

Drunk and in the Mood: Affect and Judgment

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Abstract

This paper spells out the following line of thought: (A) How much we care about various things is in constant flux, even as the world remains as it was. Internal affective shifts due to changes in mood, arousal-states or even hunger cause us to be more or less concerned about something. (B) Further, there often isn't any fact of the matter about how much we ought to care about something. As I argue, it isn't the case that there are prudential or moral norms that fix how worried we should be about every state of affairs in the world. (C) And this suggests that what we should do, both prudentially and morally, is often subject to our affective shifts, at least if how much we (permissibly) care about something is an important element of practical reasoning.

Keywords

affect – judgment – deliberation – practical reason – mood

Practical reasoning has often been conceived of as concerning either our own happiness or else the claims of morality, and, of course, with arbitrating clashes between the two. More recently, however, some writers have charged that this approach leaves out the vast range of things we care and deliberate about that don't seem at bottom to be about making ourselves happy or doing the right thing. Stock illustrations include visiting friends in hospital, sustaining our relationships, avoiding a trite and pointless life, and maintaining our commitments to causes and creeds. Perhaps these things make us happy as well or fall

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under the heading of some moral category or other, but the main reason we do them is simply that we *care* about such things, that they *matter* to us. I don't, on this view, visit my friend in hospital or work at my marriage because—certainly not only because—it will make me happy or because I morally ought to, since not visiting and a gradual estrangement and remarriage might in fact be painless and permissible. I do these things because they involve ends that I profoundly care about.¹

These claims can of course be contested. Perhaps we can stretch *happiness* along Aristotelian dimensions so as to include all of the things we care about, or perhaps we can elaborate a concept of morality that embraces self-regarding endeavors. I am skeptical of these maneuvers, but I won't take them up here. Instead, I will simply assume that it is true that a great deal of practical reasoning falls under the heading of what we care about. My aim is to investigate some worrying features of practical reasoning that emerge once we notice how inconstant what we care about really is.

In particular, I will argue that (1) *both intuitive case-mongering and experimental evidence suggest that we frequently undergo powerful affective shifts, and that these produce changes in how much we care about various considerations.* Moreover, in the cases I am interested in, these changes aren't a result of responding to reasons that we have. They are visceral changes—changes in the gut, as it were, that are endogenously generated. How much we care about something can swing wildly to and fro while the world remains exactly as it was. As I then argue, these facts make it hard to avoid a certain kind of limited relativism, since (2) *there often doesn't seem to be a good basis for settling which of the many patterns of concern that we exhibit is the right one.* Denying this would require showing not just that there are facts about what will make our lives successful or what others can reasonably demand of us, but that there are norms fixing how much each of us must care about everything. But there are no such norms, not even on a very robust conception of moral metaphysics. Finally, (3) I examine the prospects for keeping such a relativism about what we care about from affecting our reasoning about what we should do, and find such prospects bleak. *What we have most reason to do often seems*

1 See for instance Harry Frankfurt, "The Importance of What We Care About" in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) and *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) ch. 1, and my "Wealth, Disability and Happiness," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 39 (2011), 177–206. As I will use "caring," caring about something involves certain desires, but has deeper dimensions as well, especially seeing something as *important*, which I don't believe can be reduced merely to what we want.

to depend on how much we care about something, which would mean that on at least some occasions the rationally self-interested or morally right thing to do would also be hostage to kaleidoscopic shifts in what matters to us.

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We often reflect on how different people care about different things, or the same things to different degrees. But we tend to pay less attention to how wildly our *own* level of concern shifts from year to year, day to day, and second to second. Especially interesting are cases where our pattern of concern changes, not in response to changing features of the world, but for spontaneous, internal reasons. Such endogenous changes can occur in a number of ways (including just waking up with a different view of things), but many of the most interesting causes can be grouped under the heading of *affect*—perhaps with a bit of legislative shoehorning. As I will use the term, “affect” isn’t synonymous with canonical emotions like anger or fear, but refers more broadly to non-rational or “animal” or “visceral” influences on our judgments, including objectless moods, non-representational drive-states, appetites, and mental states that generally affect how we *feel* when we make decisions, like being drunk or high.² These states typically lack cognitive features like propositional objects. (We aren’t hungry *at* something, and though we can be depressed *about* something, often we’re just blue for no particular reason.)

We may worry that affective states so-conceived lack theoretical unity. There may be nothing internal to euphoria, sexual arousal, and inebriation, say, that non-trivially unites them, even when they occur simultaneously (at an unusually successful cocktail party, perhaps). But they are related by the interest they hold for us as states that cannot be reduced to propositional attitudes like belief and desire, yet which exert a powerful influence on our judgments, largely in virtue of their felt, non-cognitive properties—the swimmy, effervescent sensation of being tipsy, the heavy, paralyzing blanket of despair—which often fundamentally impact what seems important to us.

² A tricky question is whether emotions are species of affect, so defined. This depends on what we make of the emotions, which is of course disputed. In my own view, the emotions typically have cognitive features (they can have objects, they can be warranted) as well as a felt, affective dimension. For more on this question, see Jesse Prinz, *Gut Feelings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), chs. 2–3; for a different view, see Martha Nussbaum *Upheavals of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 56–64.

