

Alison Duncan Kerr

RESEARCH STATEMENT

While I have a wide range of interests in philosophy, my current research focuses primarily on the emotions. The proper understanding of emotions has been a fundamental and longstanding issue for philosophers. Moreover, it is now a central concern for theorists in the social sciences, such as social psychology, behavioral neuroscience, sociology, political science, and areas of economics. While the interdisciplinary aspects of the study of emotions are important sources of inspiration to me, most of my current research emphasizes core philosophical issues about emotions. I focus here on the bulk of my research, which concerns questions like: What are emotions? What are the functions of emotions in our lives? Can emotions be rational or can emotions contribute to one's overall rationality? How do emotions influence deliberation or moral judgments? How much control do we have over our emotions?

My research emphasizes the multiple ways that patterns of emotion episodes diachronically bolster or undermine a person's rationality, and I base my theories of these rationality assessments on a general account of emotional rationality that applies across a wide range of views in philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience. For example, one underappreciated way emotions impact our rationality concerns the ways we regulate or change our emotions over time. Recent research in cognitive science and psychology shows that we use a wide variety of mechanisms for emotion regulation (e.g., reappraisal, suppression, and attention deployment). I argue that, when an agent fails to regulate her emotions despite having ample evidence that they are problematic or harmful, the agent is irrational in a particular way that I call *imprudence*—see my writing sample, “Imprudence and the Rationality of Emotion Regulation,” currently under review. Emotions can also be rational or irrational insofar as they impact the decision-making process. When an agent feels an emotion while engaged in deliberation, the emotion makes certain considerations more salient (for better or worse). I argue that an agent is rational in a particular way when, during deliberation, that agent's emotion episodes reliably make salient facts that are actually reason-giving for that agent. The agent's emotions are good at highlighting certain considerations that improve the agent's overall wellbeing and further the agent's overarching practical projects. I call this assessment *acumen* and present the theory of it in “Emotional Rationality and Dynamic Deliberation,” currently in preparation.

Overall I disagree with the received view of emotional rationality, which focuses entirely on synchronic rationality assessments of individual emotional episodes and presupposes that a theory of emotional rationality should be specific to one's view on the nature of emotions. For example, each of what I call the *traditional assessments* of emotions (fit, warrant, and benefit) has been claimed to be a rationality assessment in the literature. Roughly, an agent's emotion is (i) *fitting* in a certain situation if the emotion corresponds to the relevant features of her situation, (ii) *warranted* in a certain situation if she has evidence for the fittingness of the emotion, and (iii) *beneficial* in a certain situation if the emotion contributes to her wellbeing. In “Emotional Rationality and the Traditional Assessments” (in preparation), I argue that none of these traditional assessments count as a rationality assessment. Even warrant, the most promising, has the problem that an agent's emotion might be accidentally warranted. In response, I introduce *warrant**: roughly, an agent's emotion is *warranted** if the agent has evidence

for the fittingness of the emotion and the emotion is properly grounded in that evidence. Moreover, I look to overarching accounts of rationality in general to ground a theory of emotional rationality, rather than basing it on some substantive views on the nature of emotions, as is the norm.

Particular emotions are also a topic of interest. For example, in “Envy in the Philosophical Tradition,” (published in 2009 with Justin D’Arms), we defend the view that envy is best understood as a response to circumstances in which a rival within some status hierarchy gains an advantage over the subject, and that envy is sometimes fitting and even rational. In addition, I am collaborating with the psychologist William Cunningham at the University of Toronto on a project targeting anger, fear, and sadness. In psychology, emotion theorists disagree about whether there are sharp lines between different emotion types (e.g., sadness versus fear). Basic emotion theorists roughly hold that there are such things as basic emotions that correspond to particular neurological natural kinds. Constructivists roughly hold that emotions are constructed out of more basic, perhaps independent psychological elements. In “Emotion Terms are Vague, but Useful,” Cunningham and I argue that an insight about vagueness from the philosophy of language may resolve this debate on the nature of emotions among theorists in psychology. In philosophy, most theorists take vague concepts to admit of borderline cases and one prominent tradition claims that in the borderline area rational people may reasonably disagree about the application of the concept in question. Our hypothesis is that ‘anger’, ‘fear’, and ‘sadness’ are vague and that each is related to the others in that there can be cases that fall into each of the three borderlines among this trio of emotion terms (i.e., anger/fear, fear/sadness, and anger/sadness). Moreover, we claim that the best explanation of these phenomena is that each of these emotion terms represents a prototype but the application of each is more fuzzy as cases differ from that prototype. A result is that these concepts function more in the way that basic emotion theorists suppose near the prototype but more as constructivists claim as one approaches the boundaries. We are currently waiting on IRB approval to conduct a study to test these hypotheses and will prepare a sequence of papers analyzing the results.

Emotions also play a significant role in contemporary metaethics. For example, fitting-attitude analysts claim, roughly, that an object X is Φ (e.g., shameful, fearsome) if and only if a particular feeling F (e.g., shame, fear) is a fitting response to X . In “Constraints on Fit,” I argue that fittingness is not so simple; just because some object X is Φ does not mean that *my* feeling F toward X is fitting. The specific *relational* constraints on fit for a particular emotion are also provided by the characteristic concern of that particular emotion. Moreover, I argue that the characteristic concerns of almost all emotions determine, not merely whether feeling F is fitting, but more importantly whether it is fitting for some agent α to feel F . Only a fitting-attitude analysis that acknowledges these constraints can possibly be correct.

I also have several projects that do not focus on emotions. In particular, in “A Plea for KR” I argue for a little-known logic, KR, against classical logic and more familiar non-classical logics on the basis of Gilbert Harman’s distinction between inference and implication. And “Being Pro Choice,” is a metaethical project in which Kevin Scharp, a philosopher at The Ohio State University, and I apply a prominent view in philosophy of language on the nature of vague words to ‘person’ as it pertains to the problem of abortion. Please see my website, alisonduncankerr.com, for more information on these endeavors and other research interests.