Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:57 Page Number: 62

CHAPTER 2

Agency in Emotion

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1 Introduction

Among the themes that have occupied philosophers of emotion are the questions of whether and, if so, in what sense and to what extent emotions and other affective phenomena should be understood as active, where 'active' is meant to indicate a robust link to the subject's agency. While presumably different from intentional action as usually understood, emotions are evidently not merely 'passive' in the way sensations like tooth pains or headaches are passive. Tooth pains and headaches are phenomena we merely undergo, find ourselves subjected to, and have to put up with in some way. By contrast, we consider emotions to be expressive of the person who has them, suggesting a more direct involvement of the self-conscious agent. Emotions, as well as other affective phenomena, express the genuine responses and stances of an individual. Their enactment firmly belongs to the agent's self-conscious, responsible conduct. At any rate, this is what I will argue for in this chapter.

The presumption of an agentive involvement in emotion is backed by, among other things, the practice of our holding each other accountable for our emotions, for instance, by critiquing another's emotions as inappropriate when we deem them out of touch with their putative occasions, or out of sync with what else we take to be true about the attitudes and orientations of the other.[1] Opinions differ, however, on the nature of the activity that arguably comes to the fore in emotional comportment. Authors also differ in their assessments of the extent to which this aspect of agency assumes a phenomenological salience in emotional experience, and on how this active element can be reconciled with the passive dimensions of our affective lives. This gets further complicated given the marked sense of

[1] This routine critique of another's emotions does not always take the form of overt criticism but can appear simply in the form of sincere requests for elucidation – '*Why* do you feel this way?' – and in the range of answers or modes of engagement with this question that we deem acceptable.

Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:57 Page Number: 63

vulnerability in view of the world that is a backdrop of much emotive comportment (cf. Nussbaum 2001). A more principled issue hinges on the question of the nature of agency in emotion: one's answer will condition one's overall conception of what emotions are, with ramifications for several further issues in this area of philosophy.[2] Among these issues is the question of how best to understand 'emotional abilities': the extent to which someone's having of emotions can be understood as the possession and exercising of a specific sort of abilities (see Landweer and Slaby 2022).[3]

In this chapter, I will probe into several ways in which agency is prima facie involved in emotions, hoping to see clearer in a messy landscape of phenomena. My aim is to clarify a paradigmatic involvement of agency in emotion: the way that emotions themselves constitutively involve an element of agency. I will proceed as follows. In Section 2, I sketch three different senses in which agency appears to play an important role in the vicinity of our emotions: we can be active (i) *by way* of our emotions, (ii) *with respect to* our emotions, or (iii) *insofar as we have or feel* emotions. The third sense – agency *in (having)* emotions – speaks most clearly to the main concern of this chapter. The other two modes of agentive involvement are likewise of importance, but play a smaller role in the full picture that I plan to paint.[4] Next, in Section 3, I will proceed to sketch elements of a conceptual framework for thinking about emotions as active, revolving around a notion of a 'response' as elucidated by Jean Moritz Müller (2021). Müller's account of the *spontaneity* of emotions is a touchstone for my reflections. It provides the minimalist base for what I hope finds more robust expression in the remainder of this text. In Section 4, I will sketch a perspective on agency in emotion. I will draw on an elaboration of Richard Moran's work in order to bring out the gist of my proposal, and then expand on it by combining it with considerations that substantiate the notion of emotional spontaneity. I conclude with a summary of my

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[2] See Naar (2022; 2023) for detailed considerations on the pros and cons of a conception of emotions as at least strongly analogous, if not outrightly similar, to agency.

[3] Answering the question of whether emotions manifest the agency of the emoter in the affirmative could commit one to assigning emotive phenomena a place within a conception of the human mind that revolves around a notion of self-constitutive agency (e.g., Korsgaard 1996; 2009; Moran 2001; Boyle 2009; 2011; see also Crowell 2013). If emotions can be demonstrated to fit this picture, this conception of the mind would gain in strength and nuance. I will touch on this larger picture in what follows (see also Slaby 2021).

[4] All three senses of agency here outlined play a role in a substantial approach to emotional *abilities*, which I construe as a composite of different abilities to form, shape, understand, uphold and direct one's emotions, and, based on that, to act by way of them in and on one's social surroundings.

Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:57 Page Number: 64

view and a brief discussion of its implications for an understanding of the relationship between emotions and vulnerability (Section 5).

2 Emotion and Agency: Preliminary Observations

For a start, I want to cast a relatively wide net around emotions in order to identify three putative senses in which agency seems manifest in, around, or with respect to them. By delving deeper into several such senses, a picture emerges that indicates the centrality of one such understanding of agency, namely, the one to be characterised in subsection (iii) below (*agency in having emotions*). But first, let us start with a paradigmatic example of an emotion that can help us bring out the different senses of agency at issue here.

Assume I am angry about a co-worker and let my anger show in a team meeting at my workplace. The team is small and tight-knit, and the stakes are high as there is pressure to deliver some service to a demanding customer on a tight deadline. Those present in the meeting clearly grasp my anger. Let us assume that they know my reasons for being angry and deem them, by and large, good reasons. With me making a scene, the atmosphere in the meeting is now tense; my anger is a salient factor in the group, something that has to be taken into account as the meeting proceeds. We can use this example to distinguish, largely pre-theoretically, three different ways in which we might speak of agency in the vicinity of emotion: activity (i) *by way of*, (ii) *with respect to*, or (iii) *in having* our emotions.

(i) Being active *by way of* our emotions: Roughly speaking, what I mean here is that I let my emotion 'do something for me' in the social realm: my anger in the situation of the meeting can amount to a way in which I act on my surroundings. As outwardly expressed, my anger changes the interpersonal landscape, for instance, by rendering aspects of the situation salient and noteworthy for those present. Thus, one might say that through my anger, I stake a claim, make it clear to those present that my self-esteem matters, that I count and am ready to stand up 'for myself' (conversely, not getting angry in situations that warrant anger might diminish one's social standing and negatively affect one's self-esteem).[5]

[5] To clarify: This is a borderline case of intentional action as I consciously – or half-consciously – let expected outward effects of my emotional episode 'do something for me'. Not any recurrent effect of any of an agent's emotions falls in this category, but only those that figure in the agent's horizon of expectation. It takes experience and self-understanding to navigate such situations (emotional competence or 'emotional intelligence').