(They are also all states whose influence we tend to underrate; it's obvious how deeply our beliefs and desires influence our judgments, but the impact of hunger and anxiety is something we're often unaware of.) This usage, moreover, is consistent with how psychologists often use the term, though there isn't consensus either in philosophy or psychology.³

The idea is that affect, so conceived, might result in changes in what we desire and care about, sometimes radical changes, without doing so by responding to new facts about the world. Here are some illustrative cases:

Puberty: You have just turned 13. After a kind of metamorphosis, an entirely new category of value has appeared on the horizon, displacing many of those that mattered most before. Suddenly, you want certain things and care about the other sex in a way that seems almost alien to your earlier self, and surprises your younger siblings who find the change marked and bewildering. Spending time with and pursuing new forms of intimacy with members of the opposite sex now seems incredibly important in a way it wasn't before.

Mood: You're a moody person. Sometimes you wake up feeling like you can conquer the world; other days you are filled with feelings of despair and hopelessness. (These aren't debilitating, though, and you recover just fine in the end; you're moody, not a basket-case.) These moods influence your attitudes toward major life-choices, like whether to start a family. Feeling happy, you optimistically interpret the inevitable hardships of family life as part of a worthwhile whole; on the darker days, they look insufferable. As a result, you find yourself caring more or less about the goods of family life depending on your mood. How important they strike you, and how worthwhile they seem, shifts from day to day.

Child-bearing: You have recently given birth and are nursing. As oxytocin levels spike, you experience intermittent feelings that are unusual for you. For instance, you begin to find violent movies intolerable, and you initiate plans to bring together people you know who dislike each other. "Who wouldn't enjoy a harmonious dinner together?" you think. To the surprise of your spouse, you decide to make a large donation to aid hungry children. Overall, the weight you place on harmonious interaction

3 See the works cited below, especially George Loewenstein. See also Jon Elster's discussion of the lack of any deep unity in the emotions themselves, in *Alchemies of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) pp. 239–244.

with others, on getting along and avoiding conflict, and seeing others prosper, massively increases.⁴

Inebriation: Under normal circumstances, you are cautious and reserved in social situations. But when tipsy, you find your courage. Although you normally find it painful to make new friends by engaging them in conversation, after a few drinks you suddenly don't find the thought frightening at all. Seeing a new colleague you've been wanting to get to know, and fortified with a tall whiskey sour, you find yourself completely unconcerned with all that would have stopped you before—you just don't care anymore that you might make a fool of yourself or that you're awkwardly dressed. It's not that you've had a rational insight; it's that under the whiskey glow you just don't give a damn about making a fool of yourself.

Arousal: Usually you would judge that spending the night with your ex would be a terrible idea, especially since, on the night in question, there is no prophylactic available. But as you embrace and start to become aroused, suddenly those things just don't seem to matter. In the heat of the moment, all you really care about is having sex.

As these cases bring out, changes in what we care about are often the product of changes in our affective state, and these changes can be radical, sudden, and entirely endogenous. When going through puberty, we don't suddenly recognize and respond to features of men and women that eluded us before; internal changes simply endow us with a kind of concern we lacked before. Or, in reverse, when tipsy, concerns we did have before suddenly disappear. Or, in a less radical way, our *level* of concern may spike in post-pregnancy circumstances or under arousal, all without our beliefs or desires responding to changes detected outside the agent. And it should be obvious that this list could be expanded almost without limit; what we are dealing with are the flesh-and-blood contours of everyday life, not runaways from the philosophical bestiary.

4 This case is based on the experiences of a friend. For research into this phenomenon, see Ruth Feldman et al., "Evidence for a Neuroendocrinological Foundation of Human Affiliation," *Psychological Science* 2007 (11), 965–70. For an accessible overview of work on oxytocin, see Paul Zak's *The Moral Molecule* (New York: Dutton, 2012).

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These endogenous changes may seem interesting but unthreatening. However, facing up to them spells trouble once we notice that these endogenous shifts often make it very hard to believe that there is a fact of the matter about how much we should care about something, at least in a way that does much to constrain us. When we reflect on the divergent perspectives we occupy under various affective states, we're led to the question of which perspective is the *right* one. We should wonder why the indented points of view depicted above aren't on all fours with how things looked before we entered puberty, got tipsy, and so on. The worry is that there often isn't a good answer to this question, and thus we face a kind of relativity: as we go through changes in what matters to us under the influence of affect, there's often no fact of the matter about which frame of reference is right. Before we cared, now we don't—and that's all.

