The Temporal Gaze of Emotions

The good life is full of emotion. Understanding the good life requires understanding our emotional reactions to past and future occurrences. Some emotions, like fear and hope, look forward to the future; others, like regret and anger, look backward to the past. What explains the temporal gaze of these emotions? I extract answers from recent philosophical literature on emotions. The *temporal theory* maintains that some emotion types are fundamentally forward-looking and others are fundamentally backward-looking. But there are apparent counterexamples, such as fearing that one’s mother was on the plane that crashed or being angry that your friend will miss the party. Consequently, some philosophers reject the temporal theory in favor of the *epistemic theory*, according to which some emotions are about objects one is uncertain of and therefore tend to look forward and other emotions are about objects one is certain of and therefore tend to look back. I argue that existing theories mistakenly aim to explain the temporal gaze of *all instance* of certain emotion types; they should aim to explain the temporal gaze of *all fitting instances* of certain emotion types. Accordingly, I develop a *new epistemic theory* and a *new temporal theory* and offer reasons to prefer the latter over the former. Temporal relations between emotions and their objects play a fundamental role in determining emotional fit.

Keywords: Backward-looking emotions; forward-looking emotions; fittingness; rationality; fear; grief; anxiety; hope; regret;

**Introduction**

The Stoics thought that the good life is a life without emotion. They did not merely think that emotions are bad for us, but that they are bad for us partly because they arise from erroneous value-judgments. It is a mistake, they thought, to attribute value to anything—a person, an object, or a place—that is vulnerable to the ravages of time, and might be lost or taken away.

Seneca, for example, writes:

A happy person is one who is not diminished by anything, who has a hold on all that matters, and relies on nothing but himself: one who depends on anything else for support is liable to fall. Otherwise things that are not our own will start to exercise much power over us. Who wants to rely on fortune … What is a happy life? It is security and lasting tranquility… (Seneca 2015, 92.2­–3)

Insofar as we reject the Stoic view—as I believe we should—we accept that our well-being is inevitably hostage to time. The past we bemoan and the future we dread *weigh on u*s; the past we cherish and the future we hope for *carry us*. Moreover, our emotional reactions can often be *fitting* and reflect *correct* value-judgments. The emotions of a happy person are grounded in the genuine value of people and things that exist and perish in time. The good life is full of emotion. Understanding the good life requires understanding our emotional reactions to past and future occurrences.

In what follows I consider emotions that seem to have a distinctive relation to time. Fear, hope, anxiety, dread, and worry look toward a future object. Grief, anger, remorse, regret, resentment, and many other emotions look back to a past object. It is often assumed that the temporal gaze of these emotion types is a defining feature: fear cannot look back, anger cannot look forward. From the fact that a person fears *x* it follows that she takes *x* not to have happened yet and from the fact a person is angry about *y* it follows that she takes *y* to have happened already. A person cannot fear what she takes to be past or be angry about what she takes to be future. This is *The Temporal Theory of Emotions’ Temporal Gaze*, or simply: *The Temporal Theory*. The temporal theory faces several challenges that led some philosophers to endorse an alternative, *Epistemic Theory of Emotions’ Temporal Gaze*. In this paper I review and clarify the debate and tentatively defend a version of the temporal theory.

The temporal theory and its competitors have not received much attention but some discussion lies close underneath the surface of recent philosophical writing about emotions. In section 1, I bring the debate about emotions’ temporal gaze into view and describe existing theories: the temporal theory already mentioned, the factive epistemic theory, and the non-factive epistemic theory. In section 2, I take a step back to consider what these theories purport to explain. I argue that all three theories mistakenly take their explanandum to be the temporal gaze of *all instances* of certain emotion types, whereas the explanandum should be the temporal gaze of *all fitting* *instances* of certain emotion types. Building on section 2, in section 3 I develop a new epistemic theory and consider its weaknesses. In section 4, I develop a new temporal theory, according to which some emotions are fitting only to objects that have not yet occurred and others are fitting only to objects that have already occurred.

1. **Three Theories of the Temporal Gaze of Emotions**

The Temporal Theory

Widespread although seldom argued for, the temporal theory of the temporal gaze of emotions maintains that some emotion types are always about future objects and others are always about past objects. ‘Objects’ here are to be understood broadly so as to include anything emotions can be about: persons, states of affairs, occurrences, concrete object, etc. Aristotle, for example, says that fear is about a future evil or disturbance, so it is in the nature of fear to look forward (*Rhetoric* 2.5, 1382a21–25). Similar views are suggested with regard to hope, dread, and anxiety, while regret, anger, and grief are thought to be always backward looking.

However, there are apparent counterexamples to the temporal theory. A person can fear that she *made* a bad impression at dinner last night or be angry that her friend *will not* attend her party. Similarly, I can hope that you made it to the flight on time and arguably one can grieve for one’s terminally ill friend before she dies.[[1]](#footnote-1) Although certain emotions are *typically* forward-looking and others are *typically* backward-looking, the fact that typically forward-looking emotions are *sometimes* backward-looking and typically backward-looking emotions are *sometimes* forward-looking suggests that the temporal-gaze of a given emotion-token is not entailed by the type of emotion it is.