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Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:57 Page Number: 65

Importantly, my anger also 'validates', in a manner that those present at the meeting will have to reckon with, the putative disvalue of its occasion: my co-worker is not getting away with his slighting me, I'm not letting this go, but rather, through my anger, render the offence salient as something that 'shan't be done'.[6] Expressed anger impacts the social situation also in another immediate but less tangible sense. It changes the atmosphere in a group; it can make everyone tense; and it can cascade into further interpersonal tensions.[7] And it does so also, and perhaps primarily, in light of the subsequent actions that my emotion might motivate me to engage in. If I hold some power in the group, others might now fear my revenge or other acts of sanctioning. Or my anger might signal diminishing commitment to the group's goals, or a looming loss of my allegiance and loyalty, and much else along these lines. For these cases, I propose we speak of being active by way of emotion: here, our publicly expressed and acted-out emotions come to be seen as interventions into our situation. These emotions make up a broad spectrum of emotions 'deployed', by and large strategically, to serve goals in interaction. Much has been said about emotional performances, 'play-acting' and emotional labour (e.g., Hochschild 1979), and often an underlying assumption in these discourses has been that such ostentatiously displayed emotions are not genuine. But while there are surely cases of such superficial emotional play-acting, it would be wrong to deny that very many mundane emotions have just these effects: they are something by way of which agents exert a directed, purposeful influence on their surroundings: staking a claim, vowing for recognition, letting value or disvalue be saliently manifest in a situation, signaling action-readiness, modulating atmosphere, and so on.[8]

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[6] That we can speak of emotions as 'validating' situationally manifest values or disvalues is a suggestion recently made by Jean Moritz Müller (personal communication; see also Müller 2022; 2025). The actual 'enactment' of this validation, as opposed to its socially manifest outcome, belongs more to the third sense of agency (agency *in* emotion); thus, when I mention this point here, I mean primarily its social ramifications: that my emotional response turns the evaluative character of an occasion of emotional engagement into a matter of shared concern in a social situation.

[7] Some of these effects are merely causal, but knowing the usual effects of expressed emotions, these causal effects often become part of the intentional profile of emotional enactments as we can (more or less) will these effects into being.

[8] These 'outcomes' need not be social; we can also have an emotion indicate *to ourselves* how we really stand on some matter – for example, an unexpected bout of compassion can make a landlord reconsider their plan to evict a tenant; a surge of jealousy can let me start to consider someone as a love interest. This complicates the picture; I'll come back to the oscillation between the practical stance of enacting or 'living' one's emotions and one's emotions being merely among one's data for self-interpretation in Sections 3 and 4 below.

Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:57 Page Number: 66

(ii) Being active *with respect to* our emotions: Not least because what has been described under (i) is such a core feature of our social lives – emotions can be ways to impact one's situation – another form of being active in the vicinity of our emotions is important and widespread: We usually act *with respect to* our emotions; we *act on* them. We enhance them, we suppress or hide them, we tone them down, channel them, modulate or style them, and deliberately express them in myriad distinct ways – in short, we *regulate* our emotions. When suddenly gripped by an emotion, as in the case of my anger at the meeting, there is much we usually do about them and are supposed to do about them: rein them in if they do not fit the occasion, tone them down if they threaten to incapacitate us in a situation of action, or try to hide them if their outward expression would compromise our standing or our plans in the situation at hand. Being active with respect to one's emotions encompasses a broad array of regulatory efforts we routinely engage in as part of our day-to-day dealings. Many of these efforts are so routine that it is hard to even distinguish their deployment from the emotion proper (think of habitual ways of being reserved in one's expressions of joy, or just of the many ways in which we hold our emotional enactments and expressions to tacit standards of appropriateness). Yet still, on a basic descriptive level, it makes sense to speak of a range of actions and activities that take our emotions as their targets. Consider again my anger in the work meeting: Even if I deem my anger warranted and think it should be expressed openly for others to understand what is up with me, I know at the same time that I cannot cross certain lines in expressing it, and most likely I am aware that I cannot get consumed by my anger if I want the meeting to continue and reach an outcome, or prevent my team from falling apart. In short, even in cases where my anger is in line with my interactional goals and displayed accordingly, I will regulate it continuously and in multiple ways.

(iii) Being active *in having* emotions: There is a sense in which the forms of agency pertaining to emotion described in (i) and (ii) still do not reach the core of the emotions, even despite their proximity to or entanglement with the emotional episodes in question. Action *by way of* emotion ((i) above) is outward-directed. That is, it describes a range of ways in which we can, presumably, benefit from what our displayed emotion occasions in our surroundings. The emotion, as a public occurrence, becomes a means for impacting the social environment. Acting *on* our emotions (emotion regulation; (ii) above) is intimately tied up with the emotion as such and with our emotional lives in general; however, it does not originate with the emotion but is imposed on it. Yet part of the

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Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:57 Page Number: 67

relevance and intensity of the case described under (i) is that emotions seem to be constituted by a personal form of engagement with the situation. My anger is something that others reckon with *because* they assume it to be manifesting my true stance, my orientation, to show, unmistakably, what is 'up with me' and thus what I am 'up to'. Hence, if we probe the source of the power of the cases subsumed under (i), we arrive at a third sense of agency pertaining to emotion: we are active *in* our emotions insofar as an emotion enacts our stance or orientation on some state of affairs that concerns us. Accordingly, we arrive at a type of activity that is least distinguishable from the emotion itself: the activity of taking and upholding a specific stance or position on some matter of importance. Thus, the 'action' at issue *is* the orientation towards the emotion's occasion, the particular way in which I *affectively engage with* what matters to me, or in other words, how I *respond* to it. One might also express this point by saying that the emotion does not occur *within* the perspective of the agent, but *manifests* that perspective. The agent speaks and acts, as it were, through their emotion.[9] This throws light on what was described in subsection (i): regardless of whether we in fact wish to take a stance, or actively 'form' or 'shape' our emotion, our emotion, once publicly manifest, usually *counts* as our stance.[10] Accordingly, on a range of occasions, cases (i) and (iii) will be difficult to disentangle, because the outward effect (i) is in line with the emotively enacted orientation (iii). In these cases, we are warranted in assuming that someone's emotive orientation is, in a literal sense, their response to their circumstances, and thus the most immediate, genuine expression of their position, perspective, or orientation as a subject.

