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The Emotions and Two Aesthetic Paradoxes

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show that the shape of the dispute over a central issue in the philosophy of emotion—namely, the disagreement over the role of cognition in emotion—provides a useful way of seeing the twin aesthetic paradoxes of horror and tragedy.

Recent theories of emotion can be helpfully divided into two camps, the affective and the cognitive. Affective theories hold that emotions consist of bodily affect alone, and are therefore cognitively impenetrable. Cognitive theories hold that emotions are or entail cognition. To discuss the differences between affective and cognitive views, I consider the theories of Jesse Prinz, a committed non-cognitivist, and Martha Nussbaum, perhaps the most cognitive of the cognitive theorists.

Though their theories diverge, both Prinz and Nussbaum think of emotions as appraisals. The phenomenal properties of the instances of emotion that Prinz and Nussbaum, respectively, take as paradigm cases are notably distinct. But, because they think of appraisal as the underlying structure of emotion, they are describing phenomena of the same kind. This commonality warrants a distinction between different instances of emotion, which is what I propose.

I call *simple* those instances of emotion best described by affective theories. Simple instances are automatic, embodied responses to environmental stimuli, such as proximate fear. I call *complex* those instances of emotion best described by cognitive theories. Complex instances of emotion are long-lasting, cognitively rich responses often prompted by mental stimuli, such as grief.

By considering some medium-specific qualities of film and theatre, the primary (though not exclusive) media of the genres of horror and tragedy respectively, I show that the emotions elicited by horror are primarily simple and the emotions elicited by tragedy are primarily complex. Having made this distinction, I turn my attention to solving the paradoxes of horror and tragedy, both of which ask why we would willingly submit ourselves to works of art designed to elicit negative emotions. Following recent work in developmental psychology, I argue that experience with emotions aroused by fictions fosters flexibility with our emotions in real life.

# The Emotions and Two Aesthetic Paradoxes

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## 1. Introduction

Because works of art are thought, variously, to express the emotions of their creators, elicit emotions in their audiences, and portray the emotions of their characters, aesthetics is particularly suited to benefit from recent work in the philosophy of emotion. The purpose of this paper is to show that the shape of the dispute over a central issue in the philosophy of emotion—namely, the disagreement over the role of cognition in emotion—provides a useful way of seeing the twin aesthetic paradoxes of horror and tragedy.

Broadly speaking, recent theories of emotion fall into two camps. I call *affective* those theories that deny that cognition is a component of emotion, since, on such theories, emotions consist of bodily affect alone. Affective theories hold that emotion is entirely cognitively impenetrable, largely on the basis of empirical neuroscientific research that shows that certain emotions elicited in a laboratory setting are so quick as to preclude cognitive involvement.

I call *cognitive* those theories that do admit of any cognitive component of emotion: in short, all theories that do not accept that emotions are cognitively impenetrable. While this classificatory scheme is too broad to make the sort of fine-grained distinctions necessary for giving a comprehensive account of the current state of the philosophy of emotion writ large, it is capable of making an important distinction, which this paper seeks to explore.

I will begin with a discussion of recent philosophy of emotion. To that end, I will consider two approaches to emotion, one affective (Jesse Prinz) and one cognitive (Martha Nussbaum). I will show that, though the phenomena that the two theories

analyze are distinct, there is both theoretical and empirical evidence to suggest that those phenomena are deeply related. Though their ultimate conclusions diverge, these two representative theories of emotion describe phenomena of a single kind. Because of this, I will propose that instances of emotion can be helpfully and intuitively divided into two categories: *simple* and *complex*. The emotions that affective theorists take as their paradigm cases are simple; those that cognitive theorists take as their paradigm cases are complex.

In the second section, I will bring my simple-complex typology to bear on the paradox of horror and the paradox of tragedy. Staples of the philosophy of art, these paradoxes are puzzles centered on our emotional reactions to works of art. Specifically, why is it that we would willingly subject ourselves to works of art that we know will elicit—that are, in fact, designed to elicit—negative emotions, such as fright and disgust in the case of horror and grief and anger in the case of tragedy? By discussing medium-specific qualities of film (a common, though not exclusive, medium of horror) and drama (a common, though not exclusive medium of tragedy), I will show that the paradox of horror is essentially a question about simple emotions and that the paradox of tragedy is essentially a question about complex emotions.

Finally, I will present a solution to the two paradoxes. Following the lead of Kendall Walton, who in his monumental *Mimesis as Make-Believe* makes an analogy between artistic representation and children's games, I will draw on psychological research that shows the educational value of child's play to support my claim that works of horror and tragedy are instructional in that they allow spectators to explore and better understand their own emotional capacities.

## 2. (a.) Theories of Emotion, Affective and Cognitive

In the last thirty years or so, a great many philosophers have occupied their minds with thoughts about feelings. This burgeoning interest has resulted in both a huge body of work on the subject and a relatively new philosophical sub-discipline: the philosophy of emotion. For the purposes of the present discussion, I will divide theories of emotion into two exclusive camps, which I will call *affective* and *cognitive*, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

On my classificatory scheme, *affective* theories are those that hold that emotions are located entirely in the body and therefore cognitively impenetrable.<sup>2</sup> Such theories identify emotion with bodily change (affect). This view received its classic statement in William James' 1884 paper "What is an Emotion?" and was refined in a book he and C. G. Lange published the following year. More recently, Jesse Prinz has worked to revivify the James-Lange view of emotion. Prinz writes, "Emotions are embodied, as James and Lange proposed. They are perceptions of changes in our somatic condition."<sup>3</sup> In general, affective theories conceive of these bodily changes as the result of changes in the subject's environment. If, while on a walk through the woods, I see a bear, my fight-or-flight response is activated. I experience physiological changes, and, for affective theorists those changes *are* the emotion.