Some resist the counterexamples by redescribing them. Perhaps when I say that I hope you made the flight yesterday I actually express my hope that I will find out that you made the flight yesterday (e.g., Walker 2006, 45). Similarly, it might be argued that when a person fears or is anxious that she made a bad impression at dinner the previous night, her backward-looking emotion is regret about her behavior while her anxiety or worry are about future repercussions of her behavior (Kurth 2018, 11). The point of such reinterpretations is that forward-looking emotions can only *appear* to be directed toward the past and backward-looking emotions can only *appear* to be directed toward the future. To assess the plausibility of such reinterpretations we must first consider alternative explanations of the cases and of emotions’ temporal gaze. Such explanations, which purport to accommodate the counterexamples without explaining them away, can be discerned in recent philosophical literature on emotions.

The main alternative explanation of emotions’ temporal gaze denies that temporal gaze is a defining feature of certain emotion types and maintains, instead, that the epistemic profiles of certain emotion types explain their temporal gaze. According to this approach, some emotion types are fundamentally about objects one is *uncertain* of—call them *uncertainty emotions*—other emotion types are fundamentally about objects one is *certain* of—call them *certainty emotions*. This is *The Epistemic Theory of Emotions’ Temporal Gaze*, or ‘the epistemic theory’, for short.

Since we are *usually* uncertain of future facts and certain of past facts, uncertainty emotions are *usually* forward-looking and certainty emotions are *usually* backward-looking. Since we are *sometimes* uncertain of the past and *sometimes* certain of the future, uncertainty emotions are *sometimes* backward-looking and certainty emotions are *sometimes* forward-looking. Thus, the epistemic theory seems to succeed where the temporal theory fails: it explains both the normal and the unusual temporal gaze of certain emotion types and it need not resort to reinterpretations of cases. The epistemic theory has two versions, depending on how ‘certainty’ and ‘uncertainty’ are understood. There is a factive epistemic theory and a non-factive epistemic theory.

The Factive Epistemic Theory

As far as I know, the only recent philosopher to propose a systematic theory of emotions’ temporal-gaze is Robert Gordon (Gordon 1987). According to Gordon, those emotions that typically look back⎯such as regret, anger, remorse, etc.⎯are about facts one knows, he therefore calls them *factive emotions.* Those emotions that typically look forward⎯such as fear, hope, and worry⎯are about facts one does not know, he calls those, *epistemic emotions*:

[I]f a person is glad or unhappy that *p* then he knows that *p*, whereas a person hopes or fears that *p* only if he does not know that *p*. (Gordon 1987, 26)

Similarly, I am angry that you screened my call only if I *know* that you screened my call, whereas I fear that you screened my call only if I do not know it.

Gordon’s argument for this distinction draws on linguistic usage. Christina Dietz explains: “Consider how strange it sounds to say, ‘Sarah regrets that she punched Jason but Sarah does not know that she punched Jason’” (Dietz 2018, 1683). Similarly, to say, ‘Oscar is angry that the Democrats stole the election’ implies that the Democrats stole the election (and Oscar knows it). Gordon writes: “In the case of any of the factive emotions, the truth of the ‘that’ clause is presupposed by assertions of the form ‘S emotes that *p*’” (Gordon 1987, 36–37).

As for epistemic emotions, Gordon argues that, unlike factive emotions, they admit of two kinds of reasons: *attitudinal* and *epistemic.* When asked why do I fear crossing paths with a black cat I can give two different kinds of answers. I can say that it is bad luck to cross paths with a black cat, thereby giving an attitudinal reason; or I can say that there are many cats in this part of town, thereby giving an epistemic reason. The first reason purports to defend the appropriateness of my attitude to its object, while the second purports to defend the judgment that the object is likely to obtain. Gordon claims that with regard to factive emotions, only attitudinal reasons can properly be provided. When asked why I *regret* crossing paths with a black cat, I can give the same attitudinal reason as I do to justify my fear (that crossing paths with a black cat is bad luck) but there is no room for an epistemic reason. Consider the oddity of the sentence: “I regret crossing paths with the black cat because I saw it standing right there, staring at me”.

According to Godron, factive emotions tend to look backward because we normally have knowledge of past facts and lack knowledge of future facts. However, occasionally we can know that a fact will obtain in the future and in those cases factive emotions can look forward. Similarly, epistemic emotions tend to look forward because normally we do not have knowledge of future facts and do have knowledge of past facts. However, occasionally we are uncertain of past facts and in those cases epistemic emotions can look back. So Gordon’s distinction between factive and epistemic emotions seems to capture something intrinsic to the kinds of emotions in question *and* to explain why some emotions tend to look forward but sometimes look back and others tend to look back but sometimes look forward.

Nonetheless, Gordon’s proposal has some fatal flaws. First, to show that fear and hope do not entail knowledge it is not enough to show that fearing/hoping that *p* does not entail knowing that p. For there might be a different proposition the knowledge of which fear and hope entail. Indeed, it seems that the same linguistic intuitions that are invoked to persuade us that regretting that p entails knowing that p, would lead to the conclusion that fearing that p entails *knowing that* *p is possible*. Similarly, if a person who is happy that *p* knows that *p*, then a person who hopes that *p* knows that *p* is possible. Just as it sounds odd to say, ‘Oscar is angry that the Democrats stole the election but he does not know that they stole the election’ it also sounds odd to say, ‘Oscar fears that the democrats stole the election but he does not know it is possible that the Democrats stole the election’. If factive emotions are *knowledge-requiring*, so are epistemic emotions.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The second contrast that Gordon draws between factive and epistemic emotions also fails. Gordon claims that fear, hope, and worry admit of epistemic reasons while regret, grief, anger, etc., do not. The argument, again, relies on linguistic intuitions. But whether or not it sounds odd to ask or offer epistemic reasons for regret or anger, these attitudes clearly commit the agent to certain judgments of fact for which she can be held accountable. Just as we should have reasons to think *p* probable in the case of fear we should have reasons to think *p* true in the case of grief.

