions and tendencies. As I will show, immediate emotions and tendencies can be unfitting, but not all unfitting immediate emotions or tendencies are morally problematic. It all depends on whether an individual's failures are *moral* failures which are part of a tendency to make the same mistakes due to a flaw of moral character which she could and should have improved or taken steps to improve, but failed to improve or taken steps to improve.

I only briefly discuss praise toward the end of this chapter. I do not focus much on praise for fitting immediate emotions and emotional tendencies because it is fairly obvious what is praiseworthy on my view in light of what I have discussed about the good moral agent in chapter 3 and in light of what I discuss about blame here. Additionally, there is more to say about when and why we ought to blame persons for their emotions and tendencies than when we ought to praise because there are more ways to get things wrong than right. I do, however, discuss fitting amusement and praise in the next chapter.

III.A. Blame for Unfitting Immediate Emotions and Emotional Tendencies

The picture of fitting emotions I have given in sections II and III provides a clear framework for understanding what constitutes an *unfitting* emotion or emotional tendency. All mistakes we make that render an immediate emotion or an emotional tendency to be unfitting fall into these categories: insufficiently accurate representation(s) of an object-in-its-circumstances (failing to meet criterion one); failure to detect and attend to what is important about an object-in-its-circumstances such that one evaluates it incorrectly (failing to meet criterion two; failing to feel affect properly either by feeling too much or too little, or by failing

67

to prioritize the object-in-its-circumstances properly such that one feels some emotion more or less than she experiences some competing mental state (failing to meet criterion three).

The categories of failures above provide a helpful way to sort them and so better understand their nature, and more specifically, whether they are *moral* failures. *A moral failure or morally valenced mistake is a failure or mistake that has moral content.* If an emoter morally fails, the emoter becomes a candidate for a blameworthy failure. To determine whether the emoter is blameworthy, we must consider mitigating conditions and details, as well as the immediate emotion's connection to the emoter's character including whether the emoter is aiming and striving. If not, an individual is likely to be fully blameworthy. Specifically, she can be blameworthy for an unfitting immediate emotion if it is part of an unfitting emotional tendency produced by a flaw of moral character she fails to address or correct.[56]

Additionally, if it is unclear whether the failure is a moral failure, it is appropriate to use the same process of determining blame to determine whether the failure has moral content, as this is discoverable along the way.[57] I will now discuss some examples of mistakes and articulate the conditions that have to be met for someone to be blamed for such mistakes.[58]

Mistakes of representation are perhaps some of the easiest mistakes to make. Not only are they common, but they are often morally neutral mistakes. As in the bullfrog/bear example, the misrepresentation caused an individual to fail to meet criterion two insofar as the individual

---

[56] D'Arms and Jacobson point out a common problem in the literature on fitting emotions which my view has successfully avoided—they call it the "moralistic fallacy." "To commit the moralistic fallacy is to infer, from the claim that it would be wrong or vicious to feel an emotion, that it is therefore unfitting" (68). They argue, against this fallacy, that an emotion can be fitting, regardless of whether it is considered morally wrong to feel it. My view avoids this fallacy as well, as fittingness and unfittingness do not depend on morality.

[57] The Shea example I will discuss shortly shows that so long as the mistake comes from moral character, it has moral content. Thus, the process for determining blame also reveals whether a mistake has moral content. This is the nature of the emotional feedback loop.

[58] I am aware of the following perennial problem for views like mine which are concerned with evaluation of someone's feelings and actions from the outside: we do not have perfect information, and we can only evaluate based on information we get from observing individuals from the outside. I do not aim to address this problem. I will only say here that while this is so, for our purposes, it is helpful here to try to imagine that we *do* have access to this information. If this is not possible for a reader, however, that is fine by me. It just means the reader should remember that we must also take how well we know the person into consideration when we evaluate them. Moreover, regardless, we all can also accept that we have more access to information about ourselves than others and so we may be better poised to praise and blame ourselves (though we should, of course, be reasonable—and in some cases lenient—when we do so).

evaluated the bear as something to be feared. Because the bear was not there, however, the object of the individual's fear was not appropriate and so the emotion was unfitting. Nevertheless, neither the misrepresentation nor the resultant improper evaluation concerned anything morally significant. So, while the emotion may be unfitting, its unfittingness is not due to a moral failure. It also seems clear that a tendency to feel fear when one ought not because one tends to mistake non-bears for bears is not a morally valenced tendency either.

Failures to meet criterion two are far more likely to be morally valenced because they usually involve failing to track what we take to be important which depends on what we value. What we value informs and is informed at least by our beliefs and our judgment. Consider the following example. Say Juan is at a restaurant with his aunt and uncle. Nearby, a gay couple are celebrating their anniversary, which is made clear to Juan and his family when the waiter brings the couple a dessert on the house. The dessert is a large piece of cake with "Happy Anniversary" written in sauce on the plate. Juan's uncle is annoyed: "Do they *have* to do that here?" "What?" says Juan. "Celebrate their anniversary?" "Yeah," replies his uncle. "Why do they have to be so showy about it? They should eat at home. No one wants to see that kind of thing." "But they're not being showy. They're not in your face about their sexuality. They're just quietly celebrating—just living their lives like everyone else," protests Juan. In this case, Juan's uncle takes the couple to be inappropriate in virtue of their celebrating their anniversary in public. This is due to his false beliefs that homosexuality is objectively morally wrong *and* that people who are homosexual are always pushing an agenda. He takes the celebration as agenda-pushing as a result of these false, morally problematic beliefs. His values and beliefs direct his attention to the public nature of the celebration, the *fact* of celebration, and he finds problems with both. Juan's uncle's annoyance is unfitting because he evaluates the object-in-its-circumstances (i.e., the couple celebrating) wrongly due to wrong beliefs and judgments. This is also a moral failure because it has moral content: namely, it is due to mistaken beliefs and judgments which are themselves morally valenced. Moreover, these beliefs are likely to cause Juan's uncle to tend to make the same sorts of mistakes.

Failing to meet criterion two can also cause someone to fail to meet criterion three. I wish to note that the immediate stakes of the failure in the following example are much lower

than they are in the example above. I here show how smaller immediate failures can be unfitting as a result of failing to meet criterion two and so three. The primary purpose of using a smaller stakes example here is to demonstrate how such small immediate failures can actually be morally blameworthy, depending on the circumstances, which I will do later.

Say Shea is at a party where guests remove their shoes before entering the host's home. Toward the end of the party, she glances over at her velour yellow shoes from across the room to make sure she knows where they are. She sees that the host's sleepy old Basset Hound has escaped his confines and is now lying on the pile of shoes, crushing one of her shoes and slobbering all over the other. She becomes angry about the dog.

Now, anger is often a fitting response to being wronged, but the dog did not *wrong* Shea. He did not intend to crush or slobber on her shoes in order to upset her. He is just an aging, floppy, old dog who likes to sleep on or near smelly things and who, as a matter of genetics, slobbers a great deal. Nevertheless, she attends to his shoe crushing and slobbering and takes them to be somehow intentional: the dog has done this on purpose just to upset her.[59] Because she makes this evaluative mistake (she fails criterion two), her anger is also disproportionate to the actual situation (she fails three), even if it is proportional to what she takes to be important about the dog in this case. Since she is mistaken about the dog, the affect she experiences is disproportionate, as it is too strong. Something milder like annoyance or irritation may be fitting, but not anger. Her immediate emotion is unfitting. Failing to meet two and so three suggests that Shea's failures may be moral failures—that is, they may have moral content because failures to detect what is important can be caused by failures of value rather than failures of representation. We have to consider what causes the failures. Incidentally, determining the cause is part of the process I use for determining the extent of blame. Thus, in cases where a failure may be a moral failure, we ought to proceed as if it could be and so determine whether and to what extent blame is appropriate or inappropriate.

---

[59] For those who may be thinking that this is not a realistic example because thinking a dog can intend to hurt one's feelings is irrational, remember that while emotions *involve* capacities that are essential for reasoning properly, emotions are often unreasonable.

I will now use this example to articulate when blame is appropriate for unfitting immediate emotions, which illuminates when blame is appropriate for unfitting emotional tendencies as well. This example will also demonstrate why something as small and seemingly unimportant as being angered about a dog on a pair of shoes can turn out to be not just unfitting, but morally problematic. To determine whether and how much Shea may be blamed for her unfitting immediate emotion which is unfitting because of the failures mentioned above and whose moral character will be detailed below, a few more things must be considered. First, we must determine whether this failure is a mistake Shea tends to make and so is part of an unfitting emotional tendency or if it is more of a one-off. So, we must consider whether Shea is the sort of person who typically would be genuinely angry about a dog for such a silly reason. Does she generally take things animals do or things that people do *personally* when they are not? If the answer is no, we look for other things that might alter how she is feeling. For instance, we would ask things like: Has she had a difficult day? Is she in the middle of a spat with her partner? Did she just lose her job? Has the dog also ruined other things of hers and this is the last straw? If any of these are true, these facts are likely to mitigate blame if it turns out her failure is a moral failure. As we all know, we carry much around with us at any given time. Details about a situation or about our lives that may not be directly in front of us are still part of us, and they can surface at a moment when we do not wish for them to do so. These sorts of things can lead us to make mistakes—even morally valenced mistakes—that produce unfitting emotions. But they are often understandable mistakes; this gives us grounds for excusing the mistake or failure. In fact, we often do not hold each other responsible for unfitting emotions and their expressions when we identify details like these. This is a good practice for maintaining relationships and is part of properly gauged sympathy and empathy.

Note, however, that mitigating immediate conditions like these are just that: mitigating. They are not exculpatory. Excusing or overlooking and forgiving involve identifying a failure and moving beyond it. To fully exculpate is to deny responsibility and deny the existence of the moral failure. It is important that we hold people responsible for their moral failures even when those moral failures are understandable. We may overlook or forgive, but we owe respect to

the person who fails, which requires us hold them responsible for what they do and feel in certain circumstances.[60]

For our purposes, let us say that we know Shea does not meet these sorts of mitigating conditions. There are no additional circumstances out of her control that contribute to or explain her emotion. Her day was great, she found $20 in her pocket this morning, her job is generally fulfilling, and things are great with her partner. She is doing quite well. There are no conditions that indicate that this may be an excusable one-off. Next, then, we must consider instead what she *tends* to feel in similar situations.

Say that Shea, like most people, tends to become angered when she believes she has been slighted. It is acceptable to be angered when slighted. However, Shea frequently believes she has been slighted when she has not. She frequently attends to what she thinks others take to be important about her: her flaws. She tends to assume others must think she is an easy target, and so every time someone does something that is not good for her, she assumes it is an intentional, personal affront. It must be because they see her flaws and assume she is inferior. She therefore takes many things as slights which are not slights.

Moreover, she is *aware* that she often feels angry because she believes she has been slighted. She further believes this is simply a matter of course. When it happens, if she reflects, she thinks, "This is just how things go for me and this is just how I am. I am always the one getting hurt and it is okay for me to feel angry about this slight." She is right that it is often appropriate to feel bothered or even angry about a slight. She is frequently wrong, however, about what *is* a slight.

Even though people close to her have brought her attention to this problematic tendency of hers because they care, she pays it no mind. Instead, she explains to them and to herself that she is just unlucky—she is just slighted more often than others. And since she is, she has every right to be angry about it every time she believes it happens. This is clearly an unfitting emotional tendency. Again, the emotion is unfitting in light of this. We must determine whether the emotion is also morally problematic.

---

[60] I discuss overlooking and forgiving further in the concluding section of chapter 6 at the end of this dissertation.

Consider that mistakes like this appear to be thoroughly ingrained in someone's character. Capacities for attention, value, judgment, and belief are involved in both immediate instances of emotions and emotional tendencies. If Shea frequently believes she is being slighted on purpose even when this is false, it is likely she makes this mistake such that other emotions and emotional tendencies of hers are unfitting. What she does is explained by *and actually* the result of the character flaw of self-absorption (excessive self-love or self-loathing, as the case may be) which permeates other parts of her life.

We shall stipulate for this example that this is the case—that she has a moral character flaw. She is self-absorbed and this causes her unfitting emotional tendency to be angry when she believes she has been slighted but has not been.[61] Thus, in the case of the dog, Shea's failures have moral content because they are due to a moral character flaw that includes wrong beliefs and wrong judgments. In light of this and all of the analysis above, she becomes a strong candidate for full blameworthiness for her unfitting anger about the dog. Indeed, this is part of a morally problematic pattern for which she is responsible. Again, responsibility for emotions is strongest over longer periods of time. Still, there may be mitigating long-term conditions.

She is aware of this tendency, and if she were taking steps to improve by aiming at a fitting emotional tendency and she were striving to change it (e.g., working to identify moments where she ought not be angry or evaluate something as a slight), blame may be mitigated. We could recognize the mistake and so consider the immediate emotion unfitting but refrain from blaming her fully because of her effort to become a good emotional agent in the long-term. People often make mistakes when in the habit of doing so, especially while trying to get *out* of the habit. It seems overly harsh to blame people for mistakes they tried to avoid but failed because of a habit that they are actively working against.[62]

In this case, however, let us stipulate that she is not aiming or striving to be a good emotional agent. She simply assumes that people are often trying to slight her because the world is against her and so, she believes, her anger is appropriate. There is one more mitigating

---

[61] I will discuss the moral flaw or vice of self-absorption in chapter 6.

[62] It also seems true that one could take *baby* steps by committing to addressing the problem but not undertake the project at a particular time so long as she had very good reason for doing so, such as addressing a different moral character flaw. I leave open whether there exist other sufficiently justificatory reasons.

long-term condition left. Blame can be reduced if it is unreasonable (or too demanding) to expect an individual to have *noticed* a problem with her character. If she never could have noticed because she, say, lacks full understanding of the nature of her problem and her lacking full understanding is not itself a moral failure (e.g., a blameworthy negligence), we can likely mitigate blame. If we can't expect her to notice her problem, we cannot expect her to aim or strive to address it. Again, we lack total control over our emotions and our emotional development. We do not choose our parents, where we grow up, where we go to school, etc. These things play some role in our emotional development. What is reasonable to expect of individuals must be considered in light of these facts.

Only very few long-term conditions may *exculpate* individuals. In fact, I can only think of one: if an individual is too young to have noticed her unfitting tendency on her own, we can likely exculpate her because we cannot expect her to know better. This is not the case for Brooke, however.

What *is* reasonable to expect of people who do not meet these conditions? Ultimately, my view is that most people can notice something new; they can notice their own tendencies; they can reflect; they can do many things differently. In fact, it seems to me that it is reasonable to expect that they at least aim and strive to change the most obviously morally egregious unfitting emotional tendencies.[63] At the least, we ought to be able to notice when our emotional tendencies are bad for other people. Let us now apply this to the case of Shea's anger about the dog.

When detailing her unfitting emotional tendency to be unduly angered about perceived slights above, I mentioned that multiple people on multiple occasions brought her unfitting tendency to her attention because they care about her. It is reasonable to expect that she should reflect more intensely on her tendency if multiple people bring it to her attention,

---

[63] I also wish to note here that I do not think that whether the person *could* succeed in actually changing or developing an emotional tendency as a matter of luck matters morally. Consider a person who has a phobia as a matter of luck and who could never have changed her phobia as a matter of luck. Even if this is true, it matters morally if she tries to change it anyway if her phobia is unduly burdensome on other people. For instance, if a person has agoraphobia and this results in her sister having to do everything for her, she ought to notice how hard this is for her sister. She can reasonably be expected to *take steps to change* even if it turns out she never could actually change, and all of this is a matter of luck.

especially if they are people close to her. But she does not reflect—she is content to assume that she just *is* slighted by people more often because of who or how she is. She is clearly not aiming or striving to improve her unfitting emotional tendency because she does not recognize it as unfitting and this is *unreasonable for her to do.* She has a moral flaw, she is aware of it, she has had plenty of opportunities to do something about it, but she has done nothing.

In light of all of this, it is clear that her morally valenced unfitting immediate emotion about the dog is something for which she is fully blameworthy. It is an instance of an unfitting emotional tendency that is part of her morally flawed character which she does nothing about even though she could have and actually has good reason to do something about. Her unfitting emotional tendency is also *blameworthy*.

Note that I do not mean she is blameworthy because the mistake reflects her character. The mistake does reflect her character but only because the mistake comes directly from her character—it is *part of* her character. To reiterate, my view is that an individual can be blamed for an unfitting immediate emotion if it comes from an unfitting emotional tendency which itself comes from a problem of moral character that someone does nothing about when there is reason to believe she could have done something about it.

One objection might run as follows: how is this view not double-dipping on blame? We tend to blame people for flaws of moral character. If we also blame people for what they feel *from* that flaw, are we not blaming someone for the same problem *twice*?