Adherents of this view take emotions to convey propositional information in the form of an appraisal: my affective response to the apparent bear is an appraisal, though not a cognitive or deliberative one, that there is a potential threat nearby. But how could a non-cognitive phenomenon constitute an appraisal, which seems to require the very things that Prinz wants to deny of emotion—cognition, deliberation, evaluation? Prinz answers this concern with two related ideas. First, he sees emotions as the result of a

causal relationship between a subject and her environment. To that end, as a person ages, he develops what Prinz calls an “elicitation file,” which is, in a sense, the “key” by which the individual determines which emotional response will correspond to which environmental stimuli. On this line of thinking, because sudden loud noises often co-occur with threats, we become habituated to fear loud noises. Thus, the loud noise elicits my fear because I have become accustomed to associating loud noises and threats. This process does begin to resemble one of appraisal.

Second, Prinz uses the word ‘appraisal’ in a restricted, technical way. “Let us define appraisal not as an evaluative judgment, but as any representation of an organism-environment relation that bears on well-being.”<sup>4</sup> Prinz’s account of emotions as causally determined by elicitation files certainly fits this definition of ‘appraisal’: a sudden loud sound elicits a fear response in a subject, which prepares her body to elude the threat. This entire course of events is, essentially, a representation of the subject’s relation to her environment. Her fear, then, is an appraisal that, because a loud sound has suddenly occurred, danger is likely to follow.

*Cognitive* theories are those that hold that emotions are or entail cognition. In general, for cognitive theorists, this cognition is evaluative in nature. Jenefer Robinson, who defends what might be called a thin cognitive view, argues that emotions are subject to retroactive cognitive appraisal.<sup>5</sup> If, for example, I think I see a bear nearby but subsequently realize that what I thought was a bear is only a tree stump, my cognitive realization causes the automatic bodily response to subside. To that end, for Robinson, it is too simple to identify emotion with bodily affect because the cognitive appraisal that follows the affect is a component of the emotion.

Robinson's theory is a kind of amendment to the strictly affective James-Lange-Prinz views of emotion. Robinson is willing to think of emotions primarily as responses to environmental stimuli, but she also correctly points out that emotional phenomena are often followed by a cognitive evaluation of the appropriateness of the initial affective response. Because this secondary evaluation can cause the initial affect either to wax or to wane, Robinson sees it as a component of the emotion itself. This view is only thinly cognitive because the role that cognition plays is restricted to evaluating appropriateness. More robustly cognitive theories posit a much greater role for cognition.

If Robinson's cognitivism is thin, Martha Nussbaum's is thick. Nussbaum identifies emotions as, "judgments of value and importance," and, as such, "acknowledgements of neediness and lack of self-sufficiency."<sup>6</sup> In thinking of emotions in this way, Nussbaum seeks to analyze cases of emotion more complex than the fear of a proximate object—cases that affective and thin cognitive theories cannot suitably explain. Instead, Nussbaum's paradigm example is grief.

Grief often arises in response to knowledge, which is, of course, a form of cognition. If I feel grief at the impending loss of a friend to cancer, it is my *knowledge* of the diagnosis and its likely outcome that brings on the emotional response, not the existence of the cancer itself. Who knows when the tumor began to grow? My grief may begin before my environment has changed significantly, since I might begin to grieve at the impending loss well before the actual loss occurs. This sort of emotion is not precipitated by a change in my environment, but by an instance of cognition. This cognition is a necessary component of the emotion itself because the emotion could not occur without it.



Similarly, cognition plays an essential role in identifying emotions. Suppose someone tells you that they feel “butterflies in the stomach.” This is an affective state and, as such, an emotional state according to affective theorists. But what emotion is the subject experiencing? Unlike emotions, which have valence, the feeling of “butterflies in the stomach” is neutral: it accompanies both negative emotions (such as fear, anger, and regret) and positive emotions (such as anticipatory joy). Other forms of bodily affect are similarly neutral and associated with various distinct emotions—consider, for example, the feeling of the hair on the back of the neck standing up or that of trembling knees. Following this line of thinking, some cognitive theorists argue that, since cognition is necessary for distinguishing emotional phenomena of one type from those of another, cognition is a necessary component of emotion itself.

Grief may be long lasting, unlike the automatic fight-or-flight response. Though the instances of emotion that have been elicited in a laboratory setting (e.g. with the subject in a functional MRI) are measurably too quick for cognition, the duration of an instance of grief may be measured in months or years. Surely, this is time enough for cognitive involvement. And grief may be only partially embodied. Pangs of grief may come and go, though the subject continues to grieve. The phenomenon of grief is simply too complex to be adequately explained by identifying it with affect—cognition is a necessary component.