I conclude that if factive emotions require knowledge so do epistemic emotions, and if epistemic emotions admit of epistemic reasons, so do factive emotions. These objections reflect a general problem with Gordon’s arguments, namely, that they rely too heavily on linguistic usage — specifically, emotion ascriptions — to determine the nature of emotions.[[3]](#footnote-3) Consider Gordon’s suggestion that some emotions entail knowledge. Even if the sentence ‘Oscar is angry that the Democrats stole the election’ implies that Oscar knows that the Democrats stole the election, it is highly implausible that if the Democrats *didn’t steal* the election then it follows that Oscar is not angry that they did. There can be misdirected or mistaken anger.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Suppose I reproach my friend for resenting me for a wrong I did not commit. To make my case, I provide conclusive evidence of my innocence. My friend, convinced by the evidence I present to him, cannot defend himself by noting that from the fact that I did not commit the wrong it follows that he did not resent me for committing it and therefore my reproach is misdirected. So mistaken ‘factive emotions’ must be possible. For the same reason, fearing or hoping that *p* does not entail knowing that *p* is possible. My fear and hope can be mistaken, too: I can fear that the house is haunted although there is nothing to fear and hope to win the game even when the situation is entirely hopeless. A non-factive epistemic theory might avoid these objections.

The Non-Factive Epistemic Theory

Various authors have made comments that suggest the following view: *uncertainty emotions*, such as fear and hope, are about objects that are represented by the subject as merely probable, while *certainty emotions*, such as anger and regret, are about objects that are represented by the subject as settled. Unlike Gordon’s view, this view allows for misdirected or mistaken emotions about non-existent objects; it is non-factive.

For example, Robert Roberts argues that what’s essential to fear is that its object be construed as “still a possibility” (2003, 193). He imagines a man who fears that his mother was on an airplane that he knows to have crashed a couple of hours earlier (ibid.) The man knows that whether his mother was on the plane is now settled, no longer a mere possibility, but the man construes it as a possibility given what he takes himself to know. So unlike Gordon, Roberts does not hold that emotions are factive; what distinguishes certainty from uncertainty emotions is how things seem to the agent.

Similarly, Mikko Salmela argues that certain types of emotions, like sadness, assert the truth of their propositional content while other types, like fear, assert that their propositional content is merely probable (Salmela 2014, 109). With regard to hope, there is a wide consensus that it involves a belief that its object is possible but not certain (Day 1969, 95; Downie 1963, 249; Wheatley 1958; Martin 2014, 154; Milona and Stockdale 2018, 205; Benton 2019). And there is a growing literature according to which anxiety involves “problematic uncertainty” (Kurth 2015, 175; 2018, ch. 1), “the apprehension of potential negative outcomes” (Vazard 2019, 6) or “the epistemic likelihood” of bad states of affairs (Fritz 2021, 8559).[[5]](#footnote-5) These views are in line with the idea that emotions like hope and anxiety, which tend to be forward-looking, are essentially about *perceived probabilities* while emotions like anger and regret are about facts *one takes to be settled*.

Like Gordon’s theory, this theory can also appeal to our general confidence about past facts and lack of confidence about future facts to explain why *certainty emotions* tend to look back but occasionally look forward and *uncertainty emotions* tend to look forward but occasionally look back. However, unlike Gordon’s theory, the current theory doesn’t have the implausible implication that the existence of a certainty emotion entails the existence of its object and the existence of an uncertainty emotion entails the probability of its object.

Despite its initial appeal, the non-factive epistemic theory is also vulnerable to counterexamples. Richard Wollheim (1999, 109–110) and Jesse Prinz (2004, 28) note that a person can fear things of which she is certain. We may fear an enemy’s assault when such assault seems likely, but we may also fear it when the enemy forces are approaching and there is no longer any doubt in our minds that the assault is forthcoming. Similarly, a person can be anxious about a social situation because she sees it as a possible source of discomfort and awkwardness, but she may also be anxious when she is certain that the social occasion will involve discomfort and awkwardness. The change in our epistemic situation, from taking the object of our fear or anxiety to be merely probable to taking it to be certain, might not undermine our fear or anxiety.

The point is often overlooked. Gordon notes that when we gain strong reason to believe that what we fear is in fact so we say that our fears have been *borne out* or *proven true* (Gordon 1987, 32). But there is a difference between a fear being borne out or proven true and it being *realized* or *fulfilled*. Even when my fear of climate-change related disasters and suffering is proven true by scientific research, my fear is not realized or fulfilled until the disasters and suffering it foresees actually occur. The fact that our fears and anxieties are normally borne out or proven true only when they are realized or fulfilled obscures this distinction. Nonetheless, the distinction is important because if fear persists until it is realized (or refuted), and fear can be proven true without being realized, then we can *fear certainties*. Both factive and non-factive versions of the epistemic theory rule out such possibility. Before we assess these theories further, we should take a step back and consider a methodological question: what exactly do these theories aim to explain?