Let us set aside morality for now and start small-bore. How much should you care about the Second Punic War? Suppose you're considering reading Livy, and you begin to wonder whether any of that old stuff really matters. The problem is that there don't seem to be any deep facts in the nature of things that fix how much you ought to care about the Second Punic War. Any value offered for this parameter, from *all-consuming passion* to *utter indifference* seems acceptable. This claim is robust, I think, to trivial denials. Suppose we say, for instance, that the Second Punic War was a significant event in human history, that human history matters, and thus that everyone ought to care a *little* bit about the Second Punic War—albeit, only in a way that is compatible with completely ignoring it at all times, in light of the many other things that are similarly important, and our limited time and attention. This, to mix wars, would be a Pyrrhic victory, since it would introduce no real constraints on the agent. (Almost anything the agent ever did, felt, said, or believed would be compatible with the “constraint.”)

Something similar goes for the point that we should care about the War if we already care about certain other things, like Roman history in general. If we were writing a thesis about ancient Rome but had treated the War as a minor event not worth much of our attention, certainly there might be room for rational criticism. But the possibility of building bridges from one object of concern to another doesn't help much. Clearly there are very many cases where such bridges aren't available, as with those of us who happen not to be writing theses on ancient Rome. And even then, the permissible range of concern for Fabius' elusive legions remains enormous. For the range must extend to, e.g., seeing a TV show about Hannibal and suddenly experiencing a massive increase in how much we care, as well as something bordering on indifference,

a mere grudging admission that one's thesis requires a certain detached engagement, without having any real gusto about the matter. ("Sure, I care about Rome, but the Second Punic War was merely an overrated *Zwischenphase*, full of sound and fury, but without fundamentally changing anything. My work concerns the real action–senatorial politics.") So here, too, there don't seem to be any significant, broadly applicable constraints, and when I speak of "relativity" or "constraints" below, I will leave out these caveats as understood. Grant, then, that in these trivial cases we face a kind of relativity, which shouldn't seem very surprising. It would be an extreme view indeed that would fix for each of us, throughout our lives, how much we must care about everything.

Now return to the more important cases outlined above. How much should we care about being close to members of the opposite sex? Our answer must respect the fact that kids aren't making some kind of mistake when they tell us, at 10, that although they wish no great harm on boys/girls, they have no real interest in spending time with them or developing a weird emotional connection, let alone participating in some kind of bizarre physical act in the nude. It must also respect the radically different response just a short while later. We need to determine who is right and which level of concern is correct. It seems to me that here affective shift induces a shift in what we care about, and that neither pattern of concern is mistaken. There fundamentally isn't any answer to the question, "How much should human beings care about being intimate with members of the opposite sex?" A radical change in affective posture generates a radical change in what we care about, and we can only shrug our shoulders at the difference. We can, again, give the Pyrrhic response—perhaps there are far-out limit-cases of being overly obsessed with meeting boys or girls. But, again, these far-out cases seem to do almost nothing to constrain. Very many people, after all, orient their entire lives for years on end around finding love, and there doesn't seem to be anything exceptional about that. So once again, virtually any normal case will present us with a relativism since the available options—caring not at all or caring hugely—are all unrestricted.

Notice that none of this is true of the canonical emotions. When we're scared of something, it makes sense to ask how scared we should be, and to rationally criticize deviant responses. Since fear is partly cognitive, it can be assessed along dimensions of fidelity and fit, and rejected when it falls outside an appropriate range. The problem with endogenous affective states is that we seem to lack these kinds of resources to any meaningful degree. There are significant constraints on how scared we should be; the jolt of emotion we experience seeing a mouse seems to tell us that we're in grave danger, but

the fact that there isn't actually a threat on the scene provides grounds for rejecting that response. But when our feelings toward girls or boys change, not as responses to the outside, but as purely internal shifts, it's much harder to see how to reject one or the other response. It's worth noting that for this reason, applying the perceptual model of emotion is much harder here. Does what is disclosed in what we feel about boys or girls change at puberty? Was the earlier perception, that mashing your face into someone else's gluey lips was disgusting, *inaccurate*, the way your murine terrors were? Perceptual metaphors seem unhelpful in this context.⁵

Moods provide many examples of the same thing. When deciding on whether to start a family or take up some career, a great deal depends on how much you care about things like how you interpret the goods and bads of family life, and how much you value having your own space or having someone to love and care for. Suppose your level of concern for these things varies significantly with the mood you're in—when feeling blue, having your own space seems to you all-important, having someone to love leaves you cold, and vice versa for those sunny days. There doesn't seem to be any fact of the matter about how much you *should* care about these things. The same argument as before establishes this, namely that the permissible range must encompass nearly the full spectrum of possible responses, from utter indifference to obsession. No one is making a mistake in not caring about having time to themselves or in viewing disgruntled teenagers with comparative serenity.

That should suffice to convey the basic sense in which affect sometimes seems to generate an ethical problem. How important something is sometimes seems to be relative to the affective state of the agent, with no further facts fixing what that state ought to be. When we enter such states, we come to occupy a point of view (the world looks a certain way when we're depressed or tipsy), and it's often difficult to see resources for criticizing our shifting perspective as we move in and out of these points of view. Farsighted readers will perceive that this can pose a serious difficulty when we turn from caring to the practical question of what we should do, but for now I want to hold off on that problem, and consider some fundamental objections to this whole line of thought.