This is the crux of the affective-cognitive divide: the cases that theories in one camp deftly explain don’t even seem to be examples of emotion, as conceived by the other side. Prinz’s account of proximate fear is based on neuroscientific research, and it explains some common intuitions about something that all fully functioning adults have

experienced. We seem to have programmed responses, learned over the course of our lives, to environmental stimuli. Bodily affect obtains quickly and without thought, and, since my body recoils in order to protect itself, this affect seems to be an appraisal of the sort that Prinz describes.

On the other hand, Prinz's purely affective account cannot explain the tortuous experience of grief, which is long-lived, doesn't involve the body automatically protecting itself, and cannot simply be an appraisal of how the organism is faring in its environment. One wonders if Prinz would consider grief to be an emotion at all. Nussbaum's account, on which grief is a cognitively rich judgment of the value of the lost object and its importance in the subject's life, is apt. But it surely isn't the case that I make a value judgment of this sort every time I'm startled by a loud noise.

On this basis, it might be tempting to conclude that the wide spectrum of phenomena that we commonly refer to as examples of 'emotion' do not form a single kind. Since neither the affective nor the cognitive approach alone can adequately account for these diverse phenomena, we could adopt a technical usage of the term 'emotion' that does not admit so much diversity. Such an approach, however, does violence to the intuition that, though their properties are different, proximate fear and grief are somehow related. It also ignores the common ground that affective and cognitive theories share.

#### **(b.) Common Ground: Prinz and Nussbaum**

Though the affective-cognitive divide is stark, theorists on both sides generally agree on several important points, consider, for example these three. First, emotions have intentionality, which is to say they are directed at some object. Alice is afraid of the bear that came upon her in the woods; Charles is angry at Deborah because she was late to

their meeting; Edward grieves because of the death of his father. Emotions without intentionality (e.g. phobias or undirected rage or objectless depression), are either (1) of another kind (e.g. moods or dispositions) that are qualitatively distinct from emotions, or (2) the product of abnormalities or disorders and therefore outside the scope of general accounts of emotion. Second, emotions have valence, which is to say that some emotions are positive (e.g. joy) and others are negative (e.g. sadness). Third, many philosophers on both sides of the divide think of emotions as containing some propositional content: affective theorists such as Prinz, focus on those emotions which are automatic bodily responses to environmental stimuli, and therefore appraisals of the subject's immediate well-being; cognitive theorists such as Nussbaum, focus on those emotions which are more complex appraisals of the subject's well-being more generally.

The fact that Prinz's theory is strongly affective and Nussbaum's strongly cognitive might tempt us to think that they are considering two distinct phenomena. And the fact that their paradigm cases—proximate fear for Prinz, grief for Nussbaum—bear little resemblance to one another might further suggest that they are simply talking about two different things. But they use strikingly similar words to describe the propositional content of emotions: in this respect, both Prinz and Nussbaum think of emotions as appraisals.

Prinz's view is what might be called a restricted appraisal theory of emotion. As mentioned above, he thinks that emotions are appraisals in the sense that they are representations of an organism-environment relation. Emotions, then, are “embodied appraisals” of how a subject is faring in its environment which obtain by virtue of an elicitation file. If I were to come upon a bear, my fight-or-flight response would kick in,

preparing my body to respond to the threat. These bodily changes amount to an appraisal of my immediate surroundings.

Building on this foundation, Prinz has also argued that emotions are necessary and sufficient for both moral and aesthetic judgments.<sup>7</sup> Employing what he calls “methodological promiscuity,” Prinz uses both introspective and empirical evidence to support two central theses. First, emotions co-occur with judgments of moral and aesthetic value. Simple reflection on personal experience bears this out—we get emotional about moral issues and works of art. But numerous studies of subjects in functional MRIs also indicate that emotions co-occur with these value judgments.

Second, Prinz argues that emotions are both necessary and sufficient for assessments of moral and aesthetic value. In support of this claim, Prinz points to studies in which researchers hypnotize some subjects such that they experience a feeling of disgust in response to the neutral word, “often.” The subjects were then presented with scenarios involving a character presented as morally upstanding, which they were asked to evaluate on moral grounds. Some of these vignettes used the trigger word and others did not. Overall, the subjects judged the character’s actions to be immoral only in the cases in which the word “often” was used. This suggests that emotions influence moral judgments.

Prinz also recounts a study in which subjects are asked about the morality of incest. The interviewer responds to a subject’s every objection by obviating the concern: if a subject justified his opposition to incest on the grounds that the offspring of such a coupling would be likely to have birth defects, the interviewer would respond by saying that the couple in question always uses birth control. Some subjects agreed that in such

special cases incest would be acceptable, but most held that incest is always wrong because it is disgusting. To that end, this study further suggests that emotions are sufficient for moral judgments.

Prinz argues for the necessity of emotions to moral judgments by considering psychopaths, people who are “profoundly deficient in negative emotions, especially fear and sadness.”<sup>8</sup> Psychopaths are able to say that their crimes are “wrong,” but they don’t truly understand what that word means to non-psychopathic people. Prinz points to one study, which found that “psychopaths treat the word ‘wrong’ as if it simply meant ‘prohibited by local authorities.’”<sup>9</sup> According to Prinz, this trait of psychopaths shows that the disposition for experiencing emotion is necessary for moral judgments.