1. **Theories of What?**

We have thus far considered various purported necessary conditions for emotion types that have a characteristic temporal gaze. We tested these claims against cases in an attempt to identify counterexamples: situations where the conditions are not met but an instance of the emotion type seems possible. What are we doing when we consider whether an emotion is possible in a certain situation? Are we making empirical estimations? Are we engaged in conceptual analysis? Both answers seem unpromising. Armchair speculation is not a good method of empirical investigation and conceptual analysis might seem limited for the same reason that Gordon’s analysis of linguistic usage seems limited, namely, because we want to learn about emotions, not merely about concepts of emotions. In this section, I propose, instead, that in considering cases of emotions’ temporal gaze we investigate the possibility of *fitting* instances of certain emotion types. An investigation of the fittingness of emotions relies on substantive normative and evaluative judgments to elucidate the distinctive standards by which we assess certain emotions, in so doing it also teaches us about their nature.

To begin, consider a case of so-called ‘recalcitrant’ emotion.

A HARMLESS TINY MOUSE

Passing through his kitchen, Beri sees a harmless tiny mouse and runs to the living-room screaming. Beri thinks about the mouse, about how tiny it is, and realizes it is harmless and poses no danger. Nonetheless, Beri’s fear persists.

Since the mouse is not dangerous, Beri’s fear of the mouse is *not fitting* and yet it is possible: a person can have such an unfitting emotion. Since Beri sincerely judges that the mouse is not dangerous, his fear is also *irrational* and yet it is still possible: a person can have such an irrational emotion.

To say that Beri’s fear is irrational is to say that there is *something* about fear—call it, fear’s evaluative aspect—that commits Beri to the judgment that the mouse is dangerous. The failure of rationality is a failure of coherence among Beri’s attitudes: his fear and his judgment. Philosophers have offered various theories of the evaluative aspect of emotions. For our purposes it is sufficient to recognize that emotions have an evaluative aspect and that they rationally commit the agent to certain judgments even if they do not include or presuppose the judgments in question. Thus, in A HARMLESS TINY MOUSE more than one thing goes wrong—Beri’s fear is both unfitting and irrational—but fear is still possible.

Now consider a case of fear on which the three theories described in the previous section would agree:

LAST NIGHT’S RALLY

All week long, Sol was afraid of the rally that took place last night because the rally was expected to be violent. Today, Sol continues to be afraid of last night’s rally.

The three theories presented in the previous section agree that it is possible for Sol to be afraid of the rally all week, before the rally occurs. Until last night, the rally was in Sol’s future, it was not known to be violent but it seemed probable—at least to Sol—that it will be violent. However, today, if Sol knows that the rally is over and takes himself to know whether or not it was violent, then all three theories would agree that it is no longer possible for Sol to be afraid of last night’s rally. This is because the object of fear in this case is past, known by Sol, and Sol takes himself to know it. On all three theories a necessary condition for fear is not met.

Now compare LAST NIGHT’S RALLY with A HARMLESS TINY MOUSE. In both cases, a person makes judgments that are clearly incompatible with the commitments implied by his emotions. Beri’s judgment that the mouse is harmless is incompatible with his fear of the mouse, while Sol’s judgments that the rally was last night and that he knows whether it was violent or not, is incompatible with his fear of the rally. However, while Beri’s fear, though flawed in more than one way, seems possible, Sol’s fear, according to our three theories, is impossible.

I propose that there is no principled reason to agree with the three theories that Sol’s fear of last night’s rally is impossible. Like Beri’s recalcitrant fear, Sol’s fear might be both flawed *and* possible. Just as Beri’s fear presents the mouse as dangerous against Beri’s judgment to the contrary, so Sol’s fear presents the rally as being future, or unknown, or merely probable, against Sol’s judgment to the contrary.

To be sure, it might be easier to imagine Beri fearing the harmless mouse than it is to imagine Sol fearing yesterday’s rally and the fact that fearing known, past facts *seems* *unimaginable* might lead us to conclude that it *is* *impossible*. But a limitation of our imagination is often an unreliable guide to psychological possibility. Once we allow that emotions can be deeply flawed as the kinds of emotions they are, the possibility of different flaws should be determined by empirical observation rather than imagination. Moreover, whether Sol’s fear is possible is an interesting psychological question, but it is not a very interesting philosophical question. The interesting philosophical question is why Sol’s fear, *if it were possible*, would be flawed. By answering the latter question, we learn something about the distinctive standards by which we evaluate fear and, insofar as such standards are essential to fear, we learn about the nature of fear itself.