5 This presents a worry for views that press hard on the perceptual character of affect, e.g., Mark Johnston, in "The Authority of Affect," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63 (2001), 181–214, esp. p. 189. For an overview of related problems with perceptual models and the question of the extent to which they are merely metaphors, see Daniel Jacobson, "Seeing by Feeling: Virtues, Skills and Moral Perception," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 8 (2005): 387–409.

3

Consider three strategies for denying these relativistic claims: appealing to *stable, persistent states*; appealing to *the distortion paradigm of affect*; and appealing to *objective values* that fix what really matters in life.

Some of the states I have described are transient, evoking the obvious suggestion that we should disregard them as temporary aberrations. Our real values might just seem to be those that we actually live with over long periods of time and that thus earn their claim to being a part of us. Cases like inebriation, temporary depression, and pregnancy seem to fit this model especially well. An initial worry, though, is that this appeal seems at odds with many of our normative judgments. Suppose I have been deeply depressed for most of my life, and now I undergo a shift—suddenly I see how worthwhile my life really is. Or suppose I've labored under a misanthropic veil for decades, suddenly interrupted by a few drinks or a Mill-like breakdown under the influence of Romantic poetry—at last I see the value of deep interpersonal relationships. The persistence response tells us to dismiss these states simply because they don't comport with the past—shifts toward serenity and amiability are to be rejected. It's as if we were to say, "My dear Smith, this recent spell of happiness, productivity, and vigor is a transient episode you should shake off in favor of your stable disposition of misanthropic melancholy." Here, it's hard to see much of a reason to favor the earlier values, stable though they may have been. These sorts of cases lead one to suspect that what really drives the persistence response is a tendency to picture people having "nice" stable states interrupted by "nasty" transient ones. But once we make clear, as just now, that things can just as well go the other way (alas), there no longer seems to be much to be said for privileging mere stability. After all, why should the mere number (or proportion) of hours an attitude has been held matter much to our evaluation of it? The "my dear Smith" response shows how much weight we really attach to mere persistence once detached from broader normative appraisals.

Worse still, many of the cases mentioned earlier are *not* transient. Take puberty. After 10 years of stable attitudes, suppose they suddenly change at age 13. If stability generally mattered, our teenager would now have a reason to persist in his or her feelings about the opposite sex. But this would be bizarre; it would be absurd to lecture the teenager about the perilous instability of his new-found attitude toward boys and girls. Nor is it plausible to claim this is only because the teenager will likely go on to live another $10 + N$ years with the new values; even if he contracts a fatal disease that will kill him at 15, it would be absurd to pretend he has reason to persist with his prepubescent values at 13. And much the same is true of other non-transient shifts, like the permanent

end of a long spell of depression. Here, again, it is implausible to claim that one has grounds to persist with one's depressed-state values until ten or 20 years have gone by so as to establish a new baseline. There are countless changes in our values of this sort where the resulting instability is nevertheless not the slightest ground for supposing that the "real" values were the displaced incumbents. Of course, this needn't prevent us from acknowledging that caring about something isn't the same thing as an occurrent feeling—Ellen doesn't stop caring about her kids when she's asleep—and that feelings are often short-lived in a way that states of caring often are not. Even here, though, we should be cautious; we care a great deal about lunch around noon but not so much at other times, and some feelings, like depression, can last for years. As I suggest below, there *is* a way of identifying shifts that are subject to rational criticism, but the crude appeal to persistence isn't it.

4

More promising is the distortion response. Even the canonical emotions have often been conceptualized primarily as defects that *distort* our reasoning, let alone the visceral, non-cognitive states I've been discussing. Why take seriously the point of view we occupy when, as we significantly put it, we're *under the influence* of alcohol, sexual desire, or other brute passions?

To develop this idea, focus first on arousal. In a disturbing experiment, researchers managed to determine subjects' judgments on a number of topics while in the midst of arousal states. In the study, sexually aroused men were significantly more likely to agree that they might be attracted to a 12 year old girl (23/46), that "just kissing" was frustrating (41/69), that having sex with an animal might be exciting (6/16), that they could enjoy having sex with someone they hated (53/77), that they might keep trying to have sex after their date said "No" (20/45), and that they might slip a woman a drug to increase the chance that she would have sex with them (5/26). They were significantly less likely to agree that they would always use a condom if they didn't know the sexual history of their partner (88/69).⁶ If anyone doubted it, clearly there is disturbing empirical evidence of "hot" arousal states distorting judgment.

6 Pp. 93–94 in Dan Ariely and George Loewenstein, "The Heat of the Moment: The Effect of Sexual Arousal on Sexual Decision Making," *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 19 (2006), 87–98. The parenthetical figures denote mean agreement scores on an analog scale of 0–100 for unaroused/aroused subjects.

Next consider inebriation, where the distorting role of affect seems even more obvious, since the judgment-impairing properties of alcohol are highly visible. Here, too, it is worth briefly referencing empirical research.⁷ One interesting strain of work seeks to show that alcohol does not directly cause undesirable behavior (e.g., violence), but simply diminishes the influence of less salient, peripheral cues. Intoxication renders the brain less capable of complex cognitive tasks, and accordingly we are less able to focus on comparatively subtle considerations that are remote in time, space, or degree of abstraction, it is said.