Similarly, in thinking about aesthetic judgments, Prinz draws on studies of anhedonic subjects. These people are, to some degree, deficient in the capacity to experience positive emotions. Such subjects are less likely to assent to the objectivity of aesthetic value, and Prinz takes this result to show that, essentially, anhedonic subjects have difficulty making aesthetic judgments.

The view that emerges from Prinz’s work, then, is an appraisal theory of emotions with two important restrictions. First, because Prinz’s theory holds that emotions are necessarily non-cognitive, these appraisals are also non-cognitive. They are simply “gut reactions,” determined by the subject’s elicitation files.<sup>10</sup> Second, because of this conception of the nature of emotions, the objects at which these emotions are aimed must be either proximate (in, for example, the case of appraising environmental stimulus) or occurrent (in, for example, the case of appraising the moral value of a hypothetical or the aesthetic value of a remembered artwork).

Whereas Prinz's view is a restricted appraisal theory, Nussbaum's is an unrestricted appraisal theory. Whereas Prinz focuses on short-lived, automatic responses to environmental stimuli, Nussbaum is clearly most interested in long-lasting and complex emotional phenomena. Grief is a powerful and urgent force, which is, at times, capable of propelling the body to action—not unlike the “gut reaction” that prepares for action in the face of an immediate threat. But some degree of cognition is also necessary.

In order to determine that the pangs one feels are pangs of grief as opposed to those of some other emotion, cognition must come to bear on the situation. But cognition has another essential role as well: barring psychological disorders, in order to feel grief, one must be reasonably certain that a loved object (be it a person, a material possession, a relationship, etc.) is in danger. And one must also have *judged* that object to be of value to her or his well-being. In short, we don't grieve for things that we do not perceive as being threatened, and we don't grieve for things that we don't care deeply for.

Nussbaum writes: “Though there are numerous internal distinctions among members of the family [of emotions], they have enough in common to be analyzed together; and a long tradition in philosophy, beginning from Aristotle, has so grouped them.”<sup>11</sup> Taking grief as her example, Nussbaum seeks to analyze that commonality, ultimately by defining the necessary and sufficient conditions for emotion. Her conclusion is this: judgment is both necessary and sufficient for emotion.

It is relatively easy to defend the view that judgment is necessary for emotion, and Nussbaum does so compellingly: grief requires the judgments mentioned above; anger requires the judgment that one has been wronged, and if the subject realizes that she hasn't been wronged or that the offender didn't intend to offend, the anger largely

subsides.

The sufficiency thesis is somewhat more difficult to show, and Nussbaum is less compelling on this score. A common objection to the sufficiency thesis is an appeal to so-called non-emotional judgments, the existence of which would obviously disprove the claim. Such an objector might point to an inconsequential judgment, as in this situation: Adam wants to get a haircut; on the phone, his barber offers two different openings, one on Tuesday and one on Thursday, which work equally well for Adam; he chooses Thursday. In this scenario, neither choice is appreciably better than the other, and the haircut itself is not a matter of much import. The decision is neither an embodied appraisal that Adam makes of his environment nor a moral or aesthetic judgment, so it is not the sort of phenomena that Prinz would identify as an emotion. Similarly, it is doubtful that Nussbaum would identify it as an emotion, since the haircut is not particularly important to Adam's well-being, and, based as it is on choosing between two different, practically identical options, doesn't seem to be the sort of admission of vulnerability that she talks about. In short, Adam's choice seems to be a purely rational (and therefore non-emotional) judgment.

But the work of the neurologist Antonio Damasio suggests otherwise. In his book *Descartes' Error*, Damasio confronts the common assumption that emotion and reason are diametrically opposed. Damasio is skeptical of this old saw, and he uses his neurological research to refute it, summarizing his findings this way: "their ["reasoning strategies"] effective deployment probably depends, to a considerable extent, on a continued ability to experience feelings."<sup>12</sup> Said another way, emotion is an essential component of reason.

Though he uses the word “feelings” in the passage above, Damasio’s case studies make it clear that he is not talking about bodily affect alone. Damasio studies patients with brain lesions that prevent them from experiencing emotions, both the short-lived automatic responses to environmental stimuli that affective theorists focus on and the complex, long-lasting phenomena that cognitive theorists focus on. Such patients are, as one might expect, highly rational and dispassionate.

One patient, when asked about his drive into the office that morning, responded coolly that it had required extra attention to the proper procedures for driving on ice. He then calmly told of seeing the car in front of him careen into the ditch when the driver failed to use such procedures. “One instant later, apparently unperturbed by this hair raising scene, my patient crossed the ice patch and drove calmly and surely ahead. He told me all this with the same tranquility with which he obviously experienced the incident.”<sup>13</sup>

In a way, this sort of hyper-rationality seems advantageous, and it may well have saved the ice-driving patient’s life, but these patients also exhibit some startling deficits. Though common sense might suggest that purely rational people, incapable of being distracted by their emotions, would be highly productive, Damasio found that this is not the case. He describes a patient, Elliot, whose job required sorting documents. Instead of glancing at the paperwork to determine which stack it belonged in, this patient would spend the entire day reading, intelligently and critically, entire documents. Or he would spend inordinate amounts of time debating the relative merits of various systems of classification, which, of course, prevented him from actually sorting the documents. “One might say that the particular step of the task at which Elliot balked was actually



being carried out *too well*, and at the expense of the overall purpose.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, Elliot lacked the ability to judge the relative importance of the different stages of the task.