The analogy between Beri’s fear and Sol’s fear supports the conclusion that the three theories of emotional gaze considered in section 1 are not best interpreted as theories about the necessary conditions for the occurrence of certain emotion types, but as theories about the *fittingness* and *rationality* conditions of certain emotion types. A theory according to which fear is about danger may allow that some instances of fear fail to be about danger and that some instances of fear fail to accord with the agent’s own judgments about danger; the theory implies that, if fear is possible in these cases, it is flawed. Similarly, theories about emotions’ temporal gaze should aim to account for the conditions of emotions’ *success*, not for the conditions of their *possibility*.[[6]](#footnote-6)

To this end, let me introduce some relevant terminology. The notion of *fit* is, by now, a familiar normative notion.[[7]](#footnote-7) First, a relation of fit is a relation in which an attitude stands to the object it is about when the object has an evaluative property (also called *formal object*) that *merits* or *is worthy of* the type of attitude in question. So it is often said that something’s being valuable is extensionally equivalent to its being fitting to value, and that parallel equivalences hold between more specific value properties and the fittingness of certain ways of valuing (Howard 2018, 2–3). Someone is lovable if and only if she is fitting to love, desirable if and only if she is fitting to desire, and deplorable if and only if she’s fitting to deplore. Moreover, to understand a given attitude type—such as, intention, belief, desire, or anger—one must understand when it is fitting (de Sousa 1987, 122–123).

Second, there is a distinction between *objective fit* and *subjective fit*, or, as it is also sometimes drawn, a distinction between *fit* and *warrant*.[[8]](#footnote-8) Objective fit (or fit), obtains when an attitude matches its object whereas subjective fit (or warrant) obtains when an attitude seems to match its object given the subject’s epistemic situation. For example, suppose that, strolling in the woods, a person runs into a man in a realistic bear costume. This person’s fear would not be objectively fitting because she is in no real danger but her fear would be subjectively fitting (warranted) because she is in danger according to the her epistemic situation. Alternatively, a person might be angry at a friend for betraying her despite lacking any evidence that her friend betrayed her. Her anger would not be subjectively fitting (warranted) but it might still be objectively fitting if her friend did, as a matter of fact, betray her.

Finally, an emotion of a certain type involves a commitment to the judgment that its formal object obtains. Admiring Glenn Gould involves a commitment to the judgment that Glenn Gould is admirable and regretting going to bed late last night involves a commitment to the judgment that going to bed late last night was regrettable. This is why one exhibits a failure of structural rationality if one judges ‘not-p’ while having an emotion the formal object of which is ‘p’. So failures of *structural rationality* that involve an emotion should be understood by reference to the formal object of the emotion. For example, Beri’s failure of structural rationality is explained by the fact that he fears an object he judges not to be dangerous and being dangerous is the formal object of fear.[[9]](#footnote-9)

We can now see that Beri and Sol might exhibit not two but three kinds of failures: their fears are objectively unfitting, subjectively unfitting, and irrational because inconsistent with their judgments that what they fear does not merit fear. By understanding when fear is objectively fitting we can understand when it appears fitting given the subject’s situation. We should therefore focus on the question of objective fit while keeping in mind judgments of subjective fit. The question our theories should aim to answer is not when certain emotion types are possible, but when are they objectively fitting?

1. **The New Epistemic Theory**

In light of the proposal in the previous section, the three theories presented in section 1—the temporal theory, the factive epistemic theory, and the non-factive epistemic theory—should be reinterpreted as theories of the *fitting* temporal gaze of emotions. According to this new interpretation, the temporal theory, for example, implies that fear, hope, and anxiety are only fitting when their objects lie in the future while regret, anger, and grief are only fitting when their objects lie in the past. In the first section we considered counterexamples to the temporal theory with an eye to the *possibility* of certain emotions, but now the focus is on *fitting* instances of these emotions. It seems possible to fear that one’s mother was on a plane that crashed and to be anxious that one made a fool of oneself at dinner last night. It seems possible to be angry that one’s friend will miss the party and to be happy that one will receive a prize. But can these instances of backward-looking fear and anxiety and forward-looking anger and happiness be fitting?

Backward-looking fear might seem fitting under specific conditions. Suppose I fear my mother was on the plane that crashed although I have no reason to believe there is a chance she was on the plane because she called me from her living room two hours ago. In this case, my fear is unfitting. Since it is fitting for me to believe she was not on the plane, it is unfitting for me to fear that she was. But if it were fitting to believe that there is a significant chance (but no more than significant chance) that my mother was on the plane, my fear would seem fitting.

Now recall the distinction between subjective and objective fit. When I am afraid that *p* against my evidence, my failure is one of subjective fit, but if there is in fact a good chance that *p* is true, then my fear, though subjectively unfitting, can be objectively fitting. Which kind of fit is at stake in the case of the man who is afraid that his mother was on the plane that crashed—subjective or objective? It seems plausible that there is a distinction between the *objective probability* that my mother was on the plane that crashed and the *subjective probability* she was on the plane. Objective probability might be something like the probability that my mother was on the plane *given all the evidence available at this moment*; subjective probability might be something like the probability that my mother was on the plane *given all the evidence available to me at this moment*.[[10]](#footnote-10) So whether my backward-looking fear is *objectively fitting* is determined by the objective probability that my mother was on the plane and whether it is *subjectively fitting* is determined by the subjective probability she was on the plane. Now consider forward-looking anger. If it is fitting to believe that my friend *will* attend my party, then my anger that my friend *will not* attend my party is subjectively *un*fitting, though it might turn out to be objectively fitting if, contrary to the evidence available to me, my friend will not attend the party. Similar cases can easily be generated for anxiety, hope, regret, and happiness.