Alcohol makes us the captive of an impoverished version of reality in which the breadth, depth, and time line of our understanding is constrained. It causes what we have called *alcohol myopia*, a state of shortsightedness in which superficially understood, immediate aspects of experience have a disproportionate influence on behavior and emotion...⁸

On this hypothesis, people behave more aggressively when drunk because the cues that would normally inhibit such behavior—consideration of future consequences, say—aren't as readily accessible as the immediate anger-inducing cues. The net effect is exaggerated hostility because the countervailing influences have been weakened. Similarly, we leave bigger checks and have a higher opinion of ourselves when drunk because the processing needed to check the strong, salient impulse toward rewarding the waiter in front of us or toward self-love is unavailable. Once again we seem to have the resources for dismissing the perspective of an affective state—we can reject claims about relativism when one of the competing perspectives involves succumbing to an “impoverished version of reality.”

In response, I want to concede a great deal to this line of attack. The view I'm defending is only that there is quite *often* nothing to choose between affectively charged perspectives. To undermine this limited relativism, what needs to be shown is that affective states are *generally* distorting. And that isn't so. Let's stick with inebriation. The shy person who, after a few drinks, acquires a little self-confidence and gets up the courage to ask someone out at a party does not seem to have suffered a warping of his or her judgment. On the contrary, depending on the details, we might very well conclude that the judgment was the first sensible thought the party-goer ever had on the subject.

7 I draw on a review article, C. Steele, and R. Josephs, “Alcohol Myopia,” *American Psychologist* 45 (1990), 921–933.

8 Steele and Josephs, “Alcohol Myopia,” p. 923.

The expansive, unfettered feeling that alcohol can confer may thus be perceived as contributing an important insight into people's situations. It is worth quoting Williams James in this vein:

The sway of alcohol over mankind is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour. Sobriety diminishes, discriminates, and says no; drunkenness expands, unites, and says yes. It is in fact the great exciter of the Yes function in man...Not through mere perversity do men run after it. To the poor and unlettered it stands in the place of symphony and of literature.⁹

Obviously the "Yes function" presents dangers that researchers like the ones we encountered earlier are forever warning us about. But they might just as well warn us of the dangers of sobriety. The teetotaler avoids some mistakes, but is liable to commit others. Engaging the "Yes-function" isn't the sort of thing whose rational significance can be assessed in any general kind of way. Sometimes what you find yourself caring about when tipsy is the perspective we would want to endorse. It's easy to think of similar, pro-affect stories for free-floating happiness, or simply caring about sexual intimacy after puberty, and the other examples described earlier; dismissing affect as an influence on judgment seems as misguided as dismissing the canonical emotions, as many philosophers have recognized.¹⁰

The crucial distinction, I want to suggest, is between those cases in which affective states alter what we care about, what we really think matters—our values, we might say grandiosely—and those in which they alter the expression of those values. In the latter sort of case, it seems fair to say that affect has distorted our judgment, since it has come between our judgments and our values, cutting off decisions about what to do and think from our deeper aims and purposes. This will be true when, for instance, affective states prevent us from seeing

9 *Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Penguin, 1985) p. 368. James goes on to reflect that nitrous oxide and ether "stimulate the mystical consciousness to an extraordinary degree. Depth beyond depth of truth seems revealed to the inhaler."

10 See, for instance, Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987) and Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995), Patricia Greenspan *Emotions and Reasons* (New York: Routledge 1988), and Michael Stocker and Elizabeth Hegeman, *Valuing Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. ch. 3. A useful overview of these issues from an empirical perspective is provided by Kathleen Vohs, Roy Baumeister and George Loewenstein, eds., *Do Emotions Help or Hurt Decision Making?* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007).

some value is at play or the significance some value of ours has in a given situation. But when affect changes what we care about and how much, matters are more complicated and it is much harder to see how talk of distortion or warped judgment could be supported. In other words, whether affect-driven judgments involve a failure of rationality depends crucially on the fine-grain details of the particular case.

Recall the varying judgments about starting a family that we might form in different moods. Which judgment is correct? That, I believe, depends on how further details are fixed, particularly the precise way in which mood is influencing judgment. It might be like this: in the depressed condition, we form a wildly unrealistic picture of our capacities as parents. As we contemplate raising a child, it just seems impossible to imagine doing it well. Perhaps depression causes us to focus on painful episodes in our own childhood, and we imagine raising a child to be an endless repetition of such episodes. Or we focus on our personal weaknesses and exaggerate their potential consequences. Even with a deep desire to raise children, these kinds of mental processes may push us from starting a family. Alternatively, in a state of euphoria, just the opposite may hold, *mutatis mutandis*: financial and other obstacles may be brushed aside, new responsibilities overlooked, and our attention may be fixed on a small number of non-representative benefits of raising children. And it may be that if we *were* sufficiently alive to the full range of considerations, our deepest values would issue in a judgment against family life, if, say, raising children would be irresponsible under the circumstances. In these sorts of scenarios, affect is giving us an unrealistic impression of the likely outcome, and that distorts our judgment, since it prevents us from realizing some of our deepest values (as stipulated here), either because the value we set on raising children is failing to be realized for no good reason, or because the important responsibilities we would otherwise recognize are being treated too lightly.