My response is to consider the emotional feedback loop. Immediate emotions contribute to tendencies; tendencies generate immediate emotions. We can engage in immediate emotional guidance. Each instance of an immediate emotion coming from a tendency from a moral character flaw is still, therefore, an instance where someone could do otherwise. She could redirect her attention, but she does not. She could notice something, but she does not. Moreover, there are moments that occur between these instances of immediate emotions wherein someone could realize that her unfitting tendency is in fact unfitting, but she does not. She could reflect but she does not. She could decide not to bother trying to change her unfitting tendency even if she knows better. Thus, for each instance of an unfitting immediate emotion which is the result of a moral character flaw (and which cannot be

mitigated by specific circumstances), we may blame the individual who failed for that failure. In short, the same problem may explain why multiple unfitting immediate emotions exist or why an unfitting emotional tendency exists, but this does not mean someone is blameworthy only for what explains them. *She is blameworthy for different morally significant failures over time.*

Again, I wish to emphasize that my view is not that people must be perfect. As I have shown, there are many mitigating conditions that justify blaming someone in one set of circumstances less than we might blame them in different circumstances. This is because, again, we do not have *total* control over our emotions in a moment or over time and we do not have total control over the world in which we live. So, while we are responsible for shaping our emotional tendencies because we can do otherwise with respect to them, and while we can do otherwise with respect to our immediate emotions such that we guide them into becoming something else, we are still fundamentally limited beings. It is not reasonable to expect us to be *perfect* emotional agents. We can keep perfect emotional agency in mind as an ideal while not expecting ourselves to be better than just *good* emotional agents. As discussed in chapter 3, developing fitting emotional tendencies is like developing a skill. Mastery requires a great deal, and we cannot expect ourselves to become masters over everything, much less all at once.

III.B. Praise for Fitting Immediate Emotions and Emotional Tendencies

Lastly, praise for fitting immediate emotions and fitting emotional tendencies is much easier to determine than blame, though it depends on the same sorts of things. First, the immediate emotion or emotional tendency must be *fitting*. The individual doing the emoting must meet the three criteria above.

A fitting immediate emotion can be praiseworthy when the individual experiencing the emotion takes something to be morally important that *is* morally important because of an emotional tendency to do so such that she evaluates the object of her emotions properly. In this case, the individual who has done so in a particular instance may be praised. Her morally valenced immediate emotion is coming from her character—from her well developed capacities for value and attention in particular.

A fitting emotional tendency is generally praiseworthy as it is part of character. For instance, someone who cares about others a great deal can be praised for tending to feel glad

about helping others or more generally glad when those who need help get what they need. This will be the result of her beliefs, judgments, values, sympathy, empathy, and because she aims and she tries to be a good moral agent. Even though these emotional tendencies are dispositions to feel a certain way, it is important to remember that no one is perfect and so occasional reflection on how one is doing—how one's tendencies are—is essential. Someone with a morally good character will do these things.

Perhaps surprisingly, on my view, the emoter's emotion *need not* be part of a fitting emotional tendency or morally good character disposition or trait in order for it to be praiseworthy. The emoter still must meet criterion two, but this need not be part of a tendency. It can be due to a change of heart, even if it only lasts for a moment. There are plenty of cases where an individual does not feel as she usually does in a particular moment because she now recognizes different facts or circumstances as important when they are. This is often due to a momentary recognition of something as valuable which was not valuable before. If the value change concerns something morally important or significant, the fitting emotion would be morally valenced. The emoter, then, gets it right, even if for the first time. And regardless of whether this momentary value change prompts her to reflection and to aim and strive, her immediate emotion is still praiseworthy because she meets criterion two as a result of a change in value and in contrast to how she typically feels.[64] This is, of course, not a standard praiseworthy immediate emotion, but it can be praiseworthy nonetheless.

III.C. Conclusions

In this section, I have articulated the conditions under which we may blame individuals for their unfitting immediate emotions and emotional tendencies, and the conditions under which we may praise people for their fitting immediate emotions and emotional tendencies. The purpose of *both* VI and VII has been to develop an intuitive, reasonable way to hold one another and ourselves accountable for immediate emotions and emotional tendencies.

---

[64] This is sort of a parallel to the "one-off" mitigating immediate condition. If someone gets it wrong but it is not from a tendency and only from trying circumstances, she may not be blamed. Here, if someone gets it right but it is not from a tendency, she may still be praised if it is due to taking the right things as important. See footnote 48 about virtue acquisition.

The criteria for fitting emotions in III focus on what is going on *within individuals* as they experience an immediate emotion (and how that is connected to character) or as their tendency is connected to their character (including their moral character). This is especially useful because 1) an emotion's fittingness surely cannot be evaluation in isolation from the individual doing the emoting or the particular context, and 2) we need a system for understanding what is going on in individuals if we are to blame and praise them for emotions which, as I said at the beginning of this chapter, is something we already do.

IV. Conclusion

I have argued that when an individual has an unfitting immediate emotion, she has failed at least one of three criteria. If her mistake is morally valenced or we are not sure whether it is morally valenced, we must consider whether and to what extent she can be blamed. We have to consider whether her immediate emotion is an exception to what she tends to feel. If it is not a one-off, we must consider whether it is part of an unfitting emotional tendency that is linked to a problem of moral character. If her immediate emotion is part of an unfitting emotional tendency which is part of some character flaw, we next consider whether it is reasonable for her to be aware of that problem. If so, it is also reasonable for her to make attempts to address the problem. If she has failed to take any steps to correct the moral character flaw despite being aware of it, she is fully blameworthy.

When someone's fitting immediate emotion is morally valenced and comes from fitting emotional tendencies which are part of a good moral character, we can praise her. A fitting emotional tendency is also typically praiseworthy, as it is usually part of one's morally good character. There is a final category of immediate emotion that can be praiseworthy: if it is due to proper assessment of an emotional object as a result of a change of heart, however momentary. That is, an individual can get it right, though not by mistake, even if it is not her tendency to do so. Again, a praiseworthy emotion cannot be experienced by mistake; it must be due to taking something that is morally important as morally important as a result of a value shift, even if it occurs very briefly, which results in proper evaluation.

I have shown that we are morally responsible to some extent for our immediate emotions and emotional tendencies and that we can be blamed and praised accordingly. We

can now get the heart of this project: moral responsibility for amusement. In the next chapter, I apply all that is articulated here to amusement specifically and show how we can be morally responsible for and *be held* morally responsible for what we find funny.

More specifically, in chapter 5, I will discuss what fitting and unfitting *amusement* look like both in a moment and over time. For immediate amusement to be fitting, it must meet the three criteria and it must come from a fitting tendency to be amused. In particular, fitting immediate amusement and a fitting tendency to be amused depend on something I noted in chapter 2: what is funny cannot be threatening. Thus, ultimately, fitting amusement amounts to finding funny what is funny and not threatening as a result of good character. I then discuss blame and praise for amusement in chapter 5.

CHAPTER FIVE

FITTING AMUSEMENT AND PRAISE

I. Introduction

Thus far in this dissertation, I have argued that amusement is an emotion and that we are morally responsible for our emotions and emotional tendencies to some extent. I have articulated what fitting emotions and emotional tendencies look like and how we can praise people for them. I have also articulated what unfitting emotions and emotional tendencies look like and how we can blame people for them. I now turn to the heart of this dissertation: the morality of *amusement*.

In this chapter, I discuss fitting immediate amusement and a fitting tendency to be amused. I will consider their connections to character and so when and how people can be praised for them. I will also address praise for *not* being amused when one should not be. In the next chapter, I discuss unfitting amusement and when and how we can be blamed for it. I also explain how we can blame individuals for not being amused in certain cases.

In order to better discuss fitting amusement in this chapter and in this introduction, I must review some of the concepts discussed in chapters 4 and 2. I begin with chapter 4. In chapter 4, I provided three criteria each for fitting immediate emotions and fitting emotional tendencies. An immediate emotion is fitting if the following criteria are met. First, an emoter must represent the object of her emotion in its circumstances with sufficient accuracy. This means she must represent well enough so that she can meet the second criterion. Second, she must detect and attend to what is in fact important about the object-in-its-circumstances such that she evaluates it properly. This second criterion is key. In many cases of amusement, there are multiple details about a given incongruity-in-its-circumstances which are *morally* important. One ought to track what is morally important in these cases. What is morally important can include things like who is present at the time where an attempt at humor is made, whether the individuals involved/who are present know one another, how aware they are of one another's background, etc. Third, the emoter must also feel the affect of her emotion in proportion to

what is actually important about the object-in-its-circumstances and relative to other simultaneous mental states. An individual is praiseworthy for her fitting immediate emotion when it comes from a morally good character or comes as part of a value shift which causes her to feel rightly.

For an emotional *tendency* to be fitting, an individual must have tendencies to meet the three criteria above, thanks to well developed capacities for representation, attention, value, judgment, and belief, as well as well developed moral sensitivities. These are constitutive elements of character.

In chapter 2, I discussed the incongruity theory of amusement. While there are various stripes of this view of humor and amusement, what is ultimately required of an individual to find something funny is generally the same. In order to be amused, an individual must identify an incongruity between two things, and we can be very open-minded about what either of those things are: an image, gesture, concept, sound, belief, memory, etc. According to incongruity theory, this singular incongruity is the object of her amusement.[65] Additionally, borrowing from Michael Clark and John Morreall, I add that the individual must find the incongruity to be *pleasant* or *enjoyable.* This is because an incongruity can be the source of horror, disgust, the creeps, pain, or anxiety. In view of this, I argued further that what someone takes to be seriously threatening, dangerous, painful, tragic, or harmful cannot also be pleasant to her at the exact same moment. This is the Not Funny Principle (NFP) and it is essential for understanding fitting amusement. At bottom, in order for someone to find an incongruity to be pleasant, she cannot evaluate it as *serious,* by which I mean seriously threatening, painful, harmful, tragic, or dangerous.

The picture of fitting amusement should be coming into view. First, for immediate amusement to be fitting, an individual must identify an incongruity and its circumstances with sufficient accuracy. "Sufficient accuracy" amounts to representing an incongruity-in-its-circumstances as accurately as is required for proper evaluation.

---

[65] Note that someone need not realize what is happening to her as she is amused in order to *be* amused. She can be amused without thinking about her amusement or any of the elements of her emotional experience.

Second, in order for amusement to be fitting, an individual must evaluate the incongruity-in-its-circumstances properly. She must detect and attend to what is important about the incongruity-in-its-circumstances—which she represents accurately—such that she evaluates it as pleasant. Considering the NFP, to properly evaluate an incongruity as pleasant means an individual must not evaluate as pleasant that which is seriously threatening, harmful, tragic, painful, or dangerous. Her attention will be directed by what she takes to be important. What she takes to be important depends on what she values. What she values ought to be in line with what is objectively morally valuable. Note that this requires good judgment and right beliefs. Thus, she will not feel pleasant about something which is actually seriously harmful, painful, threatening, tragic, or dangerous. To properly evaluate consistently requires well developed capacities for attention, value, judgment, and belief and well developed moral sensitivities.

Third, the emoter must feel the pleasantness (affect) of the emotion or experience it in proportion to what is important, including what is morally important, about the incongruity-in-its-circumstances and relative to other mental states she may have at the same time. In particular, she ought to prioritize the right sorts of things so that she feels her emotions proportionally. I discuss all of this in great detail in section II of this chapter. I also show along the way and in subsection II.D. what a fitting tendency for amusement looks like.

In section III, I explain when, why, and how an individual can be praised for fitting immediate amusement and a fitting tendency for amusement. In particular, she can be praised when her amusement comes from a morally good character or from a value shift which causes her to evaluate an incongruity as pleasant when she ought.[66] In the second case, it may be part of an improving character or evaluating an object correctly even when it is not part of a tendency to be fittingly amused, though I will focus on cases where it is the result of changing character. Lastly, in section IV, I will discuss the fittingness and praiseworthiness of not being amused when one ought not—that is, of taking *offense* instead of being amused. For now, I will focus on fitting amusement.

---

[66] Again, by this I mean when it is appropriate for her to do so in light of what is objectively valuable and important.

II. Fitting Immediate Amusement and Fitting Tendencies to Be Amused

There are three criteria for a fitting immediate emotion and three criteria for fitting emotional tendencies. I will now apply these to amusement.

II.A. Criterion One: Sufficient Representational Accuracy

I mentioned in chapter 4 that sufficient accuracy looks a bit different for different emotions in light of the objects they are about. Amusement is always about some incongruity. Sufficient representation requires, of course, representing the incongruity as well as the circumstances in which it exists. As in chapter 4, "'Circumstances' refers to relevant features of the given context in which the object of the emotion is experienced" (57).

Representing with sufficient accuracy is properly representing whatever is needed for appropriate evaluation of an incongruity-in-its-circumstances (58). Additionally, the affect of amusement is some pleasant feeling or enjoyment and so fitting amusement would require appropriately assessing an incongruity-in-its-circumstances as pleasant. As will become clearer in the next section, in the case of fitting amusement, representing with sufficient accuracy amounts to representing what it is about an incongruity-in-its-circumstances that must be detected and attended to as important such that an individual takes the incongruity-in-its-circumstances as pleasant when it is appropriate to do so.

II.B. Criterion Two: Fitting Evaluation

As I have discussed throughout in this dissertation, emotions are, at bottom, evaluative: we evaluate our emotion's object-in-its-circumstances in some way. For an individual's amusement to meet criterion two, she must detect and attend to what is important about an incongruity-in-its-circumstances such that she evaluates it as pleasant, or at least not unpleasant when it is not unpleasant. Thanks to the Not Funny Principle, we know that this means that someone must rightly detect and attend to what is important about the incongruity-in-its-circumstances and evaluate it as *not* seriously threatening, painful, harmful, tragic, or dangerous when it is not. For instance, if I am fittingly amused by a healthy puppy snoring very loudly while he naps in the sunshine, I will detect and attend to his snores, among other things. When his snores are not threatening, as they would be if they indicated an airway obstruction, I will not take the snores to be threatening to the puppy. I take them as pleasant

and it is not unfitting to do so. I will elaborate here, starting with a possible concern about *pleasantness.*

It is true that the *pleasant* is rather subject-dependent. I suspect that this is why it is so commonly believed that amusement in particular cannot be evaluated as morally right or wrong. What we find funny is "too subjective" and so cannot be evaluated objectively. But I have shown in chapter 4 that the nature of emotions lends itself to a set of objective criteria by which emotions can be evaluated for fittingness in general and moral fittingness in particular. These criteria account for the subjective nature of emotions in general, not just amusement. All emotions depend on a particular subject experiencing them in a given set of circumstances which certainly vary. Moreover, it is because we, as subjects, have a say in our characterological development that we are responsible for our emotions in the first place. This is all to show why the subject-dependent nature of the pleasant is not problematic for my view: the subject-dependent nature of emotions is baked into the criteria for emotional fittingness.

I will now show how it is that we can say an incongruity *ought not* be considered pleasant even while the pleasantness is subject-dependent. Recall the Not Funny Principle from chapter 2: an individual cannot find an incongruity-in-its-circumstances to be pleasant at the same moment she finds it seriously threatening, painful, harmful, tragic, or dangerous. Since some things in some contexts actually are serious threats and genuinely harmful, tragic, or dangerous, we ought to consider them as such. This certainly applies to incongruities-in-their-circumstances. We ought to detect and attend to what is important about an incongruity-in-its-circumstances—more specifically, whether there are any features of it that are seriously threatening, painful, harmful, tragic, or dangerous. If there are, we must detect and attend to those things so that we can evaluate it properly. If there are not, it is not inappropriate to evaluate the incongruity-in-its-circumstances as pleasant. For example, the downtown pig in a party hat from chapter 2 may be properly evaluated as amusing (14). A pig in a party hat lying next to a set of human molars at a pig farm owned by a mafioso ought to be evaluated as threatening and dangerous, though both pigs in their hats are incongruous.

In light of this, a principle about what can appropriately be considered pleasant becomes clear. It is fitting to evaluate an incongruity as pleasant so long as it is *not* actually

seriously threatening, harmful, tragic, or dangerous. This means that for someone's amusement to meet criterion two, she must detect and attend to what is important about the incongruity and its circumstances and take something as pleasant when it is fitting to take it to be pleasant rather than unpleasant. Of course, we must represent those things which we must detect and attend to *in order* to detect and attend to them properly. This is how we determine sufficient accuracy for a given instance of immediate amusement.

Note that when we fail to detect or attend to something *morally* important—such as something that is harmful for someone else—such that we evaluate an incongruity-in-its-circumstances as pleasant when we ought to have taken it to be threatening, harmful, painful, tragic, or dangerous, we have failed morally. We must track what is *morally* important. For instance, we ought to detect and attend to the pig in the party hat at the mafioso's pig farm to be threatening, dangerous, and harmful. Pigs are known for their willingness to eat and ability to digest *anything*. Plenty of stories exist about people in the crime and specifically murder business who own or make use of pig farms. When we attend to these facts and the teeth the pig lies next to, the fact of the pig's being in a hat is not particularly important, even if it is incongruous. We ought not find this funny given the circumstances; we ought to track what is morally important about this incongruity-in-its-circumstances and what is morally important ought to take precedence.