What we find is a new epistemic theory of emotions’ temporal gaze. The theory aims to explain the fitting temporal gaze of emotions and it combines the factive and the non-factive versions of the epistemic theory considered in section 1. Objective fit is factive: fear and hope are objectively fitting only when they match the objective epistemic probability of their objects; anger and happiness are objectively fitting only when they match the existence of their object. If my anger about my friend’s betrayal is objectively fitting, it follows that my friend betrayed me and that the betrayal merits anger. Subjective fit is non-factive: fear, hope, anger, and happiness can be subjectively fitting on the basis of available evidence even when the evidence is misleading and their objects are not as they take them to be. So from the fact that my anger about my friend’s betrayal is subjectively fitting it follows neither that my friend betrayed me nor that the betrayal, if it happened, merits anger.

Like its predecessors, our new epistemic theory explains the temporal gaze of fitting emotions as a function of the subject’s epistemic predicament. But the theory differs in the way it draws the distinction between certainty emotions and uncertainty emotions. First, according to our new epistemic theory, the main difference between uncertainty emotions, such as fear and hope, and certainty emotions, such as regret and anger, is that the former are (objectively) fitting to *merely probable objects* while the latter are (objectively) fitting to *objects that exist*. Uncertainty and certainty emotions can fittingly take either past or future objects. However, since it is often fitting to believe in the *existence* of past objects and fitting to believe in the *mere probability* of future objects, fitting certainty emotions tend to look backward and fitting uncertainty emotions tend to look forward.

According to this new epistemic theory, there can be, in principle, a person who experiences objectively fitting anger, regret, or grief about future occurrences. Consider Nostradamus, a 16th Century man who could, let’s suppose, foresee events far into the future. Nostradamus might experience (objectively) fitting forward-looking certainty emotions: he might be fittingly angry at his friend’s future betrayal, he might fittingly grieve the lives lost in World War I, or he might feel joy about the discovery of penicillin by Alexander Fleming in 1928. On the current epistemic theory, such emotions would be objectively fitting although their objects lie far in Nostradamus’ future. After all, the friend’s betrayal merits anger, the loss of life in WWI merits grief, and the discovery of penicillin merits joy. Since the formal objects of the relevant emotions obtain, the emotions are merited.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, Nostradamus’ emotions might not be subjectively fitting given that he had no evidence of these future occurrences. In any case, normally there is little chance of having objectively fitting certainty emotions about future objects.

Thus, according to the new epistemic theory what explains the temporal gaze of emotions is the difference between certainty and uncertainty emotions together with our typical epistemic relations to past and future objects. The temporal relation between the subject and the object of emotion is not essential to the fittingness of the type of emotion in question. This theory is attractive not merely because it can vindicate our judgment that sometimes backward-looking fear and forward-looking anger are fitting; the theory is also attractive because it seems to follow from the idea that these emotions are fitting to certain evaluative properties (‘formal objects’). If the relevant evaluative property obtains, the emotion is fitting, no matter the temporal relation between the two, as illustrated by Nostradamus’ case. Thus, the new epistemic theory makes explicit an apparent implication of the idea that emotions are fitting to evaluative properties—that is, the implication that fit is, in principle, a-temporal. Therefore, the prospects of the new epistemic theory can yield lessons about fit more generally.

Despite its appeal, the new epistemic theory is ultimately unconvincing. First, it is implausible that one’s temporal relation to loss is in principle irrelevant to the fittingness of grief. My good friend JR will certainly die within several decades, but grief over JR’s death is not yet fitting. Even if the fact of future loss merits some form of present sadness, the recent loss of a dear friend merits a kind of grief that is not merited by a loss that lies far in the future. It is similarly implausible that one’s temporal relation to hurt is in principle irrelevant to the fittingness of dread and that one’s temporal relation to a wonderful experience is in principle irrelevant to the fittingness of joy.

Second, recall the objection to the non-factive epistemic theory mentioned at the end of section 1, namely, that fear and anxiety about known objects seem possible, and indeed fitting, when the objects lie in the future. Knowing that something horrible will happen does not undermine the fittingness of fear, but once the horrible thing occurs fear ceases to be fitting. The relevance of temporal relations to fit cannot be explained in this case by changes in one’s epistemic situation.

Finally, longstanding debates about the metaphysics of time revolve around the observation that some emotions are properly expressed in irreducibly *tensed* language and that this might entail that there are irreducibly tensed facts. For example, it is thought that a painful dental surgery merits dread only if it is future and relief only if it is past and that these facts cannot be reduced to tenseless facts, i.e., facts that do not include temporal relations.[[12]](#footnote-12) Even if the metaphysical argument does not go through, the observation that the fit of some emotions depends on irreducible temporal relations puts further pressure on the new epistemic theory.

The temporal relations in which we stand to the objects of our emotions certainly impact our epistemic circumstances, but their epistemic impact does not exhaust their significance. In trying to account for the counterexamples to the temporal theory, the new epistemic theory overshoots. We should seek a theory that allows temporal relations to play a fundamental role in determining fit but also explains the cases that have posed a problem for the temporal theory; in other words, we need a new temporal theory. I develop such a theory in the fourth and final section.