In the three preceding paragraphs, I have described three prima facie distinct ways in which it makes sense to consider emotion a matter of agency. The third of the three varieties is the central one, as it is an understanding of the emotion as itself consisting in an active engagement with something in the world. I am not acting *on* my emotion, nor do I let my emotion 'do' something for me in the social realm; rather, I am active *in having* my emotion, as my being emotional just *is* my way of engaging with what goes on with me. There is an obvious connection between the first way, being active *by way of* an emotion, and the third way, being active

[9] A similar thought has been articulated by the early phenomenologist Dietrich von Hildebrand (1953, p. 178). See Müller (2020) for elaboration.

[10] It counts as our stance *correctly*, unless there are sufficient indications for a disconnect between our displayed emotion and our true stance. For instance, we might credibly disavow the emotion as 'just a whim', or other robust features of our comportment can reveal our putative emotive stance as inauthentic or fake.

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Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:57 Page Number: 68

in having an emotion, because the third is what makes possible the first: if I am indeed active *in* being emotional in the manner described in (iii), then my emotions can correctly be considered to be the manifestations of my orientation or stance, which means – among other things – that by way of them, I make claims on those in my surroundings.

3 Emotions as Responses

In subsection (iii) above, I have characterised emotions as the 'responses' of an agent, thereby drawing on a notion of response that is substantive. What is meant cannot be understood in a mere causal sense of 'response' (as in: my skin *responds* to sunlight by tanning). An elucidation of a concept of a response that can carry the weight of the supposition of an active element in emotion is, accordingly, a good way for tackling the issues raised in this chapter. To this end, I will draw on Jean Moritz Müller's account of the 'spontaneity' of emotions. It revolves around a notion of responsiveness to reasons. Müller's proposal amounts to a substantive, yet minimalist, account of emotions as active. I consider his account 'minimalist' because Müller is keen to preserve those aspects of our manifest image of emotions that construe them as 'passive' (i.e., as involuntary, automatic, often recalcitrant vis-à-vis cognitive attitudes). My intention is to push for a view of emotions as more robustly active, even if that means being partly revisionist about the commonly held image of emotions as 'passions'.[11]

Müller's case for his construal of emotions as active starts from a contrast of emotions with perceptions: while it makes sense to ask someone *why* they feel a certain emotion, it won't make sense to ask someone why they are, for instance, seeing what they are currently seeing. What we see is not a reason for our seeing it, while what we are emotional about is usually a (motivating) reason for our being thus emotional. Perception, as classically construed, is a matter of *receptivity*: by way of a perceptual state, a content is made available to us (it impresses itself on us).[12] Emotions, by

[11] Part of the trouble with our pre-theoretical understanding of emotion could be that it is in the grip of a pervasive and purposefully entertained 'myth of the passions', as Robert Solomon has argued in his Sartre-inspired work on emotions (cf. Solomon 1993). Lingis (2000) is likewise engaged to rebuff conceptions of emotions as simplistically reactive, drawing, among others, on Nietzsche.

[12] There are prominent views of perception that question this classical picture by arguing for the involvement of agentive elements in perception: most notably McDowell in *Mind and World* (1994), but also Alva Noë (2004) and other enactivists within their cognitive science–informed perspective. These views lend credence to my overall agentive picture of human mindedness,

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Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:57 Page Number: 69

contrast, as forms of reasons-responsiveness, are a matter of *spontaneity*. It is Müller's aim to explicate the character of such spontaneity of emotion, and hence a robust sense in which they are active, in a way that protects assumptions concerning the emotion's passivity.[13]

When we pose a *why*-question to someone with regard to their emotion, what we are usually after is 'those (real or purported) aspects of a situation *in light of* or *on account of* which someone feels some way' (Müller 2021, p. 3). For instance, in the example from Section 2 above, I could reply to a co-worker asking me why I'm angry by pointing out the offensive character of what a colleague has said to me. The offence is what motivates my anger – in light of it, my anger is intelligible. This, in turn, provides the basis for assessing my anger for its warrant: was the colleague's remark indeed offensive? Is the reason *for which* I am angry (motivating reason), in fact, a reason *to be* angry (normative reason)? On Müller's account, the fact that emotions are had or felt for motivating reasons fixes the relevant sense of 'response': 'Saying of someone that she φs in light of x is equivalent to the claim that her φing is a response to x' (p. 4). In line with this, we can introduce some technical terms for analysing the intentionality of emotions in line with the agency-thesis. The *intentional object* of an emotion provides its motivating reason. To intelligibly do so, the intentional object must be apprehended by the emoting subject in a specific, evaluative way – this value property is the emotion's *formal object*. Accordingly, it is to my colleague's remark (intentional object) qua offensive (formal object) that I respond with anger. Only on account of my taking the remark to be offensive is my response intelligible as anger.

Now, what is the sense of 'activity' that comes to the fore in something's being our response in the reason-ascribing sense of the term just outlined? Müller writes: 'When an action or attitude is our response to something, we conceive ourselves as playing an active role with respect to it' (Müller 2021, p. 6). Obviously, it all turns on how we further characterise this 'conceiving ourselves as playing an active role' with respect to our emotions.

Müller's favoured idiom for elucidation is the phrase 'complying with a prompt'. Just as in a conversation, an answer is prompted by a question, so

although they render my contrastive invocation of perception at this stage of the argument somewhat dubious (see Slaby 2020; 2021 for more on this issue).

[13] While I find the Kantian language used by Müller instructive, he himself tries to deflate any more substantive Kantian leanings (cf. Müller 2021, pp. 6f.). This might help to keep the discussion relatively simple, but Müller gives away potential for elucidating spontaneity in a richer sense (e.g., in terms of a capacity to actively 'construct' or 'formulate' one's emotional responses).