Now, consider that detecting and attending to what we ought for amusement require a sort of appropriate grasp of the incongruity-in-its-circumstances. Consider further that frequent fitting evaluation of the incongruity is better achieved when, in addition to proper grasp, one also has a well developed capacity for judgment. I wrote in chapter 2 that evaluating or assessing an object of an emotion is not the same thing as judgment. This is certainly true. Nevertheless, an individual who tends to make the right judgments will tend to assess the object of her emotions properly because she is used to taking the right information in the right sorts of ways.

Someone with well developed capacities for representation, attention, value, judgment, and belief, as well as well developed moral sympathies will be in the best position to evaluate an immediate incongruity-in-its-circumstances. Such an individual more than likely has a fitting

tendency to find incongruities pleasant when they are not morally wrong, as well as a tendency not to be amused by what is morally wrong.

I suspect some may find the application of criterion two from chapter 4 to amusement here to be unsatisfactory, as my view does not necessarily make incongruities-in-their-circumstances easier to evaluate. Sometimes it is difficult to detect and attend to what is morally important. More generally, it is sometimes difficult to determine if something is seriously threatening, painful, harmful, or dangerous because it hides beneath the guise of humor. In fact, certain sorts of jokes, especially prejudicial jokes, *play* with what is dangerous and this is what is supposed to make them especially funny.[67] In any case, it is often difficult to determine what is harmful or dangerous and my view does not necessarily make it easier to make those determinations. Despite this concern, my application ought to be convincing, because it *explains* why and in what ways evaluative difficulties that we already knew existed *exist.*

Others may object because they remain unconvinced by the Not Funny Principle. I discussed Curly the Stooge slipping and falling down the stairs in chapter 2, but perhaps this was not persuasive enough because it is a less extreme case. I will now provide additional support for the NFP using two extreme examples to emphasize the point more clearly.

Consider a woman living in Cambodia in the late 1970s under the rule of despotic dictator Pol Pot. Such an individual would likely not find jokes about Pol Pot amusing, and not just because she could be killed for finding it amusing or belying amusement. He presents an immediate threat to her; he is too frightening to be the object of her amusement under any circumstances. This is not a far-fetched example that supports the NFP.

Now say someone else—a dissident—in Cambodia in the late 1970s *is* willing to make fun of his oppressor, Pol Pot, even at the cost of his life. He considers bodily harm and the loss

---

[67] By prejudicial jokes, I mean jokes that function to undermine some essential feature of an individual's identity (or some features of an individual's identity they take to be essential) by suggesting that individual is inferior because they have that essential feature or characteristic. These include sexist, racist, ageist, ethnicist, and homophobic jokes, as well as sports rivalry jokes, jokes about Catholics, Poles, lawyers, blondes, etc. These sorts of jokes play with fire, so to speak, because they play on the idea of being better than others for irrelevant reasons, which can indeed be morally problematic. However, not all instances of telling these kinds of jokes are morally problematic, as in most cases of sports rivalry jokes, or even when someone tells a sexist joke that subverts sexism.

of his life to be *less* harmful than living under Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. The dissident, then, would rather aim to undermine the regime than continue living as he has been living. This is why he is *able* to make fun of Pol Pot. This supports the NFP.

In fact, suppose his motivation for making fun of Pol Pot to others is somehow to motivate or at least provide some respite for his fellow oppressed, suppressed Cambodians. His motivation further demonstrates the NFP. If some of those people hear the joke, they may be relieved of the threat temporarily. Perhaps they will even be moved to see Pol Pot as a less significant threat because they come to value something else more than their own lives. Or perhaps as a way to shape their long-term emotions, they may will themselves to subjugate their fear by finding Pol Pot jokes funny. This further supports the NFP.

There are many examples of the sorts of things which are seriously threatening, dangerous, or harmful in a context where amusement is attempted or liable to be experienced by someone. I invite you, the unconvinced reader, to consider instances in your own lives where something was not funny to you—and not because it was a dumb joke, or you were not in the mood. I suspect it because the joke was serious to you—serious in that something which *mattered* to you was undermined in a way you found objectionable. (I call this *taking offense* and I discuss it at the end of this chapter.) The incongruity likely undermined some feature you take to be essential to your identity, some belief you have about the world that matters to you, or some identity feature or belief that someone you care about possesses. In short, it threatened what you find important; it undermined what you value. That someone made light of what you find important and valuable was offensive. In light of all of the evidence, it should be clear that the NFP is correct.

To summarize what I have said so far, fitting immediate amusement first requires that an individual represent incongruity-in-its-circumstances with sufficient accuracy where "sufficient" means making meeting criterion two possible. Second, fitting immediate amusement requires detecting and attending to what is important—including what is morally important—about the incongruity-in-its-circumstances so that the individual can evaluate the incongruity as pleasant when it is appropriate for her to do so. Next, I will apply criterion three to amusement. I then discuss what a fitting tendency for amusement looks like.

II.C. Criterion Three: Fitting Affect

The third criterion for fitting immediate amusement has two parts: a) the emoter must feel the affect of her emotion in proportion to what is important about the object-in-its-circumstances; and b) the emoter feels the affect of her emotion proportionally relative to other simultaneous mental states (e.g., other emotions). Again, for amusement, the object is an incongruity-in-its-circumstances and the affect is pleasantness. So, fitting amusement requires someone to: a) feel the pleasantness of amusement in proportion to what is objectively important about incongruity-in-its-circumstances; and, b) feel the pleasantness appropriately relative to other mental states.

According to criterion two, for an instance of amusement to be fitting, an individual must attend to and detect what is important about the incongruity—the important features of it as an object-in-its-circumstances. As mentioned above, these are all parts of *grasping* an incongruity-in-its-circumstances and they are necessary for proper evaluation of an incongruity as pleasant. Additionally, evaluation must be proper for a fitting experience of affect. That is, one cannot meet criterion three without meeting one and two. An individual will not feel fittingly about an incongruity-in-its-circumstances if she is not attending properly to what is important about it and so evaluating it properly. An individual can, however, meet criteria one and two but fail to meet three. I will discuss such a case shortly.

Again, good judgment is necessary for a fitting tendency for amusement—specifically, it is needed to attend to the right sorts of things about an incongruity-in-its-circumstances. It is also true that judgment informs taste and taste often plays a role in how we feel the affect of our emotions, especially the ones like amusement which concern what we like or take to be pleasant. How we experience the affect of amusement in particular, then, has much to do with taste and therefore judgment. Fitting, proportional pleasantness amounts to feeling pleasantness to the right extent in response to an incongruity-in-its-circumstances. We can think of plenty of examples of this.

Again, I am perfectly willing to admit that the pleasantness of an incongruity-in-its-circumstances is subject-dependent. We can nevertheless require for fittingness that the individual feel pleasantness to the right extent. Consider the following example of failing to

meet part a) of criterion three even after meeting criteria one and two. Say a college student, call him Angel, is in his junior year and taking his third philosophy class. Today his professor, who is generally disengaged, is discussing Rationalism and *a priori* knowledge, and she adds the following pun to her sentence, "…But we shouldn't put Descartes before the horse." The pun is a little forced, but Angel finds this pun absolutely hysterical. Say he is not putting on for his professor and the pun does not make him think of anything else he finds funny. He is genuinely extraordinarily amused by this pun at this moment. What is important about the incongruity-in-its-circumstances is the context: the philosophy class, the topic of conversation, who Descartes is, and what a cart is. It is perfectly appropriate for Angel to find the pun amusing, since there exists an incongruity and finding it pleasant is within the realm of moral appropriateness. He does not fail one or two. The incongruity-in-its-circumstances here, however, is not a particularly striking one and it is delivered weakly by a disengaged professor.

This seems like an obvious case of disproportionate amusement. Particularly strong amusement in this case is unfitting insofar as it seems to reflect underdeveloped taste or judgment. In particular, the pleasantness of amusement is a matter of taste, but as I said, is informed by judgment, which we can reasonably expect to develop as someone ages and comes to value and appreciate different things over time. We might expect Angel to have found the pun less amusing, especially since others in the room did, but instead he found it tremendously pleasant. If we stipulate that the reason for this is that he has underdeveloped taste and judgment which is at least partly due to lack of experience and understanding about the world to some extent, then the extent of his amusement is unfitting, though not morally problematic.[68]

Consider a children's joke book. A child who flips through it will likely be much more amused by the content than an adult. The child has not had much experience in the world. What they can and do appreciate as well as what they find pleasant and amusing lies within a narrower range than that of an adult. This is part of being an underdeveloped human being. We do not expect them to grasp or understand certain sorts of things and so do not expect them to

---

[68] In the next chapter, I will discuss this example again. I will also show under what circumstances his failing to meet criterion three could be morally problematic.

appreciate or accurately judge the quality of certain sorts of incongruities—for instance, anything in the realm of political satire. Instead, a child is more amused by something like, "What do cows do on Friday nights? Go to the moo-vies."

If a child tells this joke to an adult, the adult—if she is sufficiently kind—will pretend to be much more amused than she is in order to encourage the budding sense of humor in the child. In actuality, she will not be particularly amused and this is appropriate. She has lived longer, experienced more, and understands more about the world. What she understands and appreciates and so what and how she judges has developed. This means what she finds funny also develops. We expect this of adults. We expect their experience and so grasp of objects to develop such that their ability to judge the *quality* of objects also develops.[69]

Angel's finding the pun to be hysterical is disproportionate considering the standard he does not meet. The standard we expect is that people will not find what we take to be weakly pleasant things to be extremely pleasant because we appropriately expect their taste and judgment to develop over time. We expect him to better understand and so judge the quality of objects, including incongruities-in-their-circumstances. Thus, it is appropriate to consider the extent of Angel's affective experience of amusement to be disproportionate.[70]

Angel's failure is a failure to meet part a) of criterion three. I now turn to a discussion of part b) of the criterion three: determining whether someone's experience of pleasantness is proportional relative to other mental states. In this example, I consider whether pleasantness is proportional to other emotions. As is the case with all other emotions, we have to consider the nature of the object, its context, the nature of the other emotions an emoter feels and why she feels them, what she detects and attends to, and consider her broader emotional tendencies and emotional background over time. To illustrate, I will discuss something notoriously tricky

---

[69] This is similar to our appropriate expectations about what adults are willing to eat vs. what children are willing to eat. It is a matter of taste, but it is a matter of taste strongly informed by judgment. We expect that adults are more willing to eat food that they believe is healthier for them but does not taste particularly good. Children, on the other hand, are less willing to eat anything that does not taste particularly good. They do not fully appreciate the purpose of eating and so why health ought to bear what they are willing eat.

[70] Surely much of this will be relative to particular cultures and societies and what sorts of content is considered appropriately pleasant for mature individuals. I do not, however, see this as much of a problem. It seems true and it is not a threat to the idea that some things really are serious and so are not proper objects for amusement.

and therefore required for a complete dissertation on this topic: *amusement at a funeral.* This is an ideal place for this discussion. People tend to experience many different mental states simultaneously at funerals and funerals are serious events about a serious event: death.

During a funeral, there is a set or range of typically socially acceptable or appropriate emotions for someone to have. Certainly, sadness and grief are appropriate. The death of a fellow human being is sufficiently weighty so that even if an attendee did not know the decedent particularly well, sadness for the loss of human life is still fitting. Feeling sympathy for someone who has experienced the loss of a loved one is fitting. Feeling anger about the loss of a loved one may even be appropriate. And sometimes, feeling amused at certain moments during a funeral can be fitting.

For instance, say a eulogist tells an amusing anecdote about the deceased to illustrate a beloved quirk the deceased possessed. Being amused here is clearly fitting. The eulogist directs the audience's attention from the object of grief or sadness (the loss) to an object of amusement by reminding everyone of something they loved and found silly about the deceased. It is a pleasant memory of a pleasant thing and so the incongruity of his quirk remains pleasant.[71] Feeling primarily amusement here even while feeling sad and being concerned about the welfare of the bereaved is fitting here. It also seems that amusement through laughter may be appropriate so long as it is not excessive.

There are other moments during a funeral where, if an amused person laughed, other attendees would find the laughter unacceptable because they find the fact of someone's amusement at that moment to be unacceptable. This is due to the communicative role of laughter: it is a signal to others about what is serious and what is not.[72] Expressing amusement can be easily misunderstood here *because* the death of someone is a serious thing and so there are expectations about how and when people ought to be serious or to feel serious emotions more than others. This is because we expect people to prioritize certain objects over others in certain kinds of contexts. During a funeral, we expect people to prioritize the loss *and so* primarily experience one emotion—sadness or grief—above other emotions or other mental

---

[71] I thank Tom Gilbertson for this point.

[72] See the discussion about this on page 28.

states. For example, in a moment where the eulogist expresses her deep sorrow for the loss of the decedent, the object of her emotion is obvious. In such moments, laughter would be understandably offensive because it communicates a lack of seriousness when seriousness is appropriate and suggests that the individual who is amused does not feel appropriately in view of the context. I also suspect that a group of grieving people at a funeral would understandably assume that the laughing person's amusement must be about the object of *their* grief or sadness, rendering the laughter especially offensive.

But ultimately, *feeling* amusement even in a moment where the *expression* of amusement would be inappropriate is not grounds for thinking the feeling itself is inappropriate. The circumstances matter, and that includes the emotional background of the individual who is amused.

Consider that the range of emotions typically acceptable at a funeral are also generally acceptable during the mourning period of the bereaved. Typically, the bereaved do not experience grief as their primary emotion for long periods of time. I am not sure a human being *could* experience this. We are, after all, limited beings and our environment and so what we attend to varies over time. Rather, the bereaved experience grief *as well as* other emotions. For example, happiness when reflecting on memories. They also experience amusement at funny memories of the deceased or even thinking about what the deceased would say if they were there. They may also experience amusement about things which have nothing to do with the tragic events but serve as a distraction that helps them accept reality. This is not uncommon. In some cases, people also commonly experience comfort in knowing their loved one is no longer suffering. It is also common to feel discomfort about adjusting to life without a loved one. Not only does the bereaved miss the deceased, but it may be especially difficult and uncomfortable to learn to live alone or to handle things the deceased used to handle.

It is common to experience cycles of these emotions whereby one feels one of these emotions more than others, and then later experiences a different emotion more than the others. More importantly, it is common for people to be on different emotional cycles.[73] Thus,

---

[73] I thank Naomi Rinehold for her discussion about this.

what a particular individual feels primarily in one moment will not be the same as what others are feeling primarily at the same moment and this is not necessarily wrong or inappropriate. And if someone's amusement is part of a broader cycle of fitting emotions during mourning, it may not be unfitting.[74]

For instance, say a woman's sister has passed away. She is and has been mourning the loss with her family. During her sister's very formal funeral, however, she, at a rather serious moment, realizes her youngest child is wearing unmatching, brightly colored shoes (one is sparkly). She is quite amused. Her attention is directed away from the object of her grief for this moment and toward the incongruity of her child's attire with what is expected at funerals. The mother's experiencing amusement more than other emotions like grief is not unfitting here, as she cycles through various emotions during this time. It is not unfitting for her attention to be drawn to her children, certainly, and it is not unfitting to feel amusement more than grief even at a serious moment because she has grieved appropriately. So, her emotionally prioritizing the incongruity at this moment may seem, on its face, a little surprising since she is attending her own sister's funeral. However, when we consider the range and cycles of emotions of someone who is mourning, it should not be too surprising. Her prioritizing the incongruity over the loss of her sister is part of a cycle of appropriate emotional tendencies during this difficult time of her life. It is not unfitting and is arguably fitting given the broader context. The mourning or grieving process is complex. It is not unfitting to be amused rather than grieving at every moment throughout the process. *That* would be rather disproportionate.

In this section, I have shown what feeling pleasantness in proportion to what is important about an incongruity-in-its-circumstances looks like, and what disproportionate amusement looks like. I have shown what fitting pleasantness of amusement relative to other emotions looks like. Both are required for amusement to be fitting.

I have thus far discussed the three criteria someone must meet in order for her amusement to be fitting. I have also shown how meeting these criteria is much easier if

---

[74] It is worth mentioning that plenty of people process grief primarily through amusement. It is not immediately clear to me that this is morally problematic. Much depends on their character, of course.

someone already has a fitting tendency for amusement. To conclude this section, I will now briefly discuss what such a tendency amounts to.

II.D. A Fitting Tendency for Amusement

In my discussion of the three criteria for fitting immediate amusement, I have shown the ways in which a fitting tendency for amusement better equips someone to experience fitting immediate amusement. Bearing in mind the emotional feedback loop discussed in chapter 3, it is also true that experiencing fitting immediate amusement also contributes to the development of a fitting tendency for amusement. I now must explicitly state what a fitting tendency for amusement looks like.

Aristotle would say that a fitting tendency for amusement—a social virtue, according to book IV, chapter 8 of *Nicomachean Ethics*—is tending to be amused when one should be and not being amused when one should not be. In particular, one should be amused at the right things in the right circumstances and not amused when amusement is not appropriate or fitting; one should tend to do these things. Roughly, I agree with this picture as is clear from the three criteria of a fitting immediate amusement I have discussed above and will be clearer from the final section of this chapter.