1. **The New Temporal Theory**

Let’s review the observations we have accumulated in our discussion thus far and that we want a theory of the temporal gaze of emotions to explain. First, as examples of typically forward-looking emotions, consider fear and anxiety. Of these emotions we have made the following observations:

1. Normally they are fitting to future objects. (E.g., common cases of fear and anxiety).
2. Occasionally they are fitting to past objects. (E.g., cases such as the man who fears his mother was on the plane that crashed.)
3. They are fitting to a past object only if the object is merely probable and belief in its existence is unfitting. (E.g., if it is fitting to believe one’s mother was on the plane, then fearing she was on the plane is *unfitting*.)
4. They can be fitting to a future object even if it is fitting to believe in the existence of the object. (E.g., fitting fear of the approaching enemy and fitting anxiety about impending social awkwardness.)

To explain these four characteristics of fitting fear and anxiety, I propose that objectively fitting fear and anxiety are different kinds of *aversions to objects that* *have not yet occurred*. Thus, consider the first part of the new temporal theory:

NEW TEMPORAL THEORY (FORWARD): for some emotions, a necessary condition for their objective fit at *t*, is that their objects have not yet occurred (i.e., their objects do not occur at *t*, *t-1*, *t-2*, ….).

This straightforwardly explains (1), the observation that fear and anxiety are normally fitting to future objects. But can this theory explain (2)? Backward-looking fear and anxiety are about objects that either already occurred or have not occurred and will not occur. Either my mother was on the plane that crashed or she was not and will never be. So if a necessary condition for the objective fit of fear and anxiety is that their objects have not yet occurred, backward-looking fear and anxiety cannot be objectively fitting.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Nonetheless, I think the new temporal theory can provide a plausible explanation of (2). Backward-looking fear and anxiety cannot be objectively fitting but they can be subjectively fitting, since, as noted in (3), fit is explained in these backward-looking cases by the agent’s epistemic position. To see this, consider a forward-looking instance of fear. A new Covid variant was recently discovered. I know that within a month or two, I will have a better sense of the danger the new variant poses. At the moment, however, the information available to me is limited. My current level of fear might be subjectively fitting given the information available to me, but I know that it is not objectively fitting. I simply do not have access to all the available evidence nor do I have the capacity to process the evidence correctly. So my fear can be subjectively fitting even when I fittingly believe that it is not objectively fitting. Similarly, when I fear that my mother was on the plane, I know that my fear is not objectively fitting because it has already been determined whether she was on the plane or not, but the information available to me does not determine the matter so my fear is subjectively fitting. Therefore, on the version of the temporal theory I am proposing, (2) should be understood as involving subjective, not objective, fit.

Finally, the new temporal theory easily explains (4): fear and anxiety can be objectively fitting even when one fittingly believes their objects *will* occur because in this case their objects *haven’t occurred yet*.

Now consider typically backward-looking emotions, such as regret, anger, and grief. Of these emotions we made the following observations:

1. Normally they are fitting to past objects. (E.g., common cases of regret, anger, and grief).
2. Occasionally they are fitting to future objects. (E.g., cases such as being angry at a friend for missing my party tomorrow or grieving for my friend’s impending death.)
3. They are fitting to a future object only if the object is more than merely probable and belief in its existence is fitting. (E.g., if belief that one’s friend will miss the party is unfitting, then being angry that she will miss the party is unfitting.)

(5), (6), and (7) are mirror images of (1), (2), and (3). Just as fitting fear and anxiety tend to look forward, fitting regret, anger, and grief tend to look back. Just as fitting fear and anxiety occasionally look back, fitting regret, anger, and grief occasionally look forward. And just as backward-looking fear and anxiety are only fitting with regard to objects belief in which is unfitting, so forward-looking regret, anger, and grief are only fitting with regard to objects belief in which is fitting.

Before offering a theory that can explain (5), (6), and (7), we should consider whether there is an (8), that is to say, a plausible mirror image of (4). (4) says that fear and anxiety can fittingly look forward even if belief in the existence of their object is fitting. If (8) is a mirror image of (4), it maintains with regard to regret, anger, and grief that:

1. They can be fitting to a past object even if belief in the existence of their object is unfitting.

We have not yet considered cases that fall under (8). Can the man for whom it is unfitting to believe that his mother was on the plane that crashed nevertheless fittingly grieve his mother’s death? Can he fittingly regret that she boarded the plane? Our intuitions here might be unclear, but they can be clarified by the theory we propose. So consider first an explanation for (5), (6), and (7).

The first part of the new temporal theory is that objectively fitting fear and anxiety are aversions to objects that haven’t occurred. The second part of the theory, which should illuminate (5), (6), and (7), is that objectively fitting regret, anger, grief, and other typically backward-looking emotions are aversions to objects that *have already occurred*.

NEW TEMPORAL THEORY (BACKWARD): for some emotions, a necessary condition for their objective fit at *t*, is that their objects have occurred (i.e., their objects occur at *t* or *t-1* or *t-2* or ….).

We thus have a straightforward explanation for (5), the observation that these emotions tend to take past objects. Can the theory explain (6)? (6) maintains that we can occasionally fittingly regret, be angry about, or grieve future objects, i.e., objects that haven’t yet occurred. The new temporal theory rules out that forward-looking instances of these emotions can be objectively fitting. It also rules out that forward-looking instances of these emotions can be subjectively fitting.[[14]](#footnote-14) So the theory under consideration cannot explain (6) as it is, but must offer a plausible reinterpretation.