With a third patient, Damasio confronted an occurrence very much like the hypothetical example of Adam’s haircut appointment. At the conclusion of the session, Damasio turned to the matter of scheduling the patient’s next appointment:

I suggested two alternative dates, both in the coming month and just a few days apart from each other. The patient pulled out his appointment book and began consulting the calendar. The behavior that ensued, which was witnessed by several investigators, was remarkable. For the better part of a half-hour, the patient enumerated reasons for and against each of the two dates: previous engagements, proximity to other engagements, possible meteorological conditions, virtually anything that one could reasonably think about concerning a simple date. [...] It took enormous discipline to listen to all of this without pounding on the table and telling him to stop, but we finally did tell him, quietly, that he should come on the second of the alternative dates. His response was equally calm and prompt. He simply said: “That’s fine.” Back the appointment book went into his pocket, and then he was off.

Even though the stakes could hardly have been lower, the patient was simply unable to make a judgment. Damasio’s work in general—and this episode in particular—shows that emotions are an essential component of such processes. Without emotions, even simple judgments are impossible. Though these patients retain their knowledge and memory and ability to reason, they are permanently changed by their brain injuries such that they cannot hold jobs or be trusted with money or maintain interpersonal relationships.

Damasio’s work, therefore, provides empirical support for Nussbaum’s sufficiency thesis. What these patients with brain lesions lack is the capacity to make judgments, and the appearance of this deficit coincided with the appearance of the brain

trauma that removed their capacity to experience emotions.

Though they can be seen as extreme in their views of emotion, Prinz (on the affective side) and Nussbaum (on the cognitive side) share an important bit of common ground. Both see emotions as, essentially, appraisals. Prinz is most interested in analyzing automatic, embodied appraisals of the subject's immediate environment, presumably because these responses are easily isolated and empirically measurable, and he takes it that the class of emotions is limited only to this sort of phenomena. Nussbaum is most interested in analyzing those emotions that we think of when we speak of our "emotional lives," those complex phenomena that are powerful, urgent judgments of the importance of objects to the subject's well-being more generally. Though they differ in scope, these are both appraisal theories of emotion.

### **(c.) Instances of Emotions, Simple and Complex**

The affective-cognitive divide in the philosophy of emotion makes the very term 'emotion' problematic. Are the various theorists using the term in the same way? Or are the differences in their analyses simply the result of disagreements about the proper extension of the term?

Three possible responses come to mind. (1) The affective theorists are correct in thinking that emotions have no cognitive component, and, therefore, cognitive theorists are extending the term to phenomena that are not properly emotions. On this line of thinking, states that cognitive theories analyze, such as grief, are Byzantine complexes of various states, both affective (e.g. "butterflies in the stomach," trembling knees) and cognitive (e.g. memories, desires, imaginings).

(2) The strongly cognitive theorists are correct in identifying cognition as a

necessary component of all emotions. The mistake that affective theorists have made is focusing their attention solely on the initial stages of the emotion. The automatic bodily responses to environmental stimulus that they discuss are only precursors to an emotion. The retroactive reflection on an emotion is a necessary constituent of the emotion.

These two responses employ the same basic strategy—deny that one or the other camp is using the word properly. Said another way, both solutions depend on there being a difference in kind between the phenomena described by affective theories and those described by cognitive theories.

But, as we saw above, there is common ground between Prinz's affective theory and Nussbaum's cognitive theory—both see emotions as appraisals. This suggests a third possible solution:

(3) Though they differ in their properties, the phenomena described by affective and cognitive theories are of a single kind. Even so, neither camp is capable of accounting for all instances of emotion, which means that, though they analyze phenomena of the same kind, the instances of those phenomena can be divided. And the shape of the affective-cognitive debate even suggests lines along which such a distinction can be made: those instances of emotion best explained by affective theories are of one type and those best explained by cognitive theories are of another type. This will be my strategy.

Rather than dividing the class of emotion, which is the logical result of option (1) and option (2) above, I propose distinguishing *instances* of emotion. The common ground shared by Prinz and Nussbaum shows that two vastly different approaches lead to, roughly, the same conclusion: emotions are, at base, appraisals. Prinz and Nussbaum

differ on two key points: (1) the way they construe the nature of these appraisals and (2) the object of the appraisal. For Prinz, the appraisal is a “gut reaction” aimed at the subject’s relation to her immediate environment. For Nussbaum, the appraisal is a cognitive (and, at times, *deliberative*) judgment aimed at the subject’s well being in the broadest sense, which also reveals the subject’s deepest values.

Comparatively speaking, the phenomena that Prinz describes are simple, while those that Nussbaum describes are complex. I will, therefore, classify those instances of emotion best explained by affective theories as *simple*, and those best explained by cognitive theories *complex*. I use these terms without judgment; one is no better, no nobler, no more desirable than the other. These terms are purposely subjective and somewhat vague, since I mean for the distinction to be intuitive rather than rigidly formulaic.