But now suppose it is rather like this: in the depressed condition, we just don't *care* as much about having a family. As we ponder the value of interacting with our would-be children, the alleged joys of parenthood, and weigh various goals we might have to give up in the process, depression may make the goods of family life seem less significant. This way of fixing the case makes the role of affect look completely different. Here, what has changed is not our capacity for properly applying our values (as under the earlier description), but the values themselves. Our mood alters what we care about, which things we find important and how important we find them, and so affects our ultimate aims. To the extent that our judgments are affected by mood in this kind of way, it seems to be an unobjectionable matter of responding properly to our own values. In the

earlier variant, affect was leaving our values disconnected from our judgments. We might even say that affect was coming between the kind of person we *were* and what we *did* or believed. But in this latter variant, it is precisely the values themselves, or what kinds of people we are (at least in part) that are changing. From this perspective, significant changes in our affective states can be similar to changes in character we might undergo across many years, or similar to the differences holding between people. These are changes it makes perfect sense for our judgments to reflect.

Something similar seems true in the case of inebriation; often inebriated judgments reflect changes in what we care about, not simply a warped point of view. Let me indulge in a personal observation to introduce the relevant considerations. Occasionally I find myself tipsy while on the way to the refrigerator, and pause to reflect. In those moments I ponder, in full, vivid detail my current plan: to fetch some junk food to consume while watching television. In those moments, I also ponder an alternative course of action: sobering up and working on *War and Peace*. Often I choose the first option. (I have yet to finish *War and Peace*.) This occurs despite considering in some detail the consequences of becoming a wastrel along with those of becoming a fit, well-read Tolstoy buff. It may be true that we are less likely to access subtle features of our situation under the influence, particularly things like our future regret over not having made it through *War and Peace*, the importance of not wasting our lives away, and so on. (My personal anecdote is not representative of how I or others generally think after a cocktail.) But I find that even when I *do* access those peripheral cues, I still often form judgments about what's best to do that are at odds with those I'd make in the non-tipsy state. Since these are judgments of the good, not actions or decisions that override such judgments due to weakness of will or some other rational failure, it seems to me that judgments about junk food and television can emanate from changed values—a changed sense of what matters. After a few drinks, the relative importance I attach to Tolstoy and television simply reverses itself. It's not that I lack the will power or can't access relevant cues; it's that I just don't care about things like *War and Peace* anymore.¹¹

The response to the distortion paradigm, then, is first to acknowledge that affective shifts can disturb our deliberations by coming between what genuinely matters to us and the judgments we make, but then to insist that affect can also serve to change the values themselves. And it is the latter category,

11 Cp. Michael Stocker on the disconnection between motivation and evaluation that can arise as a result of changes in moods or other affective states, "Desiring the Bad," *The Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1979), 738–753, pp. 750–753.

naturally, that we should focus on in considering whether there often isn't anything to choose between our shifting perspectives. We should concede that the line between shifts in values and their expression can look blurry. If I am too depressed to want to see my friends it's tempting to attribute that to an affective change in what I want or care about, and yet if I am dragged out to see my friends that may well have a positive effect on me, perhaps suggesting I cared all along. Such an episode may even have the quality of piercing a veil that hung over me, masking what I really cared about. But the important thing for our purposes isn't whether it's easy to distinguish these differences, but that they are real, and that sometimes affective changes really do produce changes in what we care about. As long as that remains true, the specter of relativism lingers on, even if it may be hard in practice to tell whether someone is suffering from a distortion or undergoing a value-shift.

5

Next, consider the appeal to objective values. This strategy is simple: we insist that there are facts about what matters, and that we assess what we care about in terms of the reasons generated by those objective values. With the previous section in mind, proponents of this view needn't condemn affective shifts in general. But they insist that the rationality of affective states be assessed in terms of whether they actually respond to the reasons we have for acting, as generated by objective values. They can say, with Nomy Arpaly,

At four in the morning, in a state of emotional turmoil, a person might realize that she needs to leave her husband, and her belief might be perfectly rational. At noon, in an air-conditioned room, calmly and confidently, a sleek presidential aide might reach certain conclusions regarding economic policy, and her conclusions might be tragically irrational.¹²

This is because our best judgments, formed in the cool hour, could easily be contaminated by all sorts of misleading factors, such as the desire to please our parents or a pathological fear of failure. And contrariwise, our emotional

¹² *Unprincipled Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 44. See also chapters 1–2 more broadly. Note that Arpaly herself doesn't defend the objectivity of value in this work. She only makes the point that we should focus on the reasons for our deliberative responses, as opposed to their stereotyped "emotional" vs. "calm and collected" character, or even whether they represent our own best judgment.

turmoil may involve unconsciously grasping and responding to our actual reasons—waking up in the night, drenched in sweat, yelling “I’ve got to leave him!” could be the reasonable response if that response actually tracks the agent’s reasons. Or, in the case of the shy party-goer who gets a little tipsy, diminished access to cues that would normally be devastating—the intrusive thought that you’ll make a fool of yourself—may allow us to connect with the reasons we actually have to make friends. But what counts here is connecting with our reasons.

