Julien A. Deonna and Fabrice Teroni


In this short book, Deonna and Teroni have accomplished the exceedingly difficult task of providing a concise, readable, and insightful introduction to the burgeoning field of the philosophy of emotion, while at the same time developing and defending a novel theory of the nature and epistemology of emotions. Despite its brevity, the book is notably thorough in its coverage of the major contemporary views in the philosophy of emotion. The downside of its brevity is that the authors’ arguments on behalf of their view and objections to competing views are occasionally developed a bit quickly (examples below) and there is no room for in-depth analyses of individual emotion types or for the kind of narrative illustrations that can be so helpful for enhancing moral-psychological understanding. Nevertheless, this book is ideal for use as a critical survey of contemporary philosophy of emotion in advanced undergraduate and graduate seminars. It would be best, however, to supplement the book with complementary readings, both contemporary and historical, that provide rich analyses of individual emotion types and that develop the views under consideration in further detail. To their credit, the authors have made an effort to aid the reader in this regard by concluding each chapter with briefly annotated suggestions for further reading, along with helpful questions for discussion.

The wide-ranging discussions in the book are unified by the authors’ focus on three “fundamental features of the emotions”—“their phenomenology, their intentionality, and their epistemological significance” (p. xi). After a preliminary discussion of these essential features of the emotions (chap. 1), the authors consider the unity of emotions in light of various distinctions between different kinds of emotions (e.g., positive and negative, basic and non-basic) (chap. 2) and they argue that emotions are distinct psychological states, not merely desires or some combination of desires and beliefs (chap. 3). The authors then discuss the nature of value, briefly arguing for value realism over subjectivist and fitting attitude analyses of value (chap. 4). In chapters 5 and 6 Deonna and Teroni turn their focus to contemporary theories of emotions, overviewing and critiquing judgment theories and perceptual theories of emotions, respectively. In the final four chapters of the book, the authors develop their analysis of emotions as “felt bodily attitudes” (chap. 7) and argue that emotions, so understood, contribute in a privileged way to the epistemic justification of our evaluative judgments and, hence, to our knowledge of value (chaps. 8–10). In the remainder of this review I will briefly outline and critique
the authors’ development and defense of their theory of emotions in these final chapters.

Deonna and Teroni characterize their “attitudinal theory” of emotions in the following way: “we give substance to the claim that emotions constitute evaluative attitudes when we realize that they are such attitudes in virtue of being experiences of our body as ready or poised to act in various ways towards an object” (p. 80). Despite recurrent references to emotions as “felt bodily attitudes,” the authors qualify their theory by allowing that some emotions (e.g., regret, pride) might be “felt, yet non-embodied, attitudes” (p. 81). They illustrate their theory by reference to a handful of specific emotion types. Concerning anger, for example, they write, “In anger, we feel the way our body is prepared for active hostility to whatever causes the anger” (p. 80). Likewise, “In shame, we feel the way our body is poised to hide from the gaze of others that typically causes shame” (p. 80). According to Deonna and Teroni, emotions as felt bodily attitudes are correct or incorrect depending on whether their object instantiates the relevant value property, even though the emotions themselves do not involve evaluative concepts and, hence, are not strictly about value properties. As they put it, somewhat paradoxically, “emotions stand in intentional relations to values without being about values” (p. 85).

Deonna and Teroni argue that their theory is an improvement over judgment theories because judgment theories require the subjects of emotional experience to “master” evaluative concepts, which babies and non-human animals do not seem capable of doing, and because evaluative judgments do not, in their view, have the felt quality of emotions (pp. 55–6). They argue that their view is an improvement over (non-conceptual) perceptual theories of emotions because their view allows them to explain how emotions can help justify evaluative judgments even though, as they argue, emotions cannot directly justify evaluative judgments since emotions, unlike sense perceptions, rely on other faculties or “cognitive bases” (e.g., perception, memory, imagination) to bring their objects before the mind (p. 69). In other words, while emotions seem capable of contributing to the justification of evaluative judgments, they cannot justify judgments in the direct way that sense perceptions can since emotions rely on “cognitive bases” and sense perceptions do not. On their view, emotions are (pragmatically?) justified by their subject’s awareness of certain ‘natural’ states of affairs on which the emotion-relevant values supervene. Emotions thus contribute to the justification of evaluative beliefs in the following indirect way: by experiencing fear our attention is drawn to the dangerousness of objects and through fear experiences we develop our concept of ‘danger’ as that property for which fear is the (pragmatically?) appropriate felt bodily attitude.