Importantly, my simple-complex scheme describes instances or manifestations of emotions, not particular emotions themselves. Indeed, I think that one of the greatest strengths of this approach is that it allows for a single emotion to manifest either simply or complexly, which supports the common intuition that context determines the severity—and even the properties—of an emotional response. Consider, for example, two instances of fear:

(1) If, while hiking in the woods, I came upon something that seemed to be a bear, I would fear for my safety. I would be afraid in my body: I’d have “butterflies in the stomach” and the “heart in the throat” and my leg muscles would ready themselves for retreat. Soon after my initial reaction, I would likely reassess the situation. Upon realizing that what seemed to be a bear is actually a tree stump, my fear would subside.

The whole episode would be over in seconds.

(2) On the other hand, if I worked in a volatile industry and the economy went south and my firm began laying off workers in my department, I would be afraid of losing my job. This fear is precipitated not by a nearby threat, but by cognition: my knowledge of the volatility of my position and of the state of the economy, my beliefs about what is likely to happen in the future, my inferences based on my knowledge and predictions. This fear may linger for months or even years, though my affective response may be intermittent.

The first is a simple instance of fear. It follows a pattern and exhibits qualities well known to affective theorists: the bodily response is primary, the initial manifestation is too quick for cognitive involvement, and the appraisal is of the subject's immediate well being in relation to his environment. The second is a complex instance of fear. It exhibits qualities well known to cognitive theorists: the emotion is precipitated by an act of cognition, the phenomenon is long lasting (which suggests that cognition is also a *component* of the emotion and not just the inciting factor), and the appraisal is of the subject's well-being broadly construed.

#### **(d.) Emotion and Kind**

My distinction between simple and complex instances of emotion rests on the assumption that all of the diverse phenomena described by both affective and cognitive theorists are of a single kind. One might, therefore, object to my view by arguing that there is no such natural kind. I will provide warrant to my distinction by briefly discussing the natural kind status of emotion. Both settling the debate over the natural kind status and even the lesser aim of providing a complete defense of a robust account of

the natural kind status of emotion are beyond the scope of the present inquiry. Instead, I will consider one approach to the issue—the denial (by Paul E. Griffiths) that *emotion* is a natural kind. Though my aim here is not to refute this view, I will show several of its weaknesses, and demonstrate that, by adopting essentialism, emotion can fruitfully be seen as a natural kind.

Contemporary philosophical analyses of natural kinds have yielded two main approaches to identifying the natural kind status of the objects in question.<sup>15</sup> (1) Following Aristotle (and the legions of subsequent Aristotelians), natural kinds can be identified by virtue of an essence, which all members of the kind share. Essentialists, then, identify either a single necessary and sufficient condition or several necessary and jointly sufficient conditions that are common to all members. The chemical elements often serve as an example of essentialism, since all and only hydrogen atoms have the atomic number 1, which is their essence. Recent essentialist theories, by the so-called New Essentialists, often think of essence in terms of microstructure, as in the chemical example.<sup>16</sup> Or (2) natural kind status can be determined by virtue of the properties of the object in question. Biological kinds pose a problem for essentialists, because biological entities of a given species do not share a stable essence in their microstructure or otherwise. To answer this problem, Richard Boyd and others have proposed identifying natural kinds by appealing to homeostatic property clusters (HPC).<sup>17</sup> On this view, the members of a biological species can be said to be of a single natural kind by exhibiting some—but not necessarily all—of a cluster of properties found to be common to the species.

In the literature of philosophy of emotion, the primary objection to thinking of

*emotion* as a natural kind arises from followers of option (2), the HPC model. On this line of thinking, the diverse phenomena that we, in ordinary conversation, call ‘emotions’ are too different in their properties to be of a single kind. This is the tack taken by Paul E. Griffiths, the most prolific contributor to the contemporary philosophical debate over the natural kind status of emotions.<sup>18</sup> He argues that, because there is no homeostatic property cluster (HPC) common to the referents of the vernacular usage of ‘emotion,’ *emotion* is not a natural kind.

Griffiths does, however, accept that some discreet emotions (e.g. fear, anger, joy) are themselves natural kinds. Following the work of Paul Eckman, a psychologist whose field research purports to show that certain “basic” emotions are universal (i.e. expressed and recognized independent of cultural influences), Griffiths argues that various instances of the basic emotions are similar enough in their properties for an HPC to be identified. To that end, such emotions are themselves natural kinds.

The HPC model has several weaknesses, including (a) it assumes that all instances of basic emotions are phenomenally similar, (b) it assumes that it is an emotion’s phenomenal properties that distinguish it from other, non-emotional affective or cognitive states, and (c) it assumes that it is one emotion’s phenomenal properties that distinguish it from other emotions.

(a) Griffiths asserts that the widely various referents of the vernacular term ‘emotion’ cannot be said to have an HPC, but accepts that discreet basic emotions themselves do have an HPC and are, therefore, natural kinds. This is suspect because the instances of a given emotion may also vary widely. This is evident in the two cases of fear—one simple and one complex—discussed above. And consider this: For a

particularly hot-headed person, anger may result in pronounced bodily changes, such as an increase in blood pressure or reddening of the face, and it might even induce behavioral changes, such as yelling or even physical violence. For a reserved person, anger may seethe below the surface, imperceptible to those nearby. This sort of variance may also occur within the same person: the anger that I feel toward friends often seethes whereas the anger that I feel toward bad drivers tends to explode. These distinct instances of anger are so different in their phenomenal properties that it is unlikely that they share an HPC.