On my view, a fitting tendency for amusement is one whereby an individual meets the following three criteria I derive from above and chapter 4. 1) She tends to represent Y incongruities and Z circumstances accurately thanks to well developed capacities for representation. 2) She tends to detect and attend to what actually is most important about Y-in-Z such that she evaluates Y-in-Z as pleasant when it is appropriate to do so thanks to well developed capacities for representation, attention, judgment, and belief, as well as well developed moral sensitivities. 3) She tends to feel amusement in proportion to what is important about Y-in-Z *and* relative to other mental states she has—this is thanks to the same capacities as those in 2). In sum, she represents, appreciates, and feels proportionally about what is important about incongruities-in-their-circumstances. Additionally, she *aims* and *strives* to have fitting experiences of amusement because these are necessary for a fitting tendency for amusement, and both are necessary for good emotional agency, as discussed in chapter 3.

An individual may be praised for an instance of fitting amusement when it comes from a fitting tendency for amusement—more specifically, when it comes from well developed features of her character which are necessary for experiencing amusement to the right extent, at the right times, and in the right ways. She may also be praised when her fitting amusement is the result of a value shift or change of heart such that she evaluates an incongruity-in-its-circumstances properly. In the next section, I will articulate examples of fitting immediate amusement and show when one may be praised for it.

III. Examples of Fitting Amusement and Praiseworthy Fitting Amusement

Now that we know what is required for amusement to be fitting, we can consider some examples. While all praiseworthy instances of amusement and tendencies for amusement must be fitting, it is not the case that all instances of fitting immediate amusement are praiseworthy. Sometimes amusement is fitting but it is not praiseworthy because it does not involve, deal with, or concern anything that is morally important—i.e., it is morally neutral—and so requires nothing from an individual's moral character. I discuss an example of this first. Then, I discuss when fitting amusement is praiseworthy: when evaluating the incongruity as pleasant comes from a morally good character or a morally appropriate value shift.

The following is an example of fitting amusement that is not praiseworthy. Say someone comes home from work and sits down by himself to watch *The Simpsons* episode "Duffless" (season 4, episode 16). We can add that he lives alone and that he has no more pressing responsibilities he needs or ought to fulfill today, though he is somewhat concerned about receiving his new passport in the mail on time. He sits down with his dinner and turns on his show. He hears the following exchange between a main character, Lisa Simpson, and a "wise guy" pet shop clerk and is amused by both jokes:

"Lisa: I want the most intelligent hamster you've got.

Pet Shop Clerk**:** Okay. Uh, this little guy writes mysteries under the name of J.D. McGregor.

Lisa: How can a hamster write mysteries?

Pet Shop Clerk: Well, he gets the ending first, then he writes backward."

There are two *primary* incongruities here. The first is the violation of expectations about a typical hamster. The idea of a hamster composing mystery novels—especially under a *nom de plume*—is incongruous with the man's experiences of and knowledge about hamsters, which are not particularly bright animals. The second incongruity is between Lisa's question about how it is possible for a hamster to write and the clerk's answer about a strategy for writing a mystery novel.

The individual who is amused identifies, detects, and attends to these incongruities in the context of the TV show and of watching it in his home. That is, he attends to what makes the incongruity pleasant—hamsters, mystery novels, and standard question and answer rhythms. The incongruities are pleasant for him and he is amused. In this case, he meets all three criteria, but nothing about these incongruities or the circumstances is morally important for him *to* detect or attend to. That is, there is nothing serious: no threats of harm or danger. So, his not picking up on anything morally important is not a failure. Moreover, he is not prioritizing the jokes or even the show over something such that he is being negligent. He may be worried about receiving his passport in time for a business trip, but it is not wrong for him to feel amusement more strongly than concern in this moment because there is nothing to be done about the passport and he feels appropriate concern at other times. Additionally, the jokes are about hamsters, mystery novels, and question and answer norms—three rather innocuous objects that, in this case at least, do not require having or endorsing morally problematic concepts, beliefs, or judgments to find pleasantly incongruous. Thus, his being amused meets the three criteria and so it is fitting. It is not praiseworthy, however, because there was nothing morally important for him to detect or attend to which would cause him to evaluate something as pleasant when it is not appropriate to do so, and nothing he should be feeling rather than amusement.

The next example depicts a fitting instance of amusement that comes from a morally good character and so merits praise. It is Christmas morning and a family is gathered together, ready to open gifts. The family consists of two parents and two college-age offspring—a young man and a young woman. The young woman, Erin, has recently gotten her ears pierced and is hoping for some new earrings. She unwraps a gift from her mom, Anna: there they are! The

rocking chair earrings! Erin is delighted, even if a bit confused because she instantly recognize*s* them. "Ooooh! Yay! These are mine!" she announces, clutching them close to herself. Anna, happily responds, "Yes, they're yours! Merry Christmas!" Erin, still happy, replies, "Yes, I mean they *are* mine!" Anna, now a little confused herself, says, "Yes; yay! I just gave them to you— they're yours!" Erin smiles and says, "No, they're really mine. I lost them a little while ago. I left them here on my dresser last month and now here they are!" Anna is thoroughly amused, laughs loudly, and says, "Are you kidding? I *found* them in your bedroom last month and assumed I put them there to remind myself that I bought them for you and not your cousin! Oh my goodness, I had no memory of buying those for you but assumed I had! Those *are* yours!" The family laughs together and Anna is especially amused by her own blunder.

In this particular instance, Anna meets all three criteria. She recognizes the incongruity of giving a gift to Erin that Erin already owned and appreciates the circumstances in which this incongruity exists and is discovered. Anna detects and attends to what is important here about the incongruity and the circumstances and determines that the incongruity is pleasant. She also feels the pleasant affect of her amusement proportionally: she may feel some embarrassment, but ultimately, she is more amused than anything else.

What is important here is that there is a possibility that Anna *could* feel some threat to her person, such as her identity as a mother or as a good gift-giver. Her mistake could make her feel badly about herself. After all, Erin was not particularly subtle about the mistake, as she was both confused and genuinely excited to have her earrings back. Anna could easily interpret Erin's reaction as hostile or just rude when it was not meant to be either. The circumstances in which her attention is brought to the incongruity are such that her emotional response is morally valenced. It could be that she feels hurt or threatened *or not.* In this case, Anna is amused by her blunder. Say we now stipulate that she and Erin have a good relationship and often understand each other's motivations. We also stipulate that Anna appropriately respects herself while recognizing that humans make mistakes. She tends to take herself seriously but not too seriously. As a result, she is not threatened by this particular mistake because she does not take it to undermine her identity as a mother, her gift-giving abilities, her intelligence, or any other feature about her. She also appreciates that the mistake did not harm anyone else.

Anna, therefore, evaluates this incongruity-in-its-circumstances as an appropriate object of amusement and is fittingly amused because her amusement comes from a tendency to respect herself as a person in the right sorts of ways while making room for her own humanity. Anna's amusement is therefore praiseworthy.

The last example is of praiseworthy amusement as part of a morally appropriate change of heart or value shift. I will build on the example from chapter 3 about Louise (46). She wants to take her job less seriously so that she can be amused by jokes her coworkers make about their shared plight as overworked, underpaid administrative assistants. It likely takes some time for her to internalize what she aims to internalize: a shift in her beliefs about her work and how she *values* her work and her job. Note that the value shift is a morally appropriate one because she hopes to improve herself by *not* considering her work as part of her identity or her value as a person. She also hopes to better appreciate her coworkers as well.

Say Louise shares an office with fellow administrative assistant Priya. Louise knows Priya is on the phone with their incompetent boss. Priya hangs up and clears her throat to get Louise's attention. They make eye-contact. Priya picks the phone back up, pushes the receiver button down, furrows her brow, and facetiously speaks into the phone. "Of course, ma'am. I can absolutely drop everything right now, including my meeting in 10 minutes, to help you address this serious problem." She pauses for a pretend response, puts on an enormous fake grin, and continues: "Of course not! Adjusting the height of your chair for you is always my top priority! I know I've shown you multiple times, but I didn't expect you to remember because you're just so important and busy. I am very happy to fix your chair for you and for low hourly wages! Love you, bye." They both laugh heartily.

For the first time, Louise is thoroughly amused about a joke about their boss. Priya does a wonderful parody of a response to a ridiculous request from their incompetent boss and signs off from the fake call in a funny way too. Louise has finally internalized her value shift such that she can find Priya's bit genuinely amusing. In the past, Louise would probably have smiled at Priya and thought about how Priya was wasting her time: "I know our boss is silly. I don't need a reminder while I'm trying to get my work done efficiently." But today, after aiming and striving to be amused by these sorts of jokes, Louise is amused and her amusement is praiseworthy

because of where it comes from. Where she would have been annoyed or bothered because she considered her value as a person to be dependent on her work and her job, which included taking her boss seriously, she now can appreciate the silliness of her boss and her employment situation in general. The value shift is praiseworthy and so is this instance of her amusement.

From these examples, it is clear that fitting amusement may not be praiseworthy but it can be. When it comes from a morally good character or when it comes from a value shift—however slow or quick—it can be praiseworthy. I will now explain the final feature of my conception of praiseworthy fitting amusement.

IV. Praise for Offense-Instead-of-Amusement

I argue here that in some cases, it may be fitting for someone to feel offended instead amused by an incongruity-in-its-circumstances and she may be praised for it. My view, following Aristotle, is that failure to be amused when one should not be amused—or taking offense when one should—is part of fitting amusement. Any reasonable conception of a fitting tendency for amusement must include *both* being amused and failing to be amused for the right reasons.

Certainly, people take offense to objects other than attempts at humor or things which could be found funny, but I focus here on *fitting offense-instead-of-amusement.* Note that "instead-of-amusement" is meant to denote cases where the object of offense is intended as humorous or could be taken to be humorous.

When someone takes an incongruity-in-its-circumstances to be offensive, it is fitting if she does what she ought with respect to criterion two. It is fitting for her to detect and attend to that which is morally important about the incongruity-in-its-circumstances such that she does not evaluate the incongruity as pleasant when she ought not and she does so *because* her capacities for representation, attention, value, judgment, and belief and her moral sensitivities are properly calibrated.

Doing this requires meeting criterion one for amusement because an individual cannot meet two without meeting one. Additionally, for offense-instead-of-amusement to be fitting, an individual must also meet criterion three. More specifically, her offense ought to be felt in proportion to what is morally important about an incongruity-in-its-circumstances.

For example, say Tyrese has just lost his grandfather, with whom he was very close. Tyrese's friends all know about it and have taken him to dinner to lift his spirits and generally be there to support him. They have finished eating and the friends are listening intently as Tyrese tells a touching story about his grandfather. One of his friend's coworkers coincidentally shows up at the restaurant where Tyrese and his friends are. The coworker notices the group and their serious faces. He walks over to them and says, "Hey, who died?! You guys look somber AF!" Tyrese takes offense, is annoyed, and a bit angry with this individual. Tyrese represents the incongruity-in-its-circumstances and understands the attempt at humor as such. He attends to the fact that the coworker should have taken their somber faces to indicate a somber moment. It is unfortunate that the coworker chose those words which sting Tyrese. He is not *deeply* offended, however, because he also appreciates and attends to the fact that the coworker, while imperceptive, also does not know Tyrese has just lost his grandfather. In this moment, Tyrese feels offense-instead-of-amusement appropriately. He feels it less than he feels annoyance and more than anger because he rightly prioritizes the objects of his various emotions, including offense at an attempt at humor. Tyrese's offense-rather-than-amusement would be fitting according to all three criteria and would be praiseworthy because he finds morally important what is objectively morally important about all of these circumstances and feels appropriately.

Just as it is crucial for amusement, it is crucial for an individual's offense-instead-of-amusement to track what is actually morally important about an incongruity-in-its-circumstances. That is what makes offense here fitting and praiseworthy: that someone takes as morally important what is morally important about the incongruity-in-its-circumstances such that he properly evaluates it as offensive because it is seriously threatening, dangerous, harmful, painful, or tragic, and feels offense to the right extent. It is even clearer that his offense-instead-of-amusement is fitting and he is praiseworthy if the emotion comes from morally good character, and in particular, well developed moral capacities and moral sensitivities.

Like praise for fitting amusement, praise for offense-instead-of-amusement can be appropriate even when it comes from a value shift or change of heart. Say someone, call him

Ted, has just moved to a new town for a new job. He is hanging out with some new friends and is trying to fit in with two people he likes a great deal.[75] Ted does not have a fitting tendency to be amused, but the two people he is spending time with both have fitting tendencies to be amused. They appreciate a wide variety of jokes, but they are able to evaluate those moments in which a joke may be believed to be threatening or harmful to themselves or others. This is because they value what they take to be important, and deeply care about other people and so attend to what they take to be morally important as well. They are not amused by certain sorts of incongruities in certain sorts of circumstances, though they are most certainly not prudes or boors. They are usually amused when they should be and not amused when they should not be. They have tendencies for fitting amusement.

Typically, when Ted hangs out with these two people, he reins his laughter in a bit. He does not want to come across as an insensitive or cruel person. He just does not see what the big deal is about certain things—for example, how a funny comment could be interpreted as sexist and harmful. He thinks sometimes people take things way too seriously: "it's just a joke," he thinks to himself. Nevertheless, he develops a tendency that *mimics from the outside* a fitting tendency for amusement so that he can fit in with his new chums.[76] Note that this is *not* a fitting tendency because it is not coming from a morally good character. He is unable to evaluate some things as unpleasant because he fails to appreciate what is morally important, such as how well he knows an individual or how others might feel. He fails to realize that some things may actually be unpleasant because they are harmful. Moreover, there are plenty of moments where he is genuinely amused when he should not be but does not show it.

Say one evening, however, Ted and company are at a restaurant after work. The three overhear a joke about a local female politician in their community. For the first time, Ted is not amused where he normally would be because he better understands how sexism is harmful and how this particular incongruity-in-its-circumstances functions to suggest the inferiority of women. He is therefore able to detect and attend to what is morally important about this

---

[75] I thank Naomi Rinehold for suggesting I include an example where someone ends up getting it right after having habituated himself for selfish reasons.

[76] Note that this could be part of Ted's improving his moral character. Recall footnote 48 on virtue acquisition.

instance of humor. Learning how to go through the motions of not laughing in front of certain people has caused Ted to understand some of the reasons why those friends do not find certain things funny. In this case, they would not find this type of sexist joke to be funny.[77] In this moment, Ted experiences the sort of change of heart I discussed at the end of chapter 4. Even while his offense here is not necessarily coming from a morally good character, at this moment, he detects and attends to what he ought and so evaluates fittingly and feels fittingly because of it. Ted may be praised for this.

I have shown that we ought to consider offense to an incongruity-in-its-circumstances to be fitting when it tracks what is morally important about the incongruity-in-its-circumstances and affect is felt proportionally. It seems quite clear that this is necessarily part of a fitting tendency for amusement and may therefore be considered fitting amusement even while it is more like fitting *un*-amusement.

V. Conclusion

In this chapter, I applied the three criteria of fitting immediate emotions and emotional tendencies to amusement. For someone's amusement to be fitting, she must represent an incongruity-in-its-circumstances with sufficient accuracy, where that means she must represent what is necessary to meet the second criterion. Second, an emoter must detect and attend to what is important about the incongruity-in-its-circumstances such that she can evaluate it as pleasant when it is not unfitting to do so, or offensive when it is fitting to do so. Third, the emoter must feel the affect of her emotion in proportion to what is important about the incongruity-in-its-circumstances and relative to other mental states she has.

A fitting tendency for amusement is, essentially, a tendency to do these things. It is a tendency to experience immediate amusement fittingly due to developed capacities for representation, attention, value, judgment, and belief, and well developed capacities for moral sensitivities, which are essential for a morally good character.

---

[77] My view is that joke-types *by themselves and considered in a vacuum* are never morally right or morally wrong. They can only be properly evaluated in a context. Because this is my view, I am also committed to the claim that not all sexist jokes are morally problematic or wrong. After all, plenty of sexist jokes can function to undermine sexism itself or persons who adhere to sexism. But for this example, I stipulate that the joke in this context is indeed problematically sexist

Fittingness is necessary for amusement to be praiseworthy, but not all instances of fitting amusement are praiseworthy. Fitting amusement is praiseworthy when it comes from a morally good character or when it comes from a correct shift in values. Not all cases of properly evaluating an incongruity as pleasant or unpleasant involve or require anything from moral character or concern anything that might be morally valenced.

In the next chapter I articulate the different types of mistakes we can make with respect to the three criteria of fitting amusement such that our amusement becomes unfitting. I then articulate when and why we may be blamed for some of these mistakes, depending on circumstances and character. In the last part of the next chapter, parallel to section IV in this chapter, I argue for when and how we may be blamed for taking offense instead of being amused when we ought not have. In my view, this is the most interesting conclusion of this dissertation. I do not hold that we may *always* be blamed, but in cases where there is something morally significant about our offense-instead-of-amusement—namely, that it comes from morally bad character—we may be blamed for taking offense instead of being amused.