I believe such a reinterpretation is available. When one has a fitting belief that one’s good friend will die soon, it is also fitting to believe that grief over the death of one’s friend will soon be fitting. In other words, we can foresee that certain emotions will be fitting. This can explain the early echoes of grief when my friend is on his deathbed. Believing the future will be a certain way, I can already imagine it and get a sense of what it will be like. Just as before a dreadful exam we can sometimes sense early echoes of the relief that will be fitting after it is over; or as we might sense, long before our child is born, the early echoes of love that will be fitting once our child exists. The same phenomenon explains the case of anger about that fact my friend will miss my party tomorrow. Believing that my friend will miss my party and that her missing my party will merit my anger, I already sense the experience of my friend’s absence and my fitting emotional reaction to her absence. It can feel *as if* it has already happened.[[15]](#footnote-15) Thus, fitting belief that an emotion will be fitting explains why we tend to experience the emotion ahead of time, but it also explains the misleading impression that it is already fitting to experience it. So I propose that we rephrase (6) and (7) as such:

1. Occasionally regret, anger, and grief *appear* fitting to future objects. (E.g., cases such as being angry at a friend for missing my party tomorrow or grieving for my friend’s impending death.)
2. These emotions appear fitting to a future object when it is fitting to believe that a future object will occur and merit regret, anger, or grief. (E.g., if belief that one’s friend will miss the party is unfitting, then being angry that she will miss the party would not appear fitting.)

Now let us consider (8), according to which regret, anger, and grief can be fitting to a past object even if belief in the existence of the object is unfitting. Is (8) true? The answer is that (8) is true of objective fit, not of subjective fit. If belief in the existence of the object is unfitting, then regret, anger, or grief are not subjectively fitting. However, even if one lacks evidence that the object occurred, regret, anger, or grief might be objectively fitting if the object in fact occurred. If the man lacks information about his mother’s presence on the plane, then his grief that she was on the plane cannot be subjectively fitting, but it might be objectively fitting if she in fact was on the plane.

Although I have so far focused on aversive emotions, that is, emotions that take an aversive stance toward their objects, there are also favoring emotions, such as forward-looking hope and excitement and backward-looking pride, joy, and contentment. It is worth noting that there might be subtle differences between some of these emotions. For example, hope is different from fear and anxiety with respect to (4). Believing that something will happen is compatible with fittingly fearing it and being anxious about it, but not with fittingly hoping for it. Fitting hope presupposes the mere probability of its object, so belief in the object of hope is incompatible with fitting hope. It is an interesting question why hope should differ in this regard from other forward-looking emotions.

This concludes the presentation of the *new temporal theory*, according to which objectively fitting forward-looking emotions are about objects that haven’t occurred yet and objectively fitting backward-looking emotions are about objects that have occurred already. I do not take myself to have fully defended the theory, especially given that it requires reinterpretation of some of the initial observations that it was meant to explain. However, we are now in a significantly better position to compare its strengths and weaknesses with those of the new epistemic theory. I believe that in the final analysis the temporal theory has the upper hand, but I leave further discussion for a future occasion.

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1. For a review of the psychological literature on anticipatory grief, see Sweeting & Gilhooly 1990. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a similar point, see Wollheim 1999, 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This point is also made by De Sousa 1987, 138; Wollheim 1999, 110; Roberts 2003, 94; and Salmela 2014, 109n5. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For similar criticisms of Gordon, see Wollheim 1999, 105; Roberts 2003, 94; Salmela 2014, 109 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The various authors I mention note that ‘possibility’ here is shorthand for sufficient probability or likelihood. Fear, for instance, implies that its object is more than remotely possible, it is likely or probable, though what counts as sufficient probability can vary widely according to context and what is at stake. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. De Sousa (1987, 114–115), following Ruth Millikan (1984, 17–18), endorses this methodological principle, which he calls, *the priority of success*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Howard 2018 for an overview. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Chappell (2012, 689n10) uses “subjective fittingness” whereas D’Arms and Jacobson (2000, 78) and Scarantino and De Sousa (2018, sec. 10.1) use “warrant”. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The distinctions I make in this section between objective fit, subjective fit, and structural rationality, line up with Scarantino and de Sousa’s (2018, sec. 10.1) distinction between rationality as fittingness, rationality as warrant, and rationality as coherence. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Salmela makes a similar claim, distinguishing objective from subjective probability. See Salmela 2014, 109–110. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. So when I say that certainty emotions are fitting to objects that exist, I take this to mean ‘objects that exist at some *t*’ not ‘objects that exist at the time the emotion occurs’. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Prior 1959, 1962. For more recent discussion, see Craig 1999, Suhler & Callender 2012, Yehezkel 2013, Pearson 2018, and Miller forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Strictly speaking, if my mother wasn’t on the plane then the necessary condition for fitting fear is satisfied because my mother hasn’t been on the plane yet. The problem, of course, is that in this case another necessary condition for fitting fear is not met: namely, that my mother’s being on the plane is sufficiently probable. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This is not entirely true. Suppose it is fitting to believe that a certain disaster has happened, then it is possible to feel subjectively fitting regret even if in fact the disaster has not yet happened. In this case regret about a future object can be subjectively fitting. But we are considering cases where belief that the object is future is fitting and yet it seems that regret, anger, or grief are fitting. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Alternatively, I might be fittingly angry about my friend’s current intention to miss my party rather than about the fact that she will miss it. This is another plausible form of reinterpretation of cases where backward-looking emotions appear to look forward. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)