(b) The HPC model of kind identification assumes that it is not the properties of an emotion that distinguish it from other affective or cognitive states. This is suspect because non-emotional affective or cognitive states may be phenomenally similar to emotions. Objectless rage has many properties in common with anger directed toward an object, but, because it lacks intentionality, the latter is not an emotion. Similarly, general depression resembles ordinary sadness and the irrational fear of flying resembles the appropriate fear of a bear encountered in the woods. Depression and rage disorders and phobias are all conditions for which we seek treatment, and, in some cases, they are the products of serious psychological disorders. What distinguishes these unhealthy conditions from garden variety emotions is not their phenomenal properties. Indeed, they may be indistinguishable on that basis. Instead, we can distinguish them on the basis of their underlying structure: objectless rage and depression and phobias are unlike emotions because of problems of intentionality. Depression and rage lack intentionality because they lack a specific object. Phobias are the result of irrational intentionality—fear directed at an object that is either non-threatening or not as threatening as it is taken



to be.

(c) The HPC view assumes that an instance of anger can be recognized as anger by virtue of its phenomenal properties alone. This is suspect because the instances of two different emotions may be phenomenally similar. Anger might present with “butterflies in the stomach,” but fear might have precisely the same affect. Since it is not always immediately apparent, in order to determine whether I am frightened or mad, I have to reflect on my current circumstances. Identifying emotions, then, often requires a perceptiveness beyond that which is capable of distinguishing phenomenal properties.

These three weaknesses may or may not be fatal for the HPC model, but they do suggest that a dismissal of *emotion* as a natural kind on that basis is not warranted. Above, I argued that both Prinz’s strongly affective view and Nussbaum’s strongly cognitive view both claim that appraisal is the underlying structure of emotion. This demonstrates that it is possible to construct an essentialist view of emotion that appeals to both affective and cognitive theorists. I will not defend such a view here, but I take this possibility as a warrant for my distinction between simple and complex instances of emotion. To further demonstrate the merits of this distinction, I will turn my attention to two related puzzles in philosophical aesthetics.

### **3. (a.) Emotion and Aesthetics: On the Paradoxes of Horror and Tragedy**

To put this distinction to work for the philosophy of art, I will discuss two genres that produce oft-discussed paradoxes. In doing so, I will examine the instances of emotion that these two genres are designed to elicit, and, so as not to get bogged down by unwieldy and torturous language, I will refer to simple instances of emotion as “simple emotions” and complex instances of emotion as “complex emotions.”

The twin paradoxes of horror and tragedy both boil down to this question: Why do we willingly submit ourselves to works of art that are designed to elicit unpleasant emotions? Specifically, why would anyone who knows that the film *It* will be frightening desire—or even consent—to see it? Why would anyone willingly subject herself to the negative emotions that tragedies, such as *Hamlet*, are designed to arouse?

The paradox of horror is essentially a puzzle about simple emotions. Though works in the horror genre may elicit complex emotions (e.g. long-term dread of potential threats), they horrify largely by eliciting simple emotional responses such as startle and disgust. Whereas we reflexively distance ourselves from putrid objects, moviegoers generally stay where they are and continue to watch the film. At issue, then, is the question of why, given that they produce the same or similar reactions, our behavior when the object of our disgust is a gory movie is different than our behavior when the object of our disgust is rotten food.<sup>19</sup>

The paradox of tragedy, on the other hand, is essentially a puzzle about complex emotions. Though tragedies may startle or elicit other forms of simple emotions, they work primarily by inviting complex emotional responses. We're meant to feel Hamlet's grief at the death of his father and his despair at not knowing the circumstances of his father's death; and, just as these are cognitive problems for Hamlet, in us, they are inspired largely because the play forces us to think of them. At issue for the paradox of tragedy, then, is why we as individuals willingly submit ourselves to unpleasant emotions by seeing tragedies and why we as a species venerate tragedies so highly.

### **(b.) Horror**

The genre of horror is closely associated with films. Every summer, it seems,

Hollywood releases several new examples of the genre, which includes as its archetypal characters such monsters as vampires, werewolves, zombies, and space-alien<sup>20</sup> There are, of course, novels and short stories in the horror genre, such as those of Stephen King, but they seem to translate easily and frequently into the medium of film, as nearly all of King's works have. Movies are singularly capable of producing simple emotional reactions, so they are the ideal medium for the genre of horror. I'll enumerate three reasons to show this characteristic of film: (1) films consist largely of sights and sounds, (2) films are, in a sense environmental, and (3) films precisely direct the attention of their audience.