CHAPTER SIX

UNFITTING AMUSEMENT AND BLAME

I. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I developed the criteria for fitting amusement. I showed how amusement can be fitting but not praiseworthy. I also discussed what makes fitting amusement praiseworthy—it must come from good character or a sufficiently correct "change of heart." Lastly, I addressed when taking offense instead of being amused can be praiseworthy. This chapter explores the many ways that our amusement can be unfitting as well as what makes unfitting amusement blameworthy. I will also discuss when we can be blamed for failing to be amused.

As I pointed out in chapter 4, emotions are unfitting if they fail to meet the criteria for fitting emotions. The same is true of amusement. Amusement can be unfitting if an individual fails to represent an incongruity-in-its-circumstances with sufficient accuracy (failure of representation), fails to detect or attend to what is important about the incongruity or circumstances such that she fails to evaluate the incongruity-in-its-circumstances properly (failure of attention or evaluation), or fails to feel the affect of amusement in proportion to the incongruity-in-its-circumstances or relative to other mental states (failure of affect). Not all of these failures amount to moral failures, but some of them sometimes do. If they do, or if it is unclear whether they are moral failures, we determine whether there are any mitigating conditions for blame—these include mitigating immediate conditions, such as a bad day, and mitigating long-term conditions, such as a bad starting point in moral development. These conditions help us determine how much we ought to blame people for unfitting instances of amusement and tendencies for unfitting amusement. As I have said, to blame someone is to hold them responsible for something and reject it some way. When someone's responsibility for her amusement decreases, so does how much we ought to hold that individual responsible.

The last part of this chapter addresses when we can be blamed for failing to be amused: in particular, where failure to be amused comes from a moral character flaw which we could

have reasonably expected someone to have noticed and addressed.[78] As I noted toward the end of chapter 5, someone's taking offense does not render a joke or any object of amusement morally wrong. Rather, offense can be a good indicator of the moral wrongness of a joke and it should be taken seriously. However, there are cases where offense is very clearly not warranted, yet someone takes offense due to a moral character flaw (as opposed to a misunderstanding). This section is, I think, especially practically useful. It shows that the practice of blaming for offense can be justified, yet also shows why we ought to be much more discerning than we often are when we engage in the practice. For now, I shall discuss how amusement can be unfitting.

II. Unfitting Immediate Amusement and Tendencies to Be Amused

There are many ways to fail to be fittingly amused. Common sense tells us this and my view explains why this is the case. Whenever an instance of our amusement fails to meet the criteria laid out for fitting amusement discussed in the previous chapter, that instance of amusement is unfitting. Not every instance of unfitting amusement is morally problematic, however. In this section, I will elaborate on the many ways our amusement can be unfitting, distinguishing between moral failures and morally neutral failures.

II.A Failing to Meet Criterion One: Insufficient Representational Accuracy

For immediate amusement to be fitting, an individual must represent what is needed to meet criterion two. More specifically, she must represent what must be detected and attended to by that individual in order to evaluate an incongruity-in-its-circumstances as pleasant when it is appropriate to do so. This is what it means to represent with sufficient accuracy. I will now articulate what failing to meet this criterion looks like for amusement in particular.

According to incongruity theory as discussed in chapter 2, a great many things can count as incongruities, including things which are, technically, improperly represented. This, however,

---

[78] For the sake of clarity, I ought to mention that not all cases of failing to find something funny are unfitting. For instance, there are plenty of instances where someone may not be amused because a joke-teller fails to tell the joke properly; or instances where someone is not amused because she has heard the same joke from the same person multiple times. These are instances where failing to be amused is not a problem. I would like to thank Frédéric Gagnon for this point and these examples. In this final section, rather, I am talking about cases where someone is *offended* rather than amused and she should not be.

is not a problem for my view, as what also matters for meeting criterion one is representing that which is *necessary* to detect and attend to for fitting evaluation, which does not require totally veridical experiences. What matters is representing what is necessary for meeting criterion two. It so happens that tending to represent veridically will be helpful, but we may still be very open about what an incongruity can be about.

As discussed in chapter 5, thanks to the Not Funny Principle, fitting evaluation requires tracking what is important or morally important about an incongruity-in-its-circumstances so one may evaluate it as pleasant when it is. That is, one must not evaluate them as pleasant when they are *not* seriously threatening, painful, harmful, dangerous, or tragic. To take the incongruity-in-its-circumstances as pleasant when it is not is to fail. What makes any object seriously threatening, harmful, painful, dangerous, or tragic *is* morally important to detect and attend to. So, to fail here is to fail morally. This means that failing to represent with sufficient accuracy amounts to failing to represent what is morally important which one must detect and attend to for fitting or proper evaluation. Failures to meet criterion one and two in the case of amusement, then, must be moral failures—they are failures which have moral content.

Again, we can allow for a broad variety of incongruities. Consider the following extreme example. Say I've had a concussion and I am at the hospital. I look out of my hospital window and I hallucinate a unicorn walking a tiny dragon on a leash and I find it funny. There *is* an incongruity here, even if others cannot see it. Namely, my concept of the mythical creature "unicorn" does not include pet ownership or any association with dragons. Additionally, neither concept includes "real," yet I experience them as real. It is true that my representations are, strictly speaking, non-veridical. Nevertheless, there exists incongruity between my concepts of unicorns and dragons and what I represent before me, which also includes the context—namely that they are walking outside. I therefore do represent an incongruity-in-its-circumstances, even though I experience the incongruity within a hallucination. In fact, it is an incongruity which makes sense (as incongruous) even outside the hallucination. There does not seem to be anything morally important within my hallucination for me to detect and attend to. We can conclude this if we ask the following: if my experience *were* veridical, would there be anything objectively important for me to attend to such that I ought to evaluate the incongruity-in-its-

circumstances as seriously harmful, threatening, dangerous, or tragic? Stipulate that the answer is no. In such a case, then, even if I am hallucinating an incongruity, I can still meet criterion one. Certainly, I must attend to things in the right sort of way and that ought to reflect what is objectively true within reality, but it is still *possible*.

So, what ultimately matters the most for meeting criterion one is representing what is or may be morally important about an incongruity-in-its-circumstances—for instance, whether there is good reason to think a joke genuinely denigrates someone else on morally irrelevant grounds. It is also possible to meet criterion one and two without a completely veridical emotional experience. In the next section, I continue the discussion of failing to meet criterion two.

II.B. Failing to Meet Criterion Two: Unfitting Evaluation

Again, "for someone's amusement to meet criterion two, she must detect and attend to what is important about the incongruity and its circumstances and take something as pleasant when it is fitting to take it to be pleasant rather than unpleasant" (85). This requires meeting criterion one. Of course, as discussed above, one can fail to meet criterion two as a result of failing to meet criterion one. One cannot detect or attend to what she ought if she does not represent what she ought first.

Consider this example of how failing criterion one causes failure of criterion two. I will return to this example and iterations of it throughout this chapter. Say someone, call him Oren, is hosting a Halloween party where the theme is "lovable tyrants." The idea is to dress up like tyrannical despots, add amusing elements, and enjoy making amusing that which is scary: a room full of tyrannical despots hanging out together. Oren and his friends all have either been affected by tyrannical despots themselves (e.g., his friend Jin-woo escaped North Korea in 1992), or have family who have been (Oren's grandmother survived the Holocaust). The party is an effort to come together to undermine the strength of the enduring effects of those despots on themselves and their families. In particular, Oren is trying to help his friends who have been directly affected. The party's attendees include "Hitler," "Pol Pot," "Kim Il Sung," "Milosevic," "Ceausescu," "Idi Amin," and so on. Oren, dressed as Hitler in a Hawaiian shirt and pith helmet, hears his doorbell ring. Everyone invited has arrived so the partygoers are surprised. "Idi Amin"

answers the door just as "Hitler," delivers a punchline to "Ceausescu" in a heavy fake German accent: "Not as efficient as *gas!*" The guest at the door is Oren's grandmother—the one who survived the Holocaust—and she absolutely heard the punchline. (She was dropping off left over cake as a surprise for Oren.) Of course, she is devastated. "Ceausescu," on the other hand, is amused by "Hitler's" punchline though he has a clear view of the open doorway. He laughs heartily though no one else does. Oren's grandmother is even more devastated because she knows the guy dressed as Ceausescu—his name is Nikolai.

In this particular case, Nikolai fails to represent the change in audience with sufficient accuracy. He knows someone is at the door. He even *sees* that there is someone there. The problem, however, is that he does not sufficiently represent her identity, which is precisely what it is morally important about this situation.

Certainly, anyone who was not at the party might not understand it and be upset by the joke. This would be true of anyone at the door—a fact he ought to have attended to. The accuracy of his representation is insufficient because he fails to realize *who* is at the door when it is easy for him to do so. This is a moral failure. Audience changes matter morally and most obviously in cases where a misunderstanding is likely and when that can become dangerous. Nikolai's failure causes him to take the punchline as pleasant when the specific change in audience ought to render the punchline unpleasant. Had Nikolai noticed who was at the door, his attention would have been redirected to her and her feelings; his respect and care for Oren's grandmother would have made him see the situation from her perspective such that he would not have evaluated the punchline as pleasant. He would have taken the punchline to be a threat to her, as Oren did, because he understands her situation. Nikolai's inadequate representation ensures that he fails to detect or attend to what is morally significant in this particular situation and he takes the punchline as pleasant. In this case, Nikolai's amusement is unfitting because he fails to meet criteria one and two for fitting amusement. Additionally, it ought to be clear that his failure is a moral failure.

What must now be discussed is meeting criterion one but failing to meet criterion two. Ultimately, this failure is one whereby an individual fails to detect and attend to what is seriously threatening, dangerous, painful, harmful, or tragic about an incongruity-in-its-

circumstances such that she evaluates it as pleasant when it is in fact serious. We fail to attend to something which is objectively important because what we take to be important and valuable is not in line with what *is* objectively important. Note that again, because of the NFP, *failing* criterion two of fitting amusement on its own requires failing morally.

For example, say a misogynist is with his friends and he hears a joke that denigrates women: "if women aren't meant to cook, then why do they have eggs and milk inside of them?" The misogynist is amused. The joke relies on a worn-out stereotype that women are only good for things that put them in a subservient role, like cooking and cleaning. The misogynist still thinks this stereotype is ultimately true, even if he recognizes that he cannot be honest about this. In fact, in the presence of women, he does not indicate amusement and instead protests to avoid revealing what his convictions truly are. So, the misogynist in this example certainly represents what is morally significant about this joke—namely, that it denigrates women. The problem is that he fails to *attend to it as genuinely problematic*. Additionally, he fails when women are around and he feigns offense. He still attends to the moral significance of denigration wrongly. He still thinks the denigration is justifiable in light of his views about women and attends to the morally important feature of the joke only as socially important. So, in this case, he clearly represents that the joke denigrates women because he is aware of how it makes them feel, but he does not find it problematic or attend to it as problematic because he does not properly value women as persons. This, then, is a failure of criterion two without failing criterion one.

Next, I discuss failing to meet criterion three of fitting amusement, which often depends on failing to meet criterion two, but may not. I then discuss what an unfitting tendency for amusement looks like.

II.C. Failing to Meet Criterion Three: Unfitting Affect

The third criterion for fitting immediate amusement is: "a) the emoter must feel the affect of her emotion in proportion to what is important about the object-in-its-circumstances; and b) the emoter feels the affect of her emotion proportionally relative to other simultaneous mental states (e.g., other emotions)" (88). There are, therefore, many ways to fail to meet this criterion. More specifically, an individual can fail to meet criterion one and so two and so three.

She can meet one but fail two and so three. She can also meet one and two but fail to meet three. I shall now discuss all three of these possibilities.

An individual can fail to meet criterion two and so three because she feels the emotion of amusement more than or instead of another mental state that ought to be felt or experienced to a greater extent than amusement, such as concern for others. (Specifically, she fails part b.) Let us return to the example of Nikolai and Oren's grandmother but change some details—call it version B. Say that Nikolai *did* notice Oren's grandmother at the door when he should have, so he does not fail criterion one. He does not, however, take her presence as something that ought to change what is pleasantly incongruous about the punchline. He lacks appropriate concern for her despite what he knows about her and understands about her position. He fails to attend to what he ought—how she feels. This is failure to meet criterion two. Had he attended to how she felt, the pleasantness of the incongruity would diminish or not exist at all. Instead, he is amused and not concerned with her or her feelings. This is a failure to meet criterion three. Both failures are clearly moral failures.

Moral failure is even clearer if we change the example once again—call it version C. Say Nikolai noticed Oren's grandmother but thought the punchline was funnier *because* of her presence. In such a case, he would be amused by the punchline *and* by her presence: two objects. His amusement at her presence amplifies his amusement at the punchline. This would be a tremendous failure insofar as he would have to take very wrong things to be proper objects of amusement. This example also shows how someone can meet one but fail to meet criterion two and so fail to meet criterion three.[79]

Recall the example of Angel, the college student from chapter 5, section II.C. (89). In this case, he meets criteria one and two, but fails to meet criterion three, part a). Angel is genuinely amused by the terrible pun his professor delivers during a class about Rationalism and *a priori* knowledge: "…But we shouldn't put Descartes before the horse." He finds it *excessively* funny.

---

[79] Some philosophers of humor argue that the moral wrongness of a joke can increase amusement. This claim seems correct. This does not make amusement at such things appropriate, however. See Nöel Carroll's "Ethics and Comic Amusement" for a good discussion of the comic moralism debate. See also Philip Percival's "Comic Normativity and the Ethics of Humor" as well as Aaron Smuts's "The Salacious and the Satirical: In Defense of Symmetric Comic Moralism," and "Do Moral Flaws Enhance Amusement?"

We call this excessive because the object is not one which should have caused him to feel *this* pleasant—or, as pleasant as he feels. His feeling is the result of underdeveloped taste informed by underdeveloped judgment which is at least partly due to a lack of experience or understanding about the world, all of which we reasonably expect him to have developed by this point. His taste and judgment and understanding are lacking, and this becomes clear when we consider why his fellow classmates do not feel pleasantness particularly strongly. In his case, it is due to appreciating more about the world as a result of improved understanding which shapes their judgment, taste, and so standards for amusement. Angel is deficient in this area by comparison.

Is this a moral failure? The answer is a bit tricky. On my view, this particular instance is not obviously a moral failure because it is not clear whether he finds the joke excessively funny for an obviously morally wrong reason. It is possible: his underdeveloped judgment could be a result of his own moral failure to improve. As discussed in section III.A. of chapter 4, since it is unclear whether his failure has moral content, we can use the same process for determining blame to determine whether Angel's failure has moral content, as it is discoverable along the way. In particular, if his failure is due to a failure of moral character, it will be clear that it does in fact have moral content.

Now that I have shown different ways to fail to meet the criteria for fitting amusement, and thereby shown different iterations of unfitting amusement, I will next address unfitting tendencies for amusement.

II.D. Unfitting Tendencies for Amusement

As discussed in chapter 5, an individual must tend to represent the right things, detect and attend to the right things, and feel proportionally about incongruities-in-their-circumstances in order to have a fitting tendency for amusement. A fitting tendency for amusement certainly requires a great deal from a person—it requires well developed capacities for representation, attention, value, judgment, and belief as well as well developed moral sensitivities. While it is not necessarily true that having a morally good character or being morally virtuous are technically required for a fitting tendency for amusement, it is true that

what is required for being morally good or virtuous includes what is required for a fitting

tendency for amusement.

An unfitting tendency for amusement is a tendency to fail to meet at least one of the

criteria required for a fitting tendency for amusement discussed above. So long as someone

continues to make the same mistake or sorts of mistakes that continue to render her

amusement unfitting, she can be said to have an unfitting tendency for amusement. Those

tendencies include tending to fail to represent incongruities-in-their-circumstances with

sufficient accuracy, tending to fail to detect and attend to what is most important about

incongruities-in-their-circumstances, or tending to fail to feel amusement proportionally and

relative to other mental states. Of course, an individual may have more than one tendency to

fail in these sorts of ways. In any case, it is clearly much more difficult to have a fitting tendency

for amusement than an unfitting tendency amusement. Moreover, due to the nature of

incongruities and the pleasant, it is more likely that an unfitting tendency for amusement will

be due to a consistent moral failure.

In the next section, I will discuss blameworthiness for an unfitting tendency for

amusement, as well as instances of immediate amusement.

III. Blameworthy Unfitting Immediate Amusement

and Tendencies for Amusement

In chapter 4, section IV.A., I discussed the conditions for blameworthiness for emotions.

I showed that what matters for blameworthiness for emotions depends on multiple factors:

whether the failure to meet one of the criteria is a *moral* failure; whether the moral failure is

part of a larger pattern which contributes to and is part of a moral character flaw; and whether

there are/the extent of mitigating circumstances. The same is true for immediate amusement.