So assume that we should assess our states of caring about things by the reasons we have for a particular pattern of concern, and now add the assumption that those reasons are generated by objective values (or that normative reasons are themselves objective features of the world). This seems to avoid the unseemly relativism we’ve been flirting with. Derek Parfit defends a particularly hard line of this general sort. In discussing Harry Frankfurt’s skepticism about finding reasons for the things we care about, he writes,

Hitler’s hatred of the Jews gave the last part of his life the kind of meaning that Frankfurt describes. And Hitler had the ‘clarity and confidence’ that Frankfurt claims to be more important than having reasons. It matters greatly, I believe, whether Hitler had reasons to do what he did, and whether, in our loves or hates, it is we or Hitler who got things right.¹³

Parfit argues instead for an objective view of the reasons we have: we should accept irreducible non-natural normative truths about what there is reason to do and care about. So if people stop caring about love, they’re wrong; if they start caring about needless suffering they’re right.¹⁴

Here I once again want to grant all the main claims. Assume Parfit is right and that there are facts about what matters. This is compatible with the view that we frequently face a relativity about what matters, for Parfit isn’t claiming that our reasons for caring are *always* fixed. We need only grant that there are *some* things everyone has reason to care about, and that sometimes there are facts about how much we should care about them. But often there won’t be any such facts, as in the cases discussed throughout this paper. Parfit clearly agrees with this:

We often have to choose between many good ends or aims, none of which is clearly better than the others, and in such cases there is no end that

13 *On What Matters vol. I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 98. He is discussing Frankfurt’s *The Reasons of Love*.

14 See *On What Matters vol. II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), ch. 24.

reason requires us to choose...Though we don't need reasons for loving *particular* people, we have reasons to try to love some people, since love is in itself good. Love in this way differs from hate."¹⁵

Parfit views this as a pedestrian pluralism about value, and suspects that Frankfurt has confused sensible pluralism with radical subjectivism.

Appealing to the objectivity of value, then, isn't to the point. We can simply grant that there are objective values (or reasons) that control how much we should care about some things. The point is that there is a huge range of concerns left open where there won't be a fact of the matter. The real issue is whether there are interesting implications for this claim, to which I turn next. Just by way of softening up, though, notice that describing the residual issues left over after granting some objective values as a minor matter of "pluralism" dramatically understates things. First, this is because the term "pluralism" is misleading in this context. It isn't just that the number of things that matter can't be reduced to a single one, e.g., pleasure; it's that in countless circumstances, there won't be any fact of the matter about how much we should care about things. Take the post-pregnancy case, and dramatic changes in how much you care about social harmony. Grant that it's an objective fact built into the fabric of the universe that we must care about seeing people around us getting along harmoniously. But how much must we care, exactly? This, I take it will be left open, other things being equal. Now suppose you go from caring a little about social harmony (while never doing much about it) to becoming quite obsessed—you turn your home into a salon of ceaseless visitations, meetings, and social occasions. Nothing seems to fix which of these responses is the right one, and life, to exaggerate only a little, is just one such case after another.

The same point applies if we attempt to graft objective values onto the earlier strategy of focusing on duration and continuity. Even if we undergo radical changes in what we care about, there might still be facts about the future—whether we suffer terribly for having an affair or come to regret decisions under depression, for instance—that fix what our objective interests are, and thus what we really ought to do. In some cases appealing to people's objective interests may solve the problem, as when in a moment of euphoria we are tempted to drag race at a stoplight with a huge risk of death and no particularly profound change in values. But the worry is that there remain plenty of uncomfortable cases where the objective calculus leaves us hanging, and not just for epistemic reasons. You get drunk on a riverboat cruise with your mother and

15 *On What Matters vol. I*, p. 100.

finally summon the gumption to tell her what growing up was really like under her thumb; doing so may well lead to regrets and suffering later on. And perhaps some diehard objectivist will insist that there are facts fixing exactly how these factor into your interests as compared to, say, *cutting through the cobwebs of inane social chatter in order to finally make mother confront your reality*. But I doubt it. How on earth would one go about establishing such facts, even in principle, beyond setting some trivial upper and lower bounds? In this as in many other cases of great importance to us, the relative weight of such things will depend partly on one's pattern of concern.

6

This conclusion should strike us as intrinsically interesting; it's disturbing, in a way, to view one's deepest, most important attitudes toward what matters as frequently unmoored from any fixed anchor. How disturbing this is depends, perhaps, on how representative one sees the cases I have been focusing on of everyday life. It also depends on how optimistic one is about exploiting some of the earlier concessions, like the possibility of building bridges from other concerns we have. If we care a great deal about a particular person, there's an expansive pattern of concerns that gets fixed by simple corollary (their health, perhaps being able to support them, and so on). But clearly there will remain a great many unbridged islands.