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Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:57 Page Number: 70

that we comply with a prompt in answering it; an emotional response to x is our complying with a prompt 'which x provides as x (actually or merely apparently) constitutes a normative reason to φ' (Müller 2021, p. 7). A normative reason for anger (real or apparent) – getting offended by someone – prompts anger as it *speaks in favour* of getting angry: it does not oblige me to get angry, but it 'exerts normative pressure' on me to get angry. Thus, finally, Müller's way of bringing out the active character of emotions:

> [T]he very idea of compliance is the idea of an activity. To follow a prompt is not something that simply happens to us but something that requires a certain cooperation on our part. There is a minimal sense in which each case of compliance is active inasmuch as we thereby give into a solicitation. A demand is placed on us, and we cater to it. (p. 8)

Müller adds that 'in complying, *we give our consent*, as it were, to the object or event that prompts our response' (p. 9 – italics mine). In the rest of his paper, Müller then tries to ensure that this account of emotion does not come across as unduly demanding: he shows how the compliance in question is often involuntary and immediate, not requiring a conscious appraisal of the object of the emotion. Some of his examples, moreover, concern situations where we actively struggle *not* to get emotional in view of an occasion that would clearly merit one. He presents these as a struggle against something that 'calls for' our response, and thus: 'It is this demand to which you ultimately give in as the emotion wins through' (p. 10). Thereby, we are presented with a mode of 'being active' that can in fact seem conspicuously passive: some response is basically *wrought from us*, at times even against our own active effort to prevent it, and so, by and large, the activity in question amounts to a form of acquiescence.

In what follows, I build on Müller's groundwork but argue for a more radical embrace of the active nature of emotion. I hold that we often 'do something' in a freer and, indeed, more intuitively spontaneous manner when we respond to a situation that merits an emotion. And I also think we often do more than merely 'consenting' to the evaluative character of our emotion's object. Our anger not only consents to the offensiveness of its occasion, but it actively *condemns* the offence (and the offender). When we take pleasure in something, as in Müller's example of our enjoying the beautiful autumn scenery, we indeed 'answer' to the beauty by appreciating it through our taking pleasure. One wants to say that through our enjoyment we 'add to' the scenery's manifest beauty, in the way that worship or praise add to the status or prestige of a dignified individual.

PROOF

Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:57 Page Number: 71

There is a sense in which our emotions are such forms of 'giving': giving an object, event, or person 'their due', by responding in a rich way that is appropriate to their value and thereby enhance, solidify, 'validate' the value at issue (for a related view, see Müller 2025). Such emotional 'giving' is not merely a metaphorical gloss, not just an exuberant way of describing something that is less substantive and ceremonious in reality: Emotional displays and enactments are very much a part of the social reality that they respond to, so claiming that condemnation, appreciation, admiration, hostility, and so forth add nothing to the world they respond to would be reductive.[14] But I will also raise a more fundamental issue, as I think Müller offers us a too narrow conception of the 'spontaneity' of emotion.

Before I elaborate on my understanding of agency in emotion in the next section, I briefly present two further considerations that help prepare for it.

Thus far, I have spoken rather casually about 'my anger', as if the emotion at issue was an isolable mental occurrence, distinct from the rest of my situated conduct. This way of speaking, although it is natural and gets at an important sense in which emotions indeed figure as 'givens' both in our individual lives and in social situations, is potentially misleading, as the considerations in paragraph (iii) of Section 2 about 'action in emotion' and the discussion of Müller's notion of a response have begun to illustrate. An emotion is not primarily an occurrence 'within' me, but a stance or orientation of mine – and that means, inter alia, that it is something that pertains to me as such, to 'my whole person', as it were. An emotion is a way in which *I* engage with a situation. This point is important for several reasons. One of its implications is that emotions are usually not shielded from other thoughts, attitudes, orientations, and initiatives of the agent (partial and temporary shielding notwithstanding). And this has consequences for the way we should construe the intentionality of emotion.

Richard Moran discusses the example of a man who thinks of his pride as sinful: 'the presence of this self-interpretation suffices for his pride to be of an essentially different nature from someone else's pride, or from his own pride before he came to see it this way' (Moran 2001, p. 49). Such an evaluation, however flawed, is not a separate layer clad over an unchanged core emotion, but has ramifications for the emotion's intentionality (and

[14] This is the intuition behind Solomon's Sartre-inspired notion of 'surreality': a layer of emotion-dependent value that nevertheless has to count as objectively there for our practical understanding of ourselves and the world to cohere (see Solomon 1993; see also Helm 2001 for a more thorough attempt to defend the underlying value-realist conception of emotion).

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Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:57 Page Number: 72

thus for the intelligible shape of the emotion as such): 'For him to interpret his pride as sinful is for him to see his wealth, his power, his beauty as essentially *unworthy*, and to see their allure as so much temptation, appealing to spiritual weakness' (p. 50). Relatedly, Moran considers the case of someone whose gratitude has an undercurrent of thought deeming all gratitude as 'bound up with resentment and aggression toward the benefactor' (p. 49). If we ask ourselves whether the person is grateful after having received a gift, we are not interested in the presence of some discrete state that matches a generic template for gratitude, but instead 'it is an interest in the total orientation of the person toward his benefactor' (p. 50). This 'total orientation' of the person includes second-order attitudes and evaluative sidetracks or undercurrents that shape the affective intentionality at issue. Surely, the gratitude of someone who thinks so ill of gratitude is quite different, in ways relevant to our assessment of it, from the unblemished gratitude of someone whose 'heart is pure' (excuse the cliché). On this expanded understanding, the notion of a 'response' in the sense outlined by Müller is complicated further: When we call an emotion a response, what we usually mean is that the 'total orientation' is the sense thus outlined. This has the consequence that we also do not shield the emotion from the person's other orientations, motivations, and initiatives. I'm not getting angry in isolation, but out of a context of ongoing activity and standing projects (and much more that is already 'up with me'), which will shape the way in which I respond – or refrain from responding – to a situation meriting anger.