An individual may be blamed for an instance of unfitting amusement when it comes from an

unfitting tendency for amusement that comes from poorly developed features of her character

which are necessary for experiencing amusement to the right extent, at the right times, and in

the right ways—and when we could reasonably have expected her to improve those features of

her character. That is, her unfitting tendency must be due to and part of a morally deficient

character which could reasonably be expected to be morally good or at least morally better than it is.

I will use the example of Nikolai and Oren's grandmother, version B, to illustrate these conditions of blameworthiness. Along the way, I will discuss why, how, and to what extent we can blame Nikolai for his failure to attend to Oren's grandmother's feelings and so why he feels more amusement than concern for her. Again, these failures are moral failures. We begin by considering whether these mistakes are a one-off or something that is part of an unfitting tendency for amusement .

Nikolai knows Oren's grandmother well. Nikolai is over at Oren's a great deal and so has met his grandmother many times when she would stop by. He knows her, he knows what she has been through. Nevertheless, he fails to attend to her proximity to the Holocaust and so does not recognize the punchline as a threat to her well-being. He feels more amusement than concern for her. We must ask whether this is a one-off or part of a larger pattern: does Nikolai frequently fail to consider the feelings of others? Is he not concerned about others in the appropriate ways? It is also worth asking whether he has a pattern of frequently failing to be concerned about the feelings of Jewish people in particular.

In this case, let us say he frequently fails to consider the feelings of other people generally, and not just Jewish people. These failures contribute to and are part of an unfitting tendency for amusement . So, even if Nikolai did have a terrible day or was especially tired, these immediate conditions do *not* mitigate blame. Such conditions are irrelevant at this point.

The tendencies he has for frequently failing to consider or be concerned about others appropriately are morally problematic tendencies. In particular, these tendencies must be rooted in poor moral sensitivities. Well developed moral sensitivities would ensure that he felt sympathy and empathy for others when it is appropriate to do so. This would require well developed judgment as well. Nikolai lacks these things. As a result, he lacks compassion, which is a significant failure of moral character. It is, after all, a vice to fail consistently to feel compassion for others when one ought.

Next, we must consider possible mitigating long-term conditions to determine how much we can blame him. They have to do with two things: where an individual actually is in his

moral development and where we could reasonably expect him to be. If, for instance, Nikolai were trying to develop his moral sensitivities and failed in this moment despite aiming and striving, his blame would be mitigated. Certainly, he would still be responsible for his failures, but we would appreciate his efforts and reduce how much we hold his failures against him. This would not be not a one-off, but his trying genuinely would matter morally.

Say, however, that Nikolai is not aiming and striving. He is not even aware he lacks compassion. Where we can reasonably expect an individual to be in the process of his moral development depends on the circumstances of his life, including how things began for him. We reduce blame if it is unreasonable to expect someone to be better than he could possibly be given his background. We do not choose our families or the people who raise us, where we are raised, or our social or economic statuses. Yet, these shape us in very important ways. In *Utilitarianism*, Mill rightly observes that: "Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance; and in the majority of young persons it speedily dies away if the occupations to which their position in life has devoted them, and the society into which it has thrown them, are not favourable to keeping that higher capacity in exercise" (13). This is absolutely true. Consider, for example, how both poverty and extreme wealth can sometimes create similar struggles for young people which can lead to dulled moral sensitivities. For instance, they may not get much or the right kinds of attention from others and especially adults; they may have more independence than they can handle; they may struggle to develop and maintain stable relationships with people who do not try to take advantage of them. All of these things can encourage young people to look out primarily for themselves rather than others, as they do not feel anyone else is looking out for them.

These sorts of conditions can mitigate blame insofar as they can and do choke the development of capacities required for a morally good character as well as fitting emotional tendencies. We ought not underestimate the power of outside influence and interference in the development of our character.

Yet, at the same time, we must not *over*estimate it. An individual is an emotional agent even though he is subject to things which are out of his control. He is still responsible for the

development of his emotional tendencies and his moral character throughout the course of his life.[80] For instance, if an individual from extreme wealth grows up and still lacks compassion because he prioritizes himself and his needs over others, he is still responsible for his failure to develop *better* moral character because there are, over time, plenty of instances where he could have noticed that his tendencies needed improvement. Even if his lack of care for others were invisible to him as a result of his deficiencies, he could still appreciate how his own parents' selfishness was harmful to *him* and work from there.

In Nikolai's case, we can add that he grew up in especially difficult circumstances: in Romania during the 1970s and 1980s. His father, a miner, died as a result of an "accident," and so his mother was the sole breadwinner. As a result of Ceausescu's over-exportation, he and his mother lacked basic necessities. The extreme competition for resources among the population embittered him and closed him off to concern for others aside from his mother. Despite his mother's attempts to instill in him a desire to help others, Nikolai was angry, bitter, and did not have the emotional resources to bother caring about others. He figured it would only lead to less for his mother and less for himself.

Nikolai eventually grew up and left Romania with his mother. He went to college and now works as a technical analyst. He supports his mother but lives in his own apartment and enjoys an upper middle class lifestyle. So, while he had an incredibly difficult start to his life, his life has since completely changed. There are now ample opportunities for him to notice his lack of compassion. For instance, he must surely notice that a lack of compassion no longer benefits him in these newer circumstances. In fact, it is not great for his work or personal life, despite having a few friends who understand the difficulties of living under an oppressive regime. He

---

[80] In Tolstoy's spiritual autobiographical *A Confession*, he details his early moral life in chapter 2: "With all my soul I longed to be good, but I was young, I had passions and I was alone, utterly alone, when I sought what was good. Every time I tried to express my most heartfelt desires to be morally good, I was met with contempt and ridicule; and as soon as I would give in to low passions, I was praised and encouraged. Ambition, love of power, self-interest, lechery, pride, anger, and vengeance—all of it was highly esteemed. As I gave myself over to these passions I became like my elders and felt that they were pleased with me" (17-18). Despite this, Tolstoy holds himself responsible for what he *should* have noticed a short time later—namely, that he was not the best person—and "been led to reconsider" what he really believed (21). Tolstoy takes responsibility for himself despite where he came from; he recognizes that there is always more he could have noticed or appreciated that could have driven him to reflection and improvement. This is the very point I am trying to make here: it is appropriate to do this.

ought to notice how his lack of compassion affects others. He has far more time and emotional distance to reflect and realize that others' lack of compassion oppressed him and his mother.[81] Moreover, now that his mother is well cared for and far more present in his life, he has more opportunities to learn from his mother who continues to be compassionate. Yet, he fails to do all of these things. In light of this, I think we ought to hold Nikolai responsible and reject his failures in this moment and reject his failure to improve over time. We must still blame him. It is reasonable to expect him to have improved his moral sensitivities, or at least to have noticed a problem and made efforts to address it. Had he done so, he may not have an unfitting tendency for amusement at all; at the least, he likely would not have failed with respect to Oren's grandmother.

With all of this in mind, I will now return to Angel, the inordinately amused student discussed above and in chapter 5. We left things at uncertainty about whether his unfitting amusement is a moral failure. The next move to make is to consider whether his excessive amusement is a sort of one-off or if it is part of a larger pattern. In this case, we stipulated that his failure to meet criterion three was due to a lack of understanding and underdeveloped judgment and taste. These can contribute to and be part of an unfitting tendency for amusement and can be problems of moral character. Still, we must consider mitigating long-term conditions and in particular, where he is in his individual moral and emotional development. Say he is simply immature. He is getting a late start on independence and thinking for himself, and his overbearing parents were far too involved in every part of his life. He did not learn much or think much for himself because he never had to. In this case, it seems to me that Angel will have an unfitting tendency for amusement that surely results in moral failures. However, we ought to mitigate blame here because he does not know any better and we cannot reasonably expect him to know better at this point because of his parents' failure. Thus, we ought not blame him too much in this instance, even if his failure is due to an unfitting tendency for amusement. We can certainly attribute the failure to him, but we need not hold too much against *him*, as he has not had much opportunity to recognize his problem as a result

---

[81] I acknowledge that we often fail to recognize patterns like these repeating themselves. This is an unfortunate fact about humans, but it does not change the fact that we *can* recognize them with sufficient reflection.

of his age and deficient judgment. Exposure over time to other students who *do* hold him fully accountable will surely help him realize that he needs improvement.

Lastly, I would like to discuss a particularly difficult case.[82] Say someone, call her Bao, is at a stand-up comedy show. The comedian, Jen, primes her audience to laugh. This is not difficult, as the context is one where the audience fully expects to be entertained and is *ready* to be entertained, while the comedian prepares to do the entertaining. Jen, though, makes a particular joke and the audience laughs. As the audience is laughing, she pushes the line further, causing the audience to respond with cautious amusement and amusement *at* Jen's pushing the line. She lures them back to safety with a safe joke. They are amused and they laugh. She makes another safe joke, they are amused, and they laugh. She repeats this. Through this rapid-fire rhythm, she makes them feel safe such that they can laugh after everything. Then, she drops an extremely controversial joke that follows directly from the line of previous jokes, but it is extremely "unsafe" to be amused by. Audience members are amused before they realize what hit them because of the *way* this joke follows the line of previous jokes. Bao is amused and she is troubled by this. She is not usually amused by this sort of thing. Is her amusement a moral failure for which she can be blamed? What matters, of course, is whether her amusement comes from an unfitting tendency for amusement that is part of a moral character flaw. If we stipulate that Bao actually has a fitting tendency for amusement, but makes this mistake, this *is* a one-off. In particular, it seems Jen's technique does contribute to the audience's lack of attention toward what could be seriously threatening, harmful, tragic, or dangerous about the joke. Lulling an audience into security like this relaxes them in a way that would reduce their level of engagement and attention such that they would not have been paying sufficient attention to notice the problem. We ought not hold Bao too blameworthy since her mistake does not come from an unfitting tendency or a character flaw, and the one-off was largely due to circumstances. Still, choosing to see this comedian does put some of the responsibility on her.[83]

---

[82] I thank my spouse, Derek Darnell, for this question and example.

[83] I should add that I do not think we should therefore never watch comedians because they might say something bad or provocative. The idea here is that in the context of a stand-up comedy show, one must be prepared for jokes that push the line. Bao should be ready for that, as pushing the line is very much part of the role of the

In this section, I have shown how and why certain mitigating conditions matter for determining blame for an unfitting instance of amusement and unfitting tendencies for amusement. In the next section, I will discuss these conditions as they apply to unfitting failure to be amused when ought to be amused.

IV. Blame for Offense-Instead-of-Amusement

In chapter 5, I showed why offense-instead-of-amusement must track what is independently morally problematic about an incongruity in light of its circumstances. I also showed that someone's taking offense can be praised when it properly tracks the moral wrongness of a particular incongruity as a result of a morally good character or a shift in value. In this section, I will argue that we may blame someone for taking offense when she evaluates an incongruity-in-its-circumstances as seriously threatening, dangerous, painful, harmful, or tragic when it is *not* and she does so as a result of a moral character flaw which we could have expected her to notice and address but she failed to do so.

Whenever an individual takes some incongruity-in-its-circumstances to be seriously threatening, dangerous, tragic, or harmful when she ought not, it is a failure to detect and attend to incongruity-in-its-circumstances in the right sorts of ways. This could be due to taking the wrong things seriously or taking the right things seriously in the wrong way. When this comes from a moral vice and when we could reasonably expect someone to have noticed this problem and addressed it, we can hold her responsible for her failure.

In this section, I will address two cases of self-absorption which show how we can blame someone for taking the wrong things seriously. First is a case about Gabe, who is arrogant, and second is the case of Ruby, who is self-hating. Both demonstrate how the character flaw of self-absorption accounts for unfitting tendencies for offense-instead-of-amusement that render

---

comedian, and we often grant them certain kinds of moral passes in virtue of this fact about them. I do not think granting such passes is necessarily wrong to do either. As always, it depends on context.

Another note about this sort of thing. We often let our guard down when we are around people we know and people we trust. We tend not to expect to *need* our guard up regarding amusement. Sometimes this is justified, as when we have good reason to trust those people we are around. Other times we are not justified, as when we meet new people in certain ways and have no reason to trust them, or are around people we know and so have no reason to trust them. This is just another way good judgment helps us attend to what we ought— including whether it is appropriate to stay on guard in a particular set of circumstances or let go.

specific instances of offense-instead-of-amusement morally wrong and render the people who have those flaws to be blameworthy. Then, I will discuss an example demonstrating how someone can be blamed for taking the right thing seriously in the wrong way. Lastly, I discuss taking offense due to a misunderstanding alone.

First, consider the following example which demonstrates taking the wrong things seriously. Say Gabe, a Michigan fan, and Fatimah, an Ohio State fan, have been watching football games together with their friend group throughout the season. Gabe never misses an opportunity to talk trash to Fatimah after her team's loss. In fact, he continues to do this throughout the season. Fatimah takes it in stride because she knows this is how trash-talking and sports rivalries work. She even laughs when he makes a *good* joke at her expense.

Today, however, Michigan loses a game that should have been an easy win. As the TV shows the Michigan players defeatedly exiting the field after the game, Fatimah says to Gabe, "Wow. Do you think they knew they were supposed to be playing a game today?" Immediately, Gabe throws his hands up and shouts, "What is wrong with you, Fatimah?! Can't you tell I'm upset that we lost?! You're so insensitive!" Gabe is clearly offended.

Notice that Fatimah does not denigrate Michigan's players, Gabe or any other fans, or their beliefs about how great their team is. She aims to undermine all of these things, but she does not denigrate them. Second, it also seems clear she did not intend to harm. Because Gabe often makes a series of unrelenting jokes after her team loses, she understandably thinks that he finds this kind of harsh joking permissible, even though her joke is not harsh, especially compared to the jokes Gabe makes about Ohio State. In fact, the nature of her put-down in contrast to Gabe's suggests that she is aware of how hurtful some jokes can be and she does not want to be hurtful. So even though we might think she would be ready to retaliate with equal force at this opportunity, she is not, and she does not.

Gabe, however, takes her joke as a harmful threat. Let us stipulate that the reason for Gabe's taking offense is a result of arrogance. He takes offense to one insult in the exact same circumstances in which he finds it appropriate to relentlessly dish out insults and put-downs. He does not think that he or his team are appropriate targets even in the same circumstances that

he thinks make others and their teams appropriate targets. He and his team are the *exceptions* because he and his team are superior.

His insensitivity in victory is caused by his believing he and his team are superior (he is privileging himself and his team) such that he is in a position to denigrate others. His hypersensitivity in defeat is caused by the challenge presented to his beliefs of superiority. Fatimah's joke further challenges his beliefs such that he finds it *threatening*—so threatening that he throws his hands up and shouts. Gabe takes offense to Fatimah's joke because he interpreted harm where there was none because of his arrogance—his stable disposition to consistently privilege himself over others.

Gabe is arrogant and his offense-instead-of-amusement comes from moral vice. The final important question is whether there are mitigating conditions of character. In their work on arrogance, Valerie Tiberius and John Walker argue that what makes arrogance particularly bad is that it blocks true friendships of the sort Aristotle had in mind (mutually beneficial friendships) and so "blocks a crucial source of self-knowledge, which is morally important because self-knowledge is needed for the successful pursuit of virtue" (387).[84] Their view is that part of having real relationships includes getting someone else's perspective on ourselves and our character, which helps us learn how to be better people: "The arrogant person is denied this perspective because he refuses to regard the perspectives of other people as valuable." We must take this into consideration when we evaluate what we could reasonably expect of Gabe. My view is there are probably fewer opportunities for him to have noticed his problem specifically because of the nature of his problem. Nevertheless, he is quite obviously blameworthy; he still ought to notice and ought to reflect on his own actions such that he considers whether he is doing the right thing. Failure to do this is negligent, and he is blameworthy for that.

I have used examples of self-absorption throughout this dissertation. I continue this trend here, as self-absorption's being a vice remains uncontroversial. In fact, I will demonstrate why arrogance is just one form of self-absorption and discuss the other form: self-hatred.

---

[84] Aristotle discusses friendship in books VIII and IX of *Nicomachean Ethics.*

It is true that everyone has an individual perspective and that this is the lens through which he understands the world. Someone who is self-absorbed is as follows: his perception and understanding of the world are filtered through a ceaseless concern about himself, his affairs, and what it all means *for him.* He is not just preoccupied with himself; the self-absorbed individual puts himself at the center of all of his experiences and at the center of his understanding of the world. Arrogance is a sub-species of self-absorption because it meets these criteria with the addition that the arrogant individual assumes he is superior. The self-hating individual is also self-absorbed but with the addition that she assumes she is inferior.[85] I will demonstrate this after I discuss an example of blameworthy offense-instead-of-amusement that results from self-hatred.

Say a woman, Ruby, has been invited to attend the birthday party of her six-year-old niece which takes place at a bowling alley. After she arrives at the bowling alley and spends some time talking with her niece and the rest of the family, she joins the adults' bowling lanes. All the children's bowling lanes unsurprisingly have bumpers and the adults' bowling lanes right next to them do not. After noticing this, Ruby is even more terrified of the embarrassment she knows awaits her because of her inability to bowl well.