In any case, I want to conclude by pointing out three possible implications of the view defended so far. Some of these implications draw on further assumptions that are plausible but nonetheless controversial; however for the most part I will simply explain why the point about caring I have been making seems to have these implications, without defending the additional assumptions.

First, what we should self-interestedly *do* often seems to depend on what we care about. Whether you should get married depends largely on whether you care about the goods of marriage and are in love with someone, the same for going to college, joining the army, or becoming a chef. (Assume that other things are equal, that you haven't undertaken any action-fixing obligations.) But, when we combine that assumption with the view I've been defending, we seem to arrive at the conclusion that what we ought to do from the point of view of self-interest is often a function of the vagaries of our affective states:

- P1: What we should self-interestedly do often depends on how much we care about something.

- P₂: How much we care about something fluctuates with our affective states.
- P₃: There is often no further fact of the matter about how much we should care about something, or else the permissible range is so wide as to leave us unconstrained.
- C: Therefore, what we should self-interestedly do often depends on our fluctuating affective states, without anything significantly constraining those states.¹⁶

The idea is that once we grant P₂ and P₃, the premises I've been defending throughout the paper, and if we acknowledge that what we have self-interested reason to do is often a function of what matters to us, then we end up with the conclusion that our see-sawing mood swings, arousal states, etc., often give us differing prudential imperatives. What we ought to do will sway back and forth, relative to our affective shifts.

Go back to the tipsy scholar at his refrigerator. Should he read *War and Peace*, or should he go and watch TV? In line with P₁, that depends on how much he cares about becoming a Tolstoy buff. (Not everyone in the world has a personal obligation to become a connoisseur of Tolstoy.) In some affective states, becoming better-read seems important, but in others, without committing a deliberative error, that seems much less worthwhile. Depending on the fine-grained values we enter for the various parameters, it will thus turn out that, overall, he either ought or ought not to read, rather than watching TV and sipping margaritas. And he may flip back and forth hour by hour. (We may grant that he oughtn't to drink in circumstances that threaten his health, or the fulfillment of his obligations, etc., but many cases won't meet those conditions.) The same will hold for people deciding whether to have a family and other momentous personal decisions.

The second implication is the obvious moral analog. Depending on our background moral theory, changes in affective states may even change what we ought *morally* to do. Consider those cases where our own interests get factored into what we're morally required to do. On any plausible theory this is a common occurrence. One example is the consequentialist recognition that the agent's interests count no less than anyone else's (though no more, either), and so these will sometimes tip the balance in a moral decision. I don't have a

16 Tightening up this argument would require a bit more care to make sure the various "oftens" connect up, without any gaps left between them, and the conclusion would need to be a bit more elaborate to account for the disjunction in P₃. Since the formal argument serves mainly an expository purpose, I have left it a little impressionistic.

moral obligation to retrieve your wedding ring from the shark tank, since doing so wouldn't maximize the expected value, due to the threat to my own interests. A more complicated example is the anti-consequentialist view that there is an agent-relative prerogative to flout the overall good, sometimes said to be rooted in the separateness of persons. According to this view, despite the standing reason we all have to promote the good, we're permitted to give a certain amount of extra weight to our own interests, which is why we aren't condemned to drop all of our own projects and goals in slavish service to the rest of mankind.¹⁷ Relatedly, deontologists often say that we are permitted to favor those close to us in cases of conflict with the overall good, so that we're allowed to refuse to save the greater number of people in favor of saving a close friend, say.¹⁸ This, too, involves an interest of ours entering the calculus of our moral obligations.

So assume that what you morally should do often depends on your own interests. Assume, too, that what your interests amount to is partly a function of what you care about. That is, your interests are at least partly defined by what matters to you, in a way that can't be reduced to anything else, e.g., units of pleasure. (It's contrary to your interests to lose your leg even if you would adapt and be just as happy afterwards, or to lose your wife, even if you would remarry happily.) We're now back to the result that what you should do will shift with your mood, oxytocin levels, arousal status, etc.

- M1: What we should morally do often depends on our own interests.
- M2: Our interests are partly determined by what we care about.
- M3: How much we care about something fluctuates with our affective states.
- M4: There is often no further fact of the matter about how much we should care about something, or else the permissible range is so wide as to leave us unconstrained.
- C: Therefore, what we should morally do often depends on our fluctuating affective states, without anything significantly constraining those states.

If this were true, then whether one is required to give to famine relief may depend on one's affective states. Not, it's important to stress, because "anything goes," but because in some circumstances those states will shape what our

17 See Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

18 See John Taurek, "Should the Numbers Count?" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 6 (1977) 293–316.

interests are, and at some margins that will be enough to tip the balance from an act being required to it being optional.

Exhaustive analysis of this argument is a task for another occasion—this paper has focused on discussing just (3) and (4). But there seems to be a fairly strong case for each of the premises.