Another consideration concerns the familiar but often not fully appreciated distinction between a practical stance on our attitudes and an objective or theoretical stance, and how they are both relevant to our operative self-understanding and conduct. In Sartre's (1956) terminology, this is the distinction between facticity and transcendence. We oscillate, quite routinely in our moment-to-moment conscious conduct, between *inhabiting* our emotional orientation (being committed) and taking our emotions as factual conditions that we have to somehow 'deal with' (regulate, interpret, work around). From the practical stance – my first-person perspective – the world 'appeals to me', it calls for my responses, offers me solicitations, and here it is 'up to me' to respond to these various prompts (or refrain from responding). From the theoretical stance, I am a given entity with certain characteristics that I have to accommodate (I might be choleric, so I have to be careful in certain social situations, etc.). While I actively inhabit my anger by engaging with its occasion, my anger *also* usually manifests as a psychic fact about myself (a 'state' I am

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Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:57 Page Number: 73

manifestly in), and potentially also as an 'objective' social occasion: my anger as a public interactional move on my part, but also perhaps the trouble I'm causing by making a scene. Thus, while I'm busy *being angry*, and likely quite absorbed by my anger's occasion, I also have to 'manage' my anger as a factual occurrence, and against the backdrop of what I know about my tendencies and impulses.

In practice, the back-and-forth between these two ways of relating to oneself is inevitable and often performed skillfully and with ease. But we can also be proverbially bad at it: this is where matters such as self-deception and blind spots in self-knowledge come in.[15] But it severely distorts theoretical insight when the distinction between the practical and the theoretical (or attributional) stance is not made explicit. This is especially relevant in the context of this chapter, as it is a characteristic feature of the theoretical stance that it glosses over the very element of agency at the core of our attitudes, treating these instead as empirical givens that one can make predictions about. Sometimes, this tendency manifests as an inadvertent slide into a 'para-mechanical' understanding of the terms of analysis used to elucidate the practical stance. This can be the case, for instance, when we take the term 'response', in the reason-ascribing use outlined above, as being de facto about 'automatic reactions', as if reasons 'trigger' something in us instead of inclining us to a response that we might as well withhold (terms such as 'reason tracking' can be indicative of this slip). This danger of sliding into an objectifying perspective is part of what makes the task of bringing out the active element in emotions so difficult.

4 Agency in Emotion

Let us go back to the example of me being angry during the work meeting. Consider the moments before my anger visibly manifested. Imagine me sitting there and learning that a co-worker failed to fulfil an urgent task. I was relying on them. Moreover, I now hear them trying to deflect blame by telling a spurious story about how misleadingly I had framed their task, thus effectively blaming me for their failure. My anger might not appear instantly. Rather, I might be confused, irritated, shaken up at first, skating

[15] Note how an emotion can change its status from authentic expression of our stance to 'a mere occurrence': it is an essential aspect of the practical stance that the agent can *withdraw* a commitment, and thereby take the original episode 'out of play', relegating it to a mere occurrence. The emotion might then wane, but it can also continue to reverberate as a psychic episode and still play a role within the overall perspective of the agent.

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Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:58 Page Number: 74

about for a response – then catching myself, and after some moments of processing what has just happened, *settling* on responding angrily to my colleague. I can clearly see their behaviour as offensive, and am ready to respond accordingly. To reach this point, I might have to overcome my tendency to refrain from getting angry. Maybe I am a mild-mannered person, or have been taught that anger in public is unseemly – but *this* did definitely cross the line, and so I *must* respond somehow.

However, I am not primarily concerned here with the phenomenology of anger onset, which can take many forms. I am interested in the fact and the manner of first-personal involvement. By that I mean a situation, however it plays out concretely, in which it is *up to me* whether, and how, to respond emotionally. Moments of initial insecurity and hesitation in view of a situation that potentially warrants an emotion are helpful in bringing out the contours of this involved positioning, which will settle the question of 'how to respond', in a clear way: what we see here is the taking-shape of a practical stance, a situation in which it is a partially open question what the response should be, and that accordingly calls for a resolution, to be settled by the agent. In many instances, such a resolution will indeed be 'wrought from us' in the heat of the moment, and not arrived at by way of explicit deliberation. If our repertoire of emotion is well attuned, we will often arrive at fitting responses without conscious deliberation and without a noticeable moment of decision. But also in these cases, it is still *up to us* to come up with a response and to subsequently 'live' it, keep it going as long as it is warranted and feasible, and adjust it in line with whatever the evolving situation presents us with.

Richard Moran illustrates this stance of first-personal involvement with regard to affective phenomena by contrasting the practical and the theoretical questions that we might ask ourselves. The theoretical stance is expressed by thoughts like 'I don't know what *it is* that I do feel,' letting us inquire into putative psychological states of ours, while the practical stance finds expression in thoughts like 'I don't know what *to* feel about it' (cf. Moran 2001, p. 58). We seek to make a discovery about ourselves when adopting the theoretical stance, whereas the practical stance calls for a resolution, a decision or commitment on our part, as illustrated in the anger example just sketched. Asking the practical question, we do not look at ourselves and our putative 'states', but at our ongoing situation to figure out how we *should respond* to it. The onus is on us to come up with a response; it is the stance of agency. And while some chide Moran as unrealistically rationalist (e.g., Lear 2004), I think he does not consider the pertinence of the practical stance to be necessarily panned out in the

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Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:58 Page Number: 75

manner of an explicit, reflectively conscious procedure that the agent runs through. Moran does not think that we are literally asking ourselves, 'What should I feel?' in a situation, thinking through our options one by one, and then settling on and 'building up' our emotional response. Moran's point is, rather, that the practical question *expresses* our stance, our rational predicament – and thus our agentive perspective. If our sensibility is properly attuned, habit – or, more precisely, pre-reflective practical consciousness – will usually lead the way, in the case of emotion just as much as in other domains of our being active.[16]

