

“Attending with Feeling: what do norms of attention demand of us as emoting agents?”

Emotions have often been blamed for drawing us into obsessive or ruminative thought, causing us to fixate on scenarios and ideas which do not deserve our attention, or to ignore elements which merit our focus. But can an emotion itself be considered inappropriate because it leads us to attend in a misguided way? Or are the thought contents eliciting the emotion responsible for the inappropriate way in which attention is directed? Is the agent responsible for responding with an inappropriate emotion, or is the agent responsible for tokening and attending to thoughts they shouldn't be attending to (thoughts that will elicit inappropriate grief, anger, resentment, etc.)? As we will see, both positions have recently been defended. Meanwhile, the question of the source of inappropriate emotional attention has not been laid out clearly and straightforwardly. This is what I set out to do in this paper. I pose the question of the source of emotion-led inappropriate attentional patterns, with the aim to clarify what norms of attention might demand of us as emotional agents. Do they demand that we regulate our emotional episodes, control our thoughts, or something else? I will first consider and discuss these two positions, put forward respectively by Song (2019), and by Peet & Pitcovski (2024). From these discussions will emerge a third position, which I shall argue for in Part III.

Part I focuses on the recent proposal by Peet & Pitcovski (2024), developed through the case of grief. Why is it rational for our feelings of grief over the loss of a loved one to diminish over time, even while the facts that justify grief (the loss) persist? This waning is rational, they argue, because as time passes, practical reasons increasingly favour attending to other aspects of one's life, and rational agents should therefore token thoughts of the deceased less frequently. If they don't, the source of normative criticism is not the grief response itself, but the agent's continued attention to representations of the loss. On this view, inappropriate emotional attention is explained by inappropriate attention to thoughts

that elicit emotion. The bereaved should gradually token less and less thoughts of the deceased, so as to elicit less and less episodes of grief.

I argue that this account rests on an overly simplified picture of the relation between emotion and attention. Tokening a thought does not, by itself, determine attentional persistence. Rather, it is because certain thoughts affect the agent emotionally that they acquire and retain attentional grip (Keller & Ombrato, 2022). Emotions are not merely downstream responses to attended representations; they are also mechanisms that orient and sustain attention onto given contents. Drawing on empirical and philosophical work on the reciprocal links between emotion and attention, I argue that sadness, for instance, is best understood as a way of taking representations of loss as calling for attention. Normative criticism, therefore, cannot be fully captured by appeal to the mere tokening of thoughts.

This point is reinforced by diachronic considerations about fittingness. Following Na'aman (2021), I point out that whether an emotional response is fitting depends on its place within a temporally extended process. In the case of grief, intense sadness may be fitting at early stages but unfitting when it fails, over time, to make room for other attitudes such as acceptance, gratitude, or renewed engagement with the world. What matters, then, is not simply which thoughts are tokened, but how an agent's emotional responsiveness to those thoughts evolves across time.

If this is so, then we might consider that the source of emotion-led inappropriate attention are emotional episodes themselves. Part II turns to Moonyoung Song's account, according to which emotions themselves can be epistemically inappropriate when they fail to track what is objectively salient. Song argues that emotions have a salience-tracking function distinct from fittingness and justification: an emotion can be fitting and justified with respect to its object, yet epistemically deficient because it directs attention away from what matters most in a given context. What is wrong with the bereaved who keeps on grieving is that their grief response fails to track the salience of other sources of normative demands (the living people around them who need them, etc.). I argue that Song mislocates the source of the failure. First, the shortcoming may be practical or moral rather than epistemic. Second, what is most problematic in many such cases is not the presence of an inappropriate

emotion, but the absence of an emotion that the situation calls for and which the agent fails to register or be sensitive to (Fritz, 2025).

If that is the case, we should look, I argue, to the determinants of emotion elicitation: what determines one's sensibility to certain evaluative aspects of a situation over others. We must look beyond occurrent thoughts and emotions to the standing structures that determine which responses are prioritised. Drawing on Wayne Wu's account of attention as guidance in action, emotions are powerful sources of bias in solving the agent's constant selection problem: they present their objects as urgent and to-be-dealt-with, thereby guiding both attention and behaviour. Which emotional input gets prioritised at a given time, however, depends on the agent's sensibilities: historically shaped hierarchies of concern, interest, and care that dispose her to be affected by certain features of situations rather than others. Following D'Arms and Jacobson (2001), Deonna and Teroni (2025), Echeverri (2019), I characterise sensibilities as diachronic features of an agent's psychology that structure evaluative salience. These sensibilities function as "historical biases" in Wu's sense, sculpting how agents prioritise inputs in action space.

The paper offers a diachronic conception of emotional responsibility, according to which agents are responsible not primarily for suppressing thoughts or regulating individual emotions, but for the longer-term cultivation of sensibilities. It provides a psychologically realistic account of what norms of attention might demand of us, as emoting agents.