As she expects, Ruby gets in her own head. She rolls gutter balls on her first and second turns. On her third turn, she goes to grab her ball from the ball return just as her favorite sister-in-law, Hilde, is also grabbing her ball in the next lane over. Hilde knocks down eight pins and Ruby rolls another gutter ball. Hilde smiles and says, "Wow, Ruby! The kids are bowling better than you so far!" Ruby furrows her brow, turns to Hilde, and shouts angrily, "Well *they* have bumpers, Hilde!"

Let us stipulate that Ruby takes offense because she genuinely hates herself. Ruby has been worried about her bowling performance from the moment she received the birthday party invitation because her first thoughts about each experience she has always concern *herself.* At the birthday party, she has become further discouraged by her poor performance thus far and has already begun to tear herself down by using her poor bowling as just another

---

[85] There is likely another form of self-absorption I will not discuss here: someone who does not assume but is afraid she is inferior and so she responds defensively to what she perceives as challenges to her worth.

reason to believe she is an inferior human being, perhaps even a *worthless* human being. And given that it is her habit to use her faults (and perceived faults) as reasons to hate herself further, she assumes that all criticisms of her indicate that others believe she is inferior. So, for Ruby, Hilde's joke is salt in her self-inflicted wound because 1) it confirms what Ruby believes about her bowling game (i.e., that it is bad); 2) it shows Ruby that someone else has also recognized that she is bad at bowling; and 3) given her habit, Ruby understands Hilde's joke as *Hilde* suggesting that she is an inferior human being. Ruby interprets harm here where there is none because her constant and total preoccupation with herself and her faults, perceived or otherwise, has led her to believe incorrectly that the joke was *confirmation* of her inferiority, and confirmation from someone else at that. She privileges herself and her beliefs over everything else—including the possibility that Hilde does not think she is an inferior human being—because she truly hates herself.

By hating herself so thoroughly, she makes herself the center of every experience she has. Self-hatred is, therefore, a form of self-absorption, even if it is perhaps the more tragic form of it. It meets criteria above of the self-absorbed individual, only with the addition that the self-hating individual assumes she is *inferior* (where the arrogant individual assumes he is superior). In particular, self-hatred causes someone to put herself and her beliefs about the world and herself front and center at all times. We also find that this is a stable disposition. She is disposed to take everything, especially jokes of this nature, extremely personally because her understanding of herself and the world is filtered through self-hatred at all times. So, whenever something gives even the appearance of suggesting her inferiority, she is likely to feel threatened because she *believes* in the truth of her inferiority. She will perceive at least some cases of teasing as evidence of this fact and even interpret teasing as evidence that someone else thinks she is inferior too.

What Tiberius and Walker identify as problematic about arrogance seems to apply to self-hatred as well. It would be difficult and likely impossible for someone who understands herself as an inferior being and who understands the world merely as a place for her to screw up to find meaningful, mutually respectful friendships. Even if she did end up in a friendship of the sort Aristotle had in mind, it might be *very* hard for her to take her friend's perspectives on

her own character seriously without taking them personally (including being complimented, as she would likely reject it; or being told her self-hatred was unhelpful; or being told that she is self-absorbed). She is already deeply habituated to interpret and analyze the world in the way she does and it is unlikely that she would be able to engage meaningfully with her friend about how *he* sees the world. Like arrogance, self-hatred blocks important access to solid friendships and so what is needed for pursuing virtue and becoming better people.

It is clear, then, that the nature of self-hatred makes it rather difficult to determine how much we blame Ruby for being offended-instead-of-amused as a result of self-hatred. Despite all of this, it still seems to me that Ruby should be led to self-reflection. In fact, even if she cannot engage meaningfully with a friend, there is still a path to realizing her vice which remains open to her. Specifically, if Ruby doubts herself sufficiently, she may be led to listen to how others see the world. That is, she may become deferential. This is not healthy, but if she happens upon someone who is kind enough and patient enough, she may be able to come to self-reflection with genuinely open eyes. Certainly, she would have to strive for a very long time to overcome this character problem, but it would be possible. To the extent that this is possible for her, she is blameworthy for her character flaw and so the immediate manifestations of it including offense when it is not appropriate to be offended.

I would now like to discuss how taking offense about the right things in the wrong way can be a moral failure. Say a young woman, call her Brooke, hears that Dave Chappelle has delivered another set of controversial jokes about women during his stand-up monologue as host for *Saturday Night Live*. Her friend explains the context of the joke and repeats it to her. The friend explains that Chappelle did a bit mocking former President Trump's suggestions for possible COVID-19 cures: bleach or powerful light. Then he said, "Scariest part about that, one of the leading virologists in the world was sitting as close as you are to me, and she just watched him say it. It was crazy: her face was looking like, 'He might be right.' I saw that, I said, 'Ooo, that's why. That's why… that's why women make half.'" He smiles oddly and waits for the audience's mixed response. He replies derisively: "Did I trigger you? I don't know what it is, half, maybe 70%. Whatever it is, it's too much." He pauses again while the audience groans and then

continues, "I'm sorry, Lorne [the producer of the show], I thought we were having a comedy show!"

Brooke is understandably offended by this joke. Let us stipulate that Brooke is often offended by jokes that undermine the value of women's work. Given that our society does not appropriately value women or their work (as indicated by their being paid between half and 80% of what men are paid), it is appropriate to track this failure as a moral failure. It is therefore appropriate for Brooke to track this sort of thing in jokes, especially ones which are told publicly.[86] Brooke's offense is especially permissible if Brooke has grown up in a particularly sexist subculture, like the rural South, and she is still learning about how systemic oppression works.

Now say that Brooke goes home and is still upset by the joke. She sits in her chair in silence and stews. She already knows the content of the joke and why it is serious and why she takes it seriously. She nevertheless decides to watch the video of Chappelle; this is not because she wants to see it for herself or see if she can identify anything she might have missed or that would be important for interpretation etc. She does it to relive the experience of offense. She is again offended by the joke. Now, what is morally important about the joke is still morally important and it is appropriate for Brooke to take the plight of women seriously. However, Brooke is reliving the object of her offense in order to experience offense again. In choosing to listen to the same joke in order to be upset about it, Brooke undermines the significance of what she takes to be serious about the joke—she cheapens it through trying to experience offense again. Again, it is appropriate to track what is morally important; but it is a moral failure to cheapen it. It is also worth noting that she could have chosen to watch the video to, say, try

---

[86] As I have said before, my view is that jokes are not in and of themselves morally right or wrong. They must be evaluated in context. Moreover, the character of the people responding to jokes makes their amusement or offense morally fitting or unfitting. I want to note here that it would therefore not be unfitting for someone to be amused by this same joke, provided the emoter meets the criteria. In particular, if that person has a fitting tendency for amusement because she is discerning, appreciates the nuance in jokes from particular comedians, and who can still appreciate for the right reasons that there are people who might not find this amusing and is capable of sympathizing with them even if she is not in their presence at the time she is amused. She does not take it as harmful because she has decent reason to believe it is not meant seriously.

and develop as a feminist, but she did not. The contrast between what she could have done and does instead illuminates *how* cheap Brooke renders what is morally important about the joke.

Aiming to experience offense or moral outrage for its own sake is a morally problematic practice. The activity I have just described—consuming something one knows is morally problematic in order to relive the moral outrage—has been dubbed by our culture as consuming "moral outrage porn[ography.]"[87] I will use the Brooke example to show how it works and so why tending to engage in this activity is especially morally pernicious.

People experience pleasure as a result of realizing their moral superiority, regardless of whether they in fact have the moral high ground. The feeling is *there.* In this case, Brooke feels this—she knows it is morally permissible for her to take offense to Chappelle's joke. She believes she is right (and she is certainly not *wrong*) and she feels good about being able to identify and name something as sexist when she has good reason to do so. The problem is that she then seeks out that pleasure of moral superiority. So, although she detects and attends to the right things—namely, the threat of sexism—she does not seem to care as much about sexism as she does the feeling she gets from understanding that sexism is wrong and that what Chappelle said can be reasonably understood as sexist (though, in her mind, she would probably say that what he said *is* sexist. I leave that open here). She is attending to the right things, but her motivation from pleasure undermines what is appropriate about what she attends to as morally important. Moreover, we can see how her experience and subsequent experiences she induces like this can quickly become a much more serious moral problem. These experiences reinforce *through* pleasure the practice of attending to morally important things because they bring about pleasure *rather than* attending to morally important things *because they are* morally important. So we subtly shift from attending to what is morally important *because* it is morally important to attending to what is morally important because doing so will bring about some sense of moral superiority. This is a deeply pernicious moral

---

[87] Thanks to Naomi Rinehold for discussing this topic with me in depth and for helping me clarify these ideas.

problem which can become rather difficult to identify in oneself without appropriate honesty and self-reflection.[88]

Now, in Brooke's case, it may be that this is a one-off. If she realizes what she is doing and take it as a failure, her failure would be a one-off. But let us stipulate that she as grown up in an oppressive society and she is just starting to get her bearings as a feminist. Her confidence in herself as a feminist is still somewhat fragile and so she reinforces her beliefs through taking pleasure in her moral superiority. In her case, we might be able to say that this is an unfortunate side effect of her moral development, but we ought to blame her even if we can mitigate some of that blame because of her circumstances. We must hope that she does not make a habit out of this, or that if she does, she grows out of it by a certain point. We do not want her to fail to develop the right habits as a result. Unfortunately, if the wrong habit is too well ingrained, it will be quite difficult for her to realize her morally unfitting tendency on her own.

Now that I have discussed cases where someone was offended rather than amused at jokes which are clearly meant to amuse, I would like to discuss a case where someone takes offense because of a mistaken value judgment, but *not* as the result of a character flaw. This example clarifies why we blame an individual for making a mistaken value judgment as a result of a failure to represent accurately to a lesser extent than we might judge Ruby or Gabe.

Omid purchases a toupee. This is a big moment for him. He has never worn a toupee before, but he decides the time has come to give it a try and see how it feels. He tells a few of his friends what he plans to do so they can give him an honest opinion, but he does not tell most of the people at his office. His friends, including his closest work friend, Antonio, are supportive and tell him it looks great. He decides to debut it at work. Omid is fully expecting

---

[88] It is worth pointing out that there is a wide variety of objects about which someone may aim to feel moral outrage as a way to feel good about herself. That is, amusement is not the only thing people may use to engage in empty or self-serving moral outrage. I thank Derek Darnell for mentioning the example of gossip: someone may repeat a story which warrants moral outrage *in order* to feel the outrage and to feel good about herself for feeling it. Consider this in contrast to another person who repeats the same story which warrants moral outrage in order to justify why she has come to a particular moral judgment. What both story-repeaters attend to as morally important is morally important, but the gossiper also attends to and is motivated by what her outrage does for her.

those who are *not* aware of his decision to get a toupee to take notice and he is prepared for some stares and perhaps a few jokes.

Omid, however, has forgotten the email the office manager sent out last Friday announcing that the new rug for the break room arrives today. That afternoon, as Omid walks by the break room, he overhears a coworker say, "I hope he got that monstrosity of a rug on sale." Antonio replies, "Right? It looks like an art project gone wrong—like someone tried to make it with their toes or something." Omid is horrified and deeply hurt; he is *offended*.

Later, he approaches Antonio and says, "I can't believe you would say that about my hair. You knew I was going to wear it today and here you are going behind my back and making fun of it with Thompson? You have *some* nerve!" Upset, Antonio replies, "We were talking about that awful new rug in the break room! I can't believe you would think I would make fun of you, especially after I already told you it looked great!"

Omid now feels like a real heel. He has made some mistakes. In particular, he mistakenly perceived a) a threat to his person through insults about his appearance and b) a threat to the friendship he has with Antonio where those threats did not exist. Omid genuinely forgot about the new rug in the break room. This mistake led to another. Omid knows Antonio well. He believed Antonio would never say anything to denigrate him to a coworker. Today, though, Omid mistakenly believes he has been betrayed. Importantly, Omid believes he has been betrayed *because* there was little reason to think Antonio was talking about an actual rug. Since he did not recall anything about an actual rug, and knew that Antonio knew about his toupee, it is natural for Omid to take Antonio's joke to be about *him*. Moreover, there is an important mitigating immediate condition to consider: Omid is already (and understandably) a bit touchy today because he is prepared to take some flak from coworkers about his new hair. In light of the nature of these mistakes and the mitigating immediate conditions, it seems to me that even while we can hold Omid responsible for his response and reject it (i.e., blame him), we should not hold much against him. While he did make a mistake of representation and so attended to the wrong things about the incongruity, these failures do not amount to a significant moral problem.

This section demonstrates that we can, in fact, blame people when they are offended. In particular, we may do so when this comes as a result of a moral character problem. The common practice of blaming people when they are offended can now be subjected to moral scrutiny. In particular, we ought to consider why someone is offended rather than assume that they are wrong for being offended. We ought to consider further that we are not often in an especially good position to evaluate someone's offense from the outside. We often lack information that would be necessary to justify blaming them and we generally lack *access* to that information. In some cases, however, the information is available and blame is warranted. Lastly, note that there are right ways to respond to blameworthy people. I will discuss these in section VI.

V. Conclusion of Chapter Six

As I have shown in this chapter, there are many ways to fail to meet the criteria of fitting amusement and so experience unfitting immediate amusement. There are many ways to have an unfitting tendency for amusement. Given the nature of incongruity and amusement, most of these failures amount to morally significant failures, though some do not. When we consider whether to blame and how much to blame someone for those failures, we consider mitigating conditions which could decrease blameworthiness because they explain how someone's tendency for amusement and so amusement in a moment may not be entirely up to them. We ask if the failure is a momentary slip up due to immediate conditions which would explain why someone made this mistake today in this particular moment. If so, blame is reduced. If not and the mistake or failure is part of a larger pattern that comes from a character problem that contributes to or is part of unfitting amusement, *and* the individual with that character problem could reasonably be expected to have addressed that problem—to have done better or at least aimed and strived to do be better—but has failed, then we fully blame that individual.

VI. Conclusion of Project

In the introduction to this dissertation, I discussed common human practices that demonstrate that amusement matters to us. We teach our children important distinctions between what is appropriate to be amused by and what is not. We often blame one another for what we find funny or fail to find funny. We even use amusement to determine in-groups and

128

out-groups. This project helps us understand why we engage in these practices, theoretically grounds the first two practices, and provides insight into what engaging in these practices fittingly or properly looks like.

I invited us to reconsider what amusement is. It is not a meaningless emotional response over which we have no control. Nor is it a response that is too subjective to be evaluated. I have shown that our amusement in a moment and over time is part of our moral character. We shape our tendencies for amusement. These shape later instances of amusement in our daily lives, which we can also guide. Amusement is indeed a matter of moral significance.

This fact grounds our practices of judging one another for amusement or failure to be amused. It explains why we teach our children about proper objects of amusement: those objects and our responses to them matter morally. This fact also explains why we so often encounter attempts to deflect or deny blame: we understand on some level that we are responsible for amusement, but do not want to be responsible when others judge that amusement as unfitting, especially because there are often social consequences.

However, in view of what I show about what amusement is, how it shapes our moral character and so other morally important features of our lives, we have grounds to check and revise our common practices. In particular, we ought to be far more careful than we typically are.

For instance, the very social nature of amusement ensures that we are given ample feedback from others about what amuses us and whether they think our amusement is appropriate. We are often quick to dismiss this feedback, but I have shown that we ought not. To become good emotional agents, we must engage in careful self-reflection. We ought to aim and strive for a fitting tendency for amusement and so we ought to, in general, take the feedback of others seriously and reflect on it. Of course, we may determine that we ought not trust a particular source of feedback because of the specific dynamics of the relationship we have to that source. In other cases, we may conclude that our response of amusement or offense was appropriate. In either type of case, arriving at these conclusions first requires reflection.

Moreover, we *give* a great deal of feedback to others about what we think about their amusement. This takes many forms: laughter, silence, or directly speaking to someone. Because we ought to take one another and our responses to humor seriously, as they are morally important, it should be clear that the feedback we give *matters*. Both laughter and silence are rather immediate expressions of amusement and offense respectively. It is clear, then, why our responding fittingly to humor is important to and for other people: our expressions of amusement and offense *are* feedback.

Additionally, I have shown that determining whether and how much we can blame someone for his amusement takes time. I have also shown why doing it right requires empathy, sympathy, and great care. It follows that we ought to take care to assess properly, which means we must take things much more slowly than we typically do. We should be sure about our assessments before we choose to provide intentional, verbal feedback to someone about his amusement. And when we give verbal feedback, we ought to do it the right way. (I discuss confronting, one form of verbal feedback, shortly.) When we consider the ways we commonly assess each others' amusement and give verbal feedback, we find that we are often painfully and spectacularly wrong, especially considering how commonly we give and receive verbal feedback *publicly.*

A full discussion of the practical applications of this analysis is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Nevertheless, as a way to gesture toward next steps I plan to take, I want to conclude this project with a brief discussion about the fittingness of responses we often have after we have judged that someone is blameworthy for unfitting amusement or offense.