So far, I suggested that we treat agency in emotion as belonging to an extended version of the practical stance. Not just the question 'What should I do?' but 'How should I respond?' governs this perspective. This version of the practical question applies to the entire spectrum of commitments and initiatives through which an agent can, and indeed has to, engage with their situation. Emotions are among *the answers* that an agent gives to this expanded version of the practical question: How should I respond to this situation? *With anger*, we might 'answer'. Not by saying it out loud or thinking it explicitly, but by *becoming angry* and thus engaging our situation angrily. In these cases, the emotional response is itself an exercise of freedom, insofar as it answers the practical question.[17]

To find out whether an observed affective state indeed falls under the scope of the practical question, we can gauge the agent's readiness *to avow* its content. About our question 'Why are you feeling so and so?' we expect the agent to answer by outlining the grounds that merit their emotion – the answer is given not by speaking about the emotion itself as a mental state (let alone about its putative causes or its psychological context), but by pointing us to the situation it responds to: *I'm angry at this guy who dared to put the blame for his own mistakes on me*. By avowing my anger, I speak about a feature of my situation that strikes me as offensive. And I can do so – at least on many occasions – without first probing into my condition, even if the emotion itself unfolded pre-reflectively, even impulsively. Moran's helpful choice of the term 'avowal' brings out that emotions like anger are 'transparent' to the world, and in this respect similar to belief: when I am asked what I believe about some matter X, I am likewise not looking 'inside myself' to speak about a mental state that I happen to

[16] Putting it this way reveals that I consider emotions to fall under the scope of what Anscombe (1963) has called 'practical consciousness' – a view that Moran (2001), as I read him, also endorses (see Slaby 2021).

[17] Thanks to Jean Moritz Müller for suggesting this formulation.

PROOF

Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:58 Page Number: 76

be in, but about the matter X itself, relating to (or newly determining) what I deem true about it.[18] Yet, in the case of emotions, I avow my stance in a more encompassing sense: not only do I deem an act or utterance directed at me offensive, but I present myself as hurtfully degraded by it, and, based on that, I actively condemn that act (and its perpetrator), while affirming and insisting on my self-worth vis-à-vis the offender. While belief is oriented to truth simpliciter, emotions are oriented towards aspects of the world insofar as they impinge relevantly on the agent's concerns.[19] Thus, I cannot neutrally 'emote' (that would be just a judgement affirming an evaluative matter) in the way I often believe or judge what is true, regardless of my interests (of course, there are also cases of *interested* belief, as in many instances of what we tend to call 'opinions'). What is crucial in both cases is that I actively hold the attitudes in question by being committed to the orientation they express: an orientation towards the truth of a proposition in believing, and towards an evaluative matter obtaining and affecting me specifically in emotion. Such attitudes are my activities – not because their 'origin' is an act of mine, but because I am *holding* them: they exist only as my commitments.[20] That is why talk of *mental states* is so misleading when it comes to the first-person perspective: what is at issue are active stances, accountable postures adopted by an agent in a situation.[21]

With this, I have moved past Müller's minimalist account of the active nature of our emotional responses: that we are 'conceiving ourselves as playing an active role' with respect to them (Müller 2021, p. 6). Against

[18] 'Ordinarily, if a person asks himself the question "Do I believe that p?" he will treat this much as he would a corresponding question that does not refer to himself at all, namely "Is p true?"' (Moran 2001, p. 60).

[19] It is important to understand 'concerns' not as fixed features of a person but as essentially evolving and as something that might be either abandoned or newly formed in the course of a life (if obviously not gratuitously). This complicates the picture, but it helps to move us further away from a simplistic model in which emotions result near-automatically from a momentary conjunction of 'features', some of which are situational and some of which are subjective. Part of the point of pressing the agency-in-emotion thesis is to create maximum distance from such a simplistic, objectifying, near-mechanical image of affective intentionality (see Slaby 2021).

[20] On the activity of believing, see Boyle (2009; 2011). I have attempted to develop a parallel account for emotion in Slaby (2021).

[21] This does not amount to doxastic or 'emotive' voluntarism: I cannot believe at will because I am committed, qua my capacity for belief, to only believe what I have sufficient grounds for deeming true. I cannot be emotional as I wish because my emotions likewise respond to what is the case: matters of my concern that actually obtain, and are indeed grounded in concerns I have (cf. Moran 2001, pp. 51–55). However, because our concerns are themselves evolving, the picture is more dynamic in the case of emotions: A situation might prompt me to reconfigure my concerns or a prompt might reveal a concern to me that I was previously unaware of, or that I am in the process of forming (see note 13 above).

PROOF

Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:58 Page Number: 77

the backdrop of a surface agreement with Müller – emotions are responses and accordingly active in the sense of 'answers' an agent gives to the evaluative shape of their situation – I will now continue to explore possibilities for articulating the activity at issue in a more substantive manner, bringing out what I think is a more robustly 'active' engagement in play within our emotions. This also helps to further concretise Moran's considerations about (what he calls) the 'rational attitudes' – the broader class of intentional comportment that counts emotions among its members – as matters of commitment and avowal.

One hint in this direction is offered by Müller's central term 'spontaneity'. In being reasons-responsive, I must be free, within limits, to withhold endorsement, even from what can appear to be compelling reasons, as long as I do so in an accountable way. Obviously, I cannot, on pain of irrationality, *gratuitously* ignore overwhelming evidence. But I must and do have leeway in construing or interpreting the evidence in a manner that is justifiable on an expanded view and articulation of my situation. Situations are almost never such that only one single construal and only one response, emotional or otherwise, is justifiable. A single interpretation is almost never just forced on us. Put in crudely Sartrean terms: while the facts are what they are, 'how I take them' is up to me. But it is not a simple matter of 'taking in the brute facts' and then settling on some response to them – as if there was a clear boundary between the factual and our responses to it. The evaluative character of much of what I am confronted with in the world complicates this picture. But the basic point stands. My freedom of construal encompasses both: the framing of the facts themselves (everything that is can be characterised in multiple *truthful* ways), and also aspects of their evaluation ('how I take something' is partly up to me, within a reasonable range of evaluative intelligibility). Spontaneity means that how I formulate 'what is' is to an important extent up to me: while bound by what is objectively the case, I am not applying concepts mechanically to bits of the sheer given (this is more of a Kantian reading of 'spontaneity', deviating from Müller's narrower understanding).[22] Instead, I construe 'a take' on my situation, which might include a variation on established concepts, stretching them to accommodate nuance, or the invention of new concepts, or metaphorical glosses and much else in the way of interpretive leeway in all directions. Sometimes,

[22] In Slaby (2020) I have argued for the claim that emotions involve concepts, drawing on John McDowell (1994) and Charles Taylor (1985). The considerations offered here support this point, yet it is too complex to be discussed as part of this chapter (see also Slaby 2008, chapters 10 and 11).

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Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:58 Page Number: 78

this practice of construing our take on the world gets characterised with recourse to the imagination: that in all our dealings with reality, the imagination is in play. While I tend to agree with this (and Kant's own invocation of it in the *Critique of Judgment* shows that he himself corrected his earlier, more rigid, narrow and almost mechanical notion of the understanding), we can state the bare bones of the point more parsimoniously. Wherever the understanding – the 'faculty of concepts' – is involved, there is a range of creative variation that gives the agent some latitude in construing their situation (whether this interpretive leeway is actually used in inventive ways or surrendered to stereotypes in a given case is another matter). This provides a robust foothold for agency: how we 'take' what goes on with us is always *also* up to us. And so, we are correct to remind ourselves, as well as others, of this responsibility.

This proposal might strike many as rather intellectualist. However, it gets clearer why this is not an outrageous proposal with respect to emotions when we take a diachronic perspective: even if a prompt may seem to force an emotional response on me in the urgency of a situation (for instance, a blatant offense lets me snap into anger instantly), putting the scene in a broader temporal frame often deflates the urgency and enables a wider view with a broader scope for alternative interpretations. The larger picture comes into view, allowing me to put the incident into perspective; I begin to remember my goals, concerns, plans, or social standing, and can bring to bear what I know about the offender, and so forth. In short, once my framing of the anger-inducing incident assumes an expanded temporal purview, my view of the evaluative profile of the situation likely changes considerably (see Campbell 1997). Of course, in the heat of the moment, there is no time to conduct such contextualising reflection in an explicit fashion (however, if I am competent at regulating my anger, I might run through some such factors rapidly and pre-reflectively). But even emotions that were formed impulsively are no snapshots either: even after I succumb to the initial prompt and feel angry immediately and unreflectively, I might subsequently modulate my response to bring it in line with such a revised construal of the situation. There is a difference between the *onset* of many of our emotions, which indeed might be rapid-fire, involuntary, and near-automatic, and the subsequent longer-term unfolding of the episode, which leaves more leeway for active shaping on the part of the agent.[23] So if we take

[23] I assume that the involuntary onset of some of the oft-discussed allegedly 'paradigmatic' emotions (fear, disgust, embarrassment, many forms of anger) stands behind many of the intuitions about the passivity of emotion. These intuitions thus latch onto what is only a part, and often a small part, of

PROOF

Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:58 Page Number: 79

a more realistic view of real-life emotions, in their temporal unfolding, the picture looks different from the classical image of a brute 'passion' casting a spell on the agent.

These considerations indicate a larger disagreement between Müller's and my own position. I think Müller inadvertently construes the idea of the emotions' reasons-responsiveness in a too simplistic manner. In his view, reasons are there, manifestly, as they are, and it is then on the agent to 'merely' respond (heed their call, comply with them). This tendency might be in part due to the use of comparatively simple examples, where nearly all details of the situation an agent is supposed to respond to are already settled: the dangerous bear emerges from the woods, I cannot but respond with fear or panic (on pain of manifest irrationality). Such cases, in effect, due to their simplicity and evaluative 'clarity', circumvent some of the more interesting instances of what I have called 'freedom of construal': the interpretive latitude an agent has in formulating their take on a situation, even if the facts and most of their evaluation seem to substantively weigh in a certain direction, is not really needed in these cases. But this leeway is decisive, even if largely unused on some occasions, for the broadly Kantian idea of spontaneity to get a foothold. If we understand emotions as an agent's concernful engagement with their surroundings, and understand that such an engagement is not snapshot-like but a temporally extended dynamic between emoter and environment, then the interpretive dynamic between agent and situation comes into view in a notable way (cf. Slaby and Wüschner 2014). But this same dynamic also operates, with much of its complexity in play, in many of our short-term responses: these respond to the situation (as initially construed), but also may add to or alter the construal. Moreover, further considerations, undercurrents of thought, memories, imaginations, hints from the social surround, further concerns, and so forth may enter the evolving construal, altering both the emotional response and what it responds to.[24]

To be sure, what I have outlined so far comes nowhere near a full picture of emotional agency. For instance, I have eluded the vexing issue of how to accommodate the practical stance, from which I avow my emotions as commitments to the evaluative shape of my situation, with the deliverances of the theoretical stance, from which I may 'discover' that

the full emotional episode. I agree with Goldie (2000; 2012) that it is vital to understand human emotions as temporally extended, often heterogeneous sequences of engagement of an agent with their situation.

[24] Not to mention the further complicating fact that the emotion itself, as publicly manifest, will likely also change the situation to which it continues to be an evolving response.

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Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:58 Page Number: 80

I apparently hold some affective attitude. It can be a difficult task for self-interpretation to bring what I discover from the theoretical stance into the ambit of my potential endorsement (or effective dismissal). What is decisive, however, is not the *success* of such self-interpretation but the *responsibility* that incurs on an agent to actually engage in it when confronted with an affective impulse of theirs that is, thus far, outside the scope of their practical self-understanding. Whatever I discover about my mental life, it cannot leave me indifferent from my first-person perspective. I have to either work towards incorporating the putative attitude of mine into my practical (avowable) outlook or dismiss it, and then see to it that I get rid of its lingering effects (maybe only therapy will help, ultimately). Moran puts this point in a way that takes up Sartre's elusive claim that 'choice and consciousness are one and the same thing' (Sartre 1956, p. 595): 'no attitude or impulse apprehended by reflective consciousness has any right to continued existence apart from one's free endorsement of it' (Moran 2001, p. 140).[25]

5 Conclusion: Vulnerability, Agency, and Routine Disavowal

I have defended the claim that intentional affective comportment – notably represented by emotions– centrally involves an element of agency. We are active in our emotive engagements in that we respond to aspects of our situation in light of which our emotive condition is at least intelligible, but often also practically rational. Such emotion-constitutive agency is not a one-off, punctual, near-automatic affair, but involves the exercise of capacities to construe and formulate a substantive, evolving response to what goes on with and around us. The exercise of these capacities is a matter of spontaneity in a Kantian sense. This means that emotions belong to the sphere of our responsible conduct and thus our freedom, albeit within practical and material limits. To conclude these considerations, I will now briefly relate the agency-in-emotion thesis to the theme of vulnerability. To get there, another brief foray into action theory is required.