Three common responses are 1) overlooking, 2) confronting, and 2) forgiving. To overlook a moral failure is, ultimately, to ignore it. We recognize it as a moral failure and reject it, then we pretend it did not happen. Sometimes overlooking is warranted and other times it is not. We do this often in cases where we identify a one-off. We overlook because we have considered it and we care about the individual and recognize that they are just having an off day. This is an appropriate time to overlook a moral failure. There are other good reasons to overlook. For instance, we are finite beings and we are not responsible for everyone. We may therefore be justified in overlooking in cases where we must conserve our moral energy based

on our specific circumstances. In some cases, even if I am harmed by something another person finds amusing, it still may not be worth it to confront them, especially if I could be further harmed by doing so. Additionally, in many cases, there is no need to speak to someone about why we take her amusement as unfitting, especially if that person is a stranger. It seems to me that overlooking is valuable here. Another case where overlooking is appropriate is if we, say, have a friend who is unfittingly amused and bringing it up to him would not be helpful to him, as we know he is most likely already punishing himself. Another more delicate case may be when a family member is unfittingly amused and confronting her about it would only hurt the relationship. We are not responsible for our family members and it may be that keeping the peace is our best option.

Having said this, there are other cases where we ought not overlook but confront someone for her blameworthy failure, especially if her amusement harms us directly. There may be other cases where it is appropriate to confront someone if they have harmed someone else directly. However, we must exercise good judgment and discernment here. Certainly, we must avoid confronting if we are doing so for the pleasure of moral superiority. Additionally, confronting someone on behalf of a harmed person is wrong if we wrongly assume the harmed person is incapable of confronting that person herself. In other cases, our intervention could make matters worse for the person who was harmed. In cases where confronting is off the table for reasons like these, publicly overlooking and privately talking to the harmed person is most likely the best option. Even so, if there is no one to object to a particularly egregious moral failure, confronting the blameworthy person may be appropriate and perhaps even morally required. Of course, we ought to be careful about the ways in which we confront for a variety of reasons, some of which are moral and others prudential.

Lastly, forgiveness is a common response. Forgiveness acknowledges moral failure and requires the individual doing the forgiving to accept whatever damage results from that failure.[89] In Pamela Hieronymi's "An Uncompromising Forgiveness," she points out that the forgiver must incorporate damage into the fabric of her life, which may not be easy. In such

---

[89] Additionally, on the view I give here, forgiveness is something only a person who has been directly harmed can do.

cases, the forgiver ends up bearing most of the burden and so it may take a while for her to move on. In my experience, forgiveness is something we reserve as a response for dealing with especially egregious blameworthy moral failures. After all, we often do not go out of our way to forgive someone who does not bother to apologize. Given that apologies are not especially common in cases of morally unfitting amusement, that morally unfitting amusement as a matter of fact *abounds*, and that we must treat ourselves fairly, it follows that we ought to reserve forgiveness for morally unfitting amusement or offense for certain cases where an individual is genuinely penitent.

The view I have given in this dissertation empowers us to pay fittingly nuanced attention to our own amusement, to others' amusement, to how we assess amusement, and even to how we respond after we make our assessments. Amusement is an important part of who we are and of our moral character. It is morally significant. We must ensure, therefore, that our tendencies to be amused, the ways we assess our amusement and others' amusement, and our responses to those assessments are sufficiently *fitting*.

REFERENCES

Adams, Robert Merrihew. "Involuntary Sins." *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 94, no. 1, 1985, doi:10.2307/2184713.

Annas, Julia. *Intelligent Virtue.* Oxford University Press, 2011.

    ---"Virtue as a Skill." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1995, pp.227-243.

Aristotle, et al. *Poetics*. Harvard University Press, 1995.

Aristotle, and Roger Crisp. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Baril, Anne. "Book Review: *Intelligent Virtue*." *Mind*, vol. 122, no. 485, Jan. 2013.

Bell, Macalester. "Globalist Attitudes and the Fittingness Objection." *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 61, no. 244, Jul. 2011.

Ben-Ze'ev, Aaron. "Emotions and Morality" *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, vol. 31, 1997, pp. 195–212.

    --- *The Subtlety of Emotions.* MIT Press, 2000.

    --- "The Thing Called Emotions: A Subtle Perspective," in *Philosophy of Emotions* (eds. Ben-Ze'ev and Krebs), Vol I, Routledge, 2017, pp. 1-22.

Benatar, David. "Taking Humor (Ethics) Seriously, But Not Too Seriously." *Journal of Practical Ethics*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 24-43. http://www.jpe.ox.ac.uk/papers/taking-humour-ethics-seriously-but-not-too-seriously/

    --- "Prejudice in Jest: When Racial and Gender Humor Harms." *Public Affairs Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 2, April 1999, pp. 191-203. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40441225

Bergmann, Merrie. "How Many Feminists Does It Take to Make A Joke? Sexist Humor and What's Wrong with It." *Hypatia,* vol. 1, no. 1, Spring 1986, pp. 63-82.

Bergson, Henri. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. The MacMillan Company, 1911.

Boskin, Joseph. "The Complicity of Humor: The Life and Death of Sambo." *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, edited by John Morreall, State University of New York, 1987.

Brady, Michael S. "Value and Fitting Emotions." The Journal of Value Inquiry, vol. 42, 2008, pp. 465-475.

Burge, Tyler. *Origins of Objectivity*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010.

Carroll, Noël. "Ethics and Comic Amusement." *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 54, no. 2, April 2014, pp. 241-253.

> --- "Horror and Humor." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 57, no. 2, pp. 145-160.

Clark, Michael. "Humour and Incongruity." *Philosophy,* vol. 45, no. 171, Jan. 1970, pp. 20-32.

Charles, Larry. "The Library." *Seinfeld,* performance by Philip Baker Hall, season 3, episode 5, NBC, 16 Oct. 1991.

Condon, Paul, Christine D. Wilson-Mendenhall, Lisa Feldman Barrett. "What Is a Positive Emotion? The Psychological Construction of Pleasant Fear and Unpleasant Happiness." Handbook of positive emotions, edited by M.M. Tugade, et al. Guilford Publications, 2014.

Cova, F., and Deonna, J. A. "Being moved." *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 169, no. 3, 2014, pp. 447–466. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-013-0192-9

D'Arms, Justin and Daniel Jacobson. "The Moralistic Fallacy: On the 'Appropriateness' of Emotion." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 61, 2000, pp. 65–90.

"Dave Chappelle; Foo Fighters." *Saturday Night Live*, monologue performance by Dave Chappelle, season 46, episode 6, *NBC*, 2020.

Deonna, Julien and Fabrice Teroni. *The emotions: a philosophical introduction.* Routledge, 2012.

Deonna, Julien A. and Klaus R. Scherer "The Case of the Disappearing Intentional Object: Constraints on a Definition of Emotion." *Emotion Review.* vol. 2, no. 1, Jan. 2010, pp.44-52.

de Sousa, Ronald. *The Rationality of Emotions*. MIT Press, 1987.

> --- "When is it wrong to laugh?" *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, edited by John Morreall, State University of New York, 1987.

Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Translated by Constance Garnett, Suzeteo Enterprises, 2018. Originally published 1879. Translated in 1912.

Filippelli, Mario, et al. "Respiratory dynamics during laughter." *Journal of Applied Physiology*, vol. 90, 2001, pp. 1441-1446.

Frazin, Rachel. "White House Defends Trump's Dingell Comments: 'The President Is a Counter-Puncher'." *The Hill*, 19 Dec. 2019, https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/475260-trump-spokesperson-defends-dingell-comments-the-president-is-a

Festinger, Leon. *A Theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford University Press, 1957.

Fredrickson, Barbara L., and Michael A. Cohn. "Positive Emotions." *Handbook of Emotions, Third Edition*, edited by Michael Lewis et al., Guilford Publications, 2008, pp. 777–796.

Fredrickson, B. L. "The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions." *American Psychologist*, vol. 56, 2001, pp. 218–226.

Garthoff, Jon. "The Salience of Moral Character." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 53, no. 2, Jun. 2015.

Gaut, Berys. "Just Joking: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humor." *Philosophy and Literature* vol. 22, no. 1, Apr. 1998, pp. 51-67.

Gordon, Robert M. "The Passivity of Emotions." *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 95, no. 3, 1986, doi:10.2307/2185465.

Gray, Sean, et al. "Running." *Veep*, performance by Julia Louis-Dreyfus, season 2, episode 9, HBO, 16 Jun. 2013.

Harvey, J. "Humor as a social act: Ethical Issues." *The Journal of Value Enquiry,* vol. 29, no. 1, 1995, pp. 19-30.

Hazlitt, William. "Lectures on the English Comic Writers: Lecture I: Introductory—on Wit and Humour." *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt*, edited by A.R. Waller and Arnold Glover, vol. 8 of 12, J.M. Dent & Co., 1903, pp. 5–29. *Project Gutenberg*, www.gutenberg.org/files/59506/59506-h/59506-h.htm

Helms, Janet E. *A Race Is a Nice Thing to Have: a Guide to Being a White Person or Understanding the White Persons in Your Life*. Cognella, 2020.

Hutcheson, Francis. "Reflections Upon Laughter." *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, edited by John Morreall, State University of New York Press, 1987, pp. 26–40.

Keith-Spiegel, Patricia. "Early Conceptions of Humor: Varieties and Issues." *The Psychology of

     Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues, edited by Paul E. McGhee and
       Jeffrey H. Goldstein, Academic Press, Inc., 1972, pp. 4–39.

Kierkegaard, Søren, and D. Swenson and W. Lowrie. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*,
       Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1846 (1941).

Luschei, Erich S., et al. "Patterns of Laryngeal Electromyography and the Activity of the
       Respiratory System During Spontaneous Laughter." *Journal of Neurophysiology*, vol. 96,
       2006, pp. 442-450.

Mancini, Don. *Child's Play*. United Artists, 1988.

Mande, Joe. "Bailout." *Parks and Recreation*, season 5, episode 16, NBC, 14 Mar. 2013.

Mill, John Stuart. "What Utilitarianism Is." *Utilitarianism*, Batoche Books, 2001 pp. 9-27.

Morreall, John. *Taking Laughter Seriously.* State University of New York, 1983.

       --- editor, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*. Wiley, 2011.

       --- "Philosophy of Humor," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition),
       Edward N. Zalta (ed.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/humor/

Nagel, Thomas. "Death." *The Metaphysics of Death*, by John Martin Fischer. Stanford Univ.
       Press, 1993, pp. 61-69.

Oakley, Justin. *Morality and the Emotions*. Routledge, 1996.

Palencik, Joseph. "Amusement and the Philosophy of Emotion: A Neuroanatomical Approach."
       Dialogue, vol. 46, no. 3, 2007, pp. 419-434.

Percival, Philip. "Comic Normativity and the Ethics of Humour." *The Monist,* vol. 88, no. 1, 2005,
       pp. 93-120.

Pearson, Muriel. "The Last Days of Richard Pryor." *ABC News Documentary*, ABC, 5 Jan. 2020.

Pitts, Leonard. "For Richard Pryor, comedy was tragedy." *The Orlando Sentinel*. 3 Dec. 2005
       https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-2005-12-13-pitts13-story.html

Plato, and J. C. B. Gosling. *Philebus*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975.

Price, Mark. "Coronavirus brings out America's fearless sense of humor on social media." *Miami Herald*. 20, Mar. 2020.
https://www.miamiherald.com/news/coronavirus/article241363811.html

Roberts, Robert C. "Humor and the Virtues." *Inquiry*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1988, pp. 127-149.

--- "Is Amusement an Emotion?" *American Philosophical Quarterly,* vol. 25, no. 3, 1988, pp. 269-274.

Roberts, Tom. "Emotional Regulation and Responsibility." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2014, pp. 487–500., doi:10.1007/s10677-014-9535-7.

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Thorndike Press, 2003.

Sabini, John and Maury Silver. *Emotion, Character, and Responsibility.* Oxford University Press, 1998.

Sankowski, Edward. "Responsibility of Persons for Their Emotions." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1977, pp. 829–840., doi:10.1080/00455091.1977.10716199.

Scarantino, Andrea and Ronald de Sousa. "Emotions." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2018. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/emotion/

Schoeman, Ferdinand David. "Introduction." *Responsibility, Character, and the Emotions: New Essays in Moral Psychology*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 1–24.

Schopenhauer, Arthur. "First Book. The World As Idea." *The World As Will And Idea*, translated by R.B. Haldane and J. Kemp, vol. 1 of 3, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1909, pp. 25–137. *Project Gutenberg*, www.gutenberg.org/files/38427/38427-pdf.pdf

Schwarz, Norbert and Gerald L. Clore. "Chapter 16: Feelings and Phenomenal Experiences." *Social Psychology. A Handbook of Basic Principles.*, edited by E.T. Higgins and A. Kruglanski, Guilford Press, 2007, pp. 385–407.

Sharpe, Robert. "Seven Reasons Why Amusement Is an Emotion." *Journal of Value Inquiry*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1975, pp. 201-203.

Sherman, Nancy. "Taking Responsibility for Our Emotions." *Social Philosophy and Policy*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1999, pp. 294–323., doi:10.1017/s026505250000248x.

--- "The Habituation of Character." *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle's Theory of Virtue*, Clarendon Press, 2004, pp. 157–200.

Smuts, Aaron. "Do Moral Flaws Enhance Amusement?" *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 2, Apr. 2009, p. 151-162.

--- "The Ethics of Humor: Can Your Sense of Humor be Wrong?" *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice,* vol. 13, no. 3, 2010, pp. 333-347

--- "The Salacious and the Satirical: In Defense of Symmetric Comic Moralism." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education,* vol 47, no. 4, 2013, pp. 45-63.

Solomon, Robert. "Emotions and Choice." *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 27, no. 1, Sep. 1997, pp. 20–41.

--- *The passions: Emotions and the meaning of life.* Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1976.

--- "The Philosophy of Emotions." *Handbook of Emotions, Third Edition*, edited by Michael Lewis et al., Guilford Publications, 2008, pp. 3-16.

Steinert, Steffen. *Amusement and Beyond – Challenges and New Directions for the Philosophy of Humor*. 2017. Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, PhD dissertation.

Stern, David M. "Duffless." *The Simpsons*, season 4, episode 16, Fox Broadcasting Company, 18 Feb. 1993.

Stocker, Michael. "Responsibility Especially for Beliefs." *Mind*, vol. 91, no. 363, Jul. 1982, pp. 398–417.

Stohr, Karen. "Feminist Virtue Ethics." *Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, edited by Lorraine Besser-Jones and Michael Slote, Routledge, 2015, pp. 271–282.

Storbeck, Justin and Gerald L. Clore. "Affective Arousal as Information: How Affective Arousal Influences Judgments, Learning, and Memory." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, vol. 2, no. 5, Aug. 2008, pp. 1824-1843.

Tappolet, Christine. *Emotions, Values, and Agency.* Oxford University Press, 2016. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199696512.001.0001

Taylor, Gabriele. "Justifying the Emotions." *Mind*, vol. 84, no. 335, Jul. 1975, pp. 390-402.

Tiberius, Valerie, and John D. Walker. "Arrogance." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 35 no. 4, Oct. 1998, p. 379-390.

Tolstoy, Leo. *A Confession*. Translated by David Patterson, W.W. Norton, 1983.

Tsouna, Voula. "Arrogance and Related Vices." *The Ethics of Philodemus.* Oxford University Press, 2007.

Tumulty, Maura "Two(ish) Kinds of Self-Control," unpublished.

Young, Iris Marion. "Five Faces of Oppression." *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press, 2007

VITA

Upon realizing the gravity and certainty of death, Ashley Caroline Mobley wrote a detailed living will at age 8. It is not a surprise the little worrywart ended up studying philosophy.

Understanding the importance of laughter, her parents let her watch *Saturday Night Live*, *Seinfeld*, and stand-up comedy at an early (but still appropriate) age. It is not a surprise that she now focuses on philosophy of humor.

Like any half-way decent moral philosopher, she thinks it is usually bad to hurt people. So, it is not a surprise that she cares deeply about the morality of finding things funny.

In light of all this—and that she has always loved being right and writing lengthy, stapled-together things—a dissertation on this topic was a natural and perhaps genuinely unavoidable step for her. She finally received her Ph.D. in May 2021.

She is fortunate and grateful to have had and presently have lovely, wonderfully caring, very funny people in her life. Thanks to them—her family, friends, teachers, mentors, therapist, and a few strangers—she is living proof that while homeschooled kids certainly are weird, they can still become socially acceptable, contributing members of their respective communities.

She is married to Derek Darnell, who is the primary reason she bothers to get out of bed every morning and whose glorious Mick Jagger impression remains unparalleled.

She is also a proud auntie to two fantastic, funny little Texans, as well as a little one who will soon join the world. There will, therefore, be many knock-knock jokes, bad puns, and generally terrible children's jokes in her immediate future. She looks forward to them all.