In her seminal engagement with the nature of action, Elizabeth Anscombe had famously argued that intentional actions are 'actions to which a certain sense of the question "Why?" is given application' (Anscombe 1963, p. 9): By asking, 'Why are you doing x?' we ask for the intention operative in someone's doing, assuming that what someone

[25] I discuss this point and its implications for our emotional lives in Slaby (2021, pp. 6–12).

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Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:58 Page Number: 81

is presently doing is a matter of the agent's 'practical knowledge' – the knowledge an agent has solely in virtue of their performing an action intentionally (Anscombe 1963). Joseph Schear (2019) has suggested that we can project a part of this conception of practical knowledge to moods (and thereby also to other affective conditions). While moods are obviously not something 'we do',[26] they are in the range of what Anscombe's question arguably probes into, namely, our active sense of situation, as it is manifest first-personally. Anscombe's why-question about putative actions is designed to get at the sense in which an agent usually knows 'what they are up to' without recourse to observation or evidence. 'What I am up to' also pertains to emotive comportment. In the case of moods, for instance, people can answer Anscombe's question because this is just *how it is* for them right now, their sense of how they currently fare in the world, their predicament as affectively grasped.[27]

This provides a fitting occasion to consider how vulnerability fits into the present account. In this chapter so far, I have mostly discussed emotive agency in terms of how an agent responds to something that goes on in the world, or to a (either short- or longer-term) situation obtaining with or around them. But a crucial part of every affective episode is the existential background out of which an affective engagement with the world ensues (Ratcliffe 2008). We are differently attuned to our surroundings in part due to the ways in which we sense our vulnerability vis-à-vis what does or might go on around us (this is often more evident in the case of moods or existential feelings than with episodic emotions). In this respect, one can characterise affective episodes as janus-faced (de Sousa 2002, p. 247): besides being directed at something in the world, they also usually reveal (or otherwise manifest) the existential condition of the emoting agent – standing cares and concerns, including a notable dimension of vulnerability that encompasses the physical, mental, material, and social well-being of the person. As precarious beings, we are at the mercy of things going well for us to continue existing in healthy, dignified, and socially acceptable ways. While often not at the forefront of awareness, we harbor a robust sense of our vulnerability in light of all these dimensions, sensing,

[26] We do not 'perform' our moods in the manner in which we perform an action, even when we, at times, bring our moods about intentionally, for example, by working us up into them, seeking out mood-inducing spaces, or taking drugs. We also might speak of certain 'ways of being in a mood', referring, in part, to the respective vigor or timidity with which one enacts, for instance, one's grumpiness, one's elation, or one's melancholia.

[27] Schear (2019) takes this as grounds to analyse moods as forms of reason-responsiveness, which makes his approach fitting to both Müller's and my own account of affective comportment.

PROOF

Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:58 Page Number: 82

for instance, how certain events or encounters might hurt, degrade, or impair us, or how well or ill we could potentially cope with all sorts of mishaps or bad fortunes given our condition, skill sets, and resources. Insofar as this dimension of vulnerability figures within emotive comportment, it makes up a self-directed 'back side' of affective intentionality (see Slaby and Stephan 2008).

Now, acknowledging such vulnerability can be difficult. Doing so might make us look fragile, weak, unstable, verging on breakdown, and it might let us come face to face with our mortality in a way that can be 'too much to take'. There is an understandable urge to hide this predicament from ourselves, to not admit our own insecurities, our sense of looming mishaps, disasters, adversity, and the various possible consequences we might soon enough be forced to deal with. I think this inclination to suppress, disavow, or outrightly ignore vulnerability stands behind an all too familiar tendency in our emotional lives – one that complicates the agency-in-emotion thesis. This is the tendency to instantly suppress certain emotions, especially if these are directly revealing of our own essential vulnerability. Many occasions of fear, of insecurity, of despair, of negative anticipation, or other markedly concern-imbued orientations tend to be met with a rather principled inner resistance. Of course, there are also other emotions that we are inclined to suppress; for instance, some of us have learned to instinctively down-regulate manifestations of anger or indignation, out of fear of the social consequences these emotions might incur. But I think the flight from vulnerability is a yet deeper, more profound source of emotional suppression. I would go so far as to claim that vulnerability, while a fundamental background dimension of emotive comportment across the board, is a powerful antidote to the active nature of emotive comportment.

This is obviously not the place to discuss this in detail. The main aim of this chapter was to elucidate and defend the broader agency-thesis with regard to emotive comportment. But as the brief discussion of emotion regulation in Section 2 above has suggested, a lot is going on also in terms of an agency that is directed at our first-order emotional episode in order to channel, shape, and – sometimes – curb or suppress them. I would bet that the ever-nagging condition of vulnerability stands behind many of the attempts to prevent emotive episodes from arising and finding expression, and likewise behind attempts to re-channel emotive concern onto other, more innocuous objects or occasions. This is an important reminder that our agentive capacities are beset with principled limitations, and that regardless of the scope and extent of our agency within the emotive realm,

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Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
Date:8/4/26 Time:11:40:58 Page Number: 83

this much is clear: we are first and foremost vulnerable, finite beings at the mercy of circumstances beyond our control (Nussbaum 2001). Our agentive and emotive autonomy unfolds within the shifting but ultimately unsurpassable bounds of this existential predicament.

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Comp. by: Prabhu Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 2 Title Name: Melicharetal
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