(1) Though today's films include a highly complex aural component, the medium of film is primarily visual. This is largely self-evident, but the typical environment in which films are shown supports it: the lights are dimmed and a giant visual stimulus appears just where the placement of your seat invites you to look. The other major component of movies is the soundtrack, which consists of such things as voices speaking dialogue, background noises, and the musical score. Further, we take in these sights and sounds by virtue of the faculties we use in everyday life, and thus we don't need to "learn" how to watch movies.<sup>21</sup>

(2) Films are environmental in the sense that in the typical arrangements in which films are shown (movie theatres), members of the audience largely can't help but see and hear the film. The light reflected off the screen is practically the only illumination in the room, so little else can be seen, and the sound is often piped in so forcefully that little else can be heard. What's more, the images on the screen are huge, often many times larger than life size. Because they so dominate the audience's visual and aural field, films

radically alter the audience's environment in ways that other forms of art rarely achieve. Viewers of most paintings can see the work's edges and can look away if they so choose. And even readers "lost" in a novel remain peripherally aware of their surroundings. Viewers of films, though, are largely at the mercy of the director for the duration because the film itself, in a sense, becomes their environment.

(3) Viewers of films have no choice short of looking away from the screen but to look at what the filmmaker has chosen for them to see. Further, by virtue of the techniques of variable framing—indexing, scaling, and bracketing<sup>22</sup>—filmmakers can direct audiences' attention very precisely, forcing the audience to see a character's fearful eyes, the door of the closet from which strange sounds are emanating, or the tail of the monster as it scurries away.

These three characteristics of film make it the ideal medium for eliciting simple emotional reactions, which are, following the affective theorists, appraisals of one's environment. Sights and sounds are our most common sources of information about our immediate surroundings, so it is no surprise that the startle response (a paradigm example of a simple emotion) is elicited most frequently by sights (such as seeing what appears to be a snake) and sounds (such as a loud crash). Because they are made up of both sights and sounds, films have the resources to represent stimuli that elicit simple emotional responses, and because the arrangements in which films are shown amount to environments in and of themselves, films can elicit these responses quite effectively. Even though we know that the stimuli are fictional, the responses they produce are enough to make us sweat and jump in our seats and, sometimes, scream. Seen as simple emotional responses, such reactions are largely involuntarily reactions to environmental

stimuli.

### **(c.) Tragedy**

The genre of tragedy is associated with more “literary” forms, particularly drama, which is the medium of the famous and venerated tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Shakespeare. Indeed, tragedy and theatre were linked from the beginning, as both were innovations of the Ancient Greeks.

Though film and theatre seem quite similar, since the most common examples of each are narratives portrayed by actors, the three qualities of films that I discussed above largely don’t apply to theatre. Whereas film is largely made up of visual images, (1) theatre relies more heavily on language than visual effects. Whereas films dominate their audience’s environment (2) theatre is most often not similarly environmental. And whereas films precisely direct audiences’ imagination and attention (3) theatre invites less restricted imagining.

(1) Theatre depends heavily upon language. The playwrights that I mentioned above are widely regarded as great poets. Their works are of perhaps equal (and in some cases, greater) interest to literary scholars and theatre producers. This sort of scrutiny is not often given to screenplays, which is one reason to think of drama as a literary art. Other such reasons will emerge in the discussion of the technical aspects of theatre below.

(2) Though movie theatres and stage theatres have similar arrangements, drama is not capable of achieving the environmental dominance of movies. The reason for this is simple, and it has everything to do with size. In a close-up shot, Meryl Streep’s face is upwards of 20 feet tall. On stage, it is its regular size, and from the cheap seats, it can

barely be seen without binoculars. And even with the lights dimmed, there are other things to look at, such as the scenery, other actors on stage, and so on. Simply put, theatre cannot achieve the kind of dominance of the visual field that films do, and this suggests that theatre must rely more heavily on language than on visual effects.<sup>23</sup>

(3) Whereas filmmakers can precisely control exactly what moviegoers see, theatre directors can only encourage theatregoers' attention. By virtue of techniques of lighting and staging, the best directors can achieve this sort of manipulation, but because drama cannot achieve the environmental dominance of film, their direction of the audience's attention is often less exact and less certain. This, too, suggests that theatre depends heavily on language, because theatrical productions cannot achieve the environmental dominance or the visual effects that are commonplace in films.

Seen as compared with film, these qualities of theatre may seem like weaknesses or limitations. Seen another way, they equip drama to elicit complex emotional reactions. Whereas simple emotions arise as an automatic response to changes in one's environment, complex emotions often arise because of a change in one's cognitive state—grief in response to a diagnosis, regret on learning of a mistake, guilt on having been caught. The tool used to bring on such changes in thinking is very often language: someone tells us of the diagnosis or the mistake, we realize, by what someone says, that they're on to us. Because theatre depends heavily upon language, it is especially able to cultivate complex emotional responses.

The fact that theatre cannot dominate the audience's environment in the way that film does is not a weakness for the medium. Instead it forces the audience to pay attention to the words. Similarly, the fact that theatre cannot represent as realistically as

film does is not a limitation, but a difference in focus. The Greek tragedies are full of gruesome events: Oedipus blinds himself, Medea kills her children, Clytemnestra stabs Agamemnon in the bath. Each has the potential to be a compelling, if gruesome, scene in a movie. Shown with the sort of realism now possible, these scenes could inspire many different simple emotions, from startle to disgust to fear to anger. In the plays, however, these scenes all occur offstage. They are events that loom large in the lives of the characters and knowledge of them inspires (in both the characters and the audience) complex emotions such as grief and regret.

#### **(d.) Solving the Paradoxes**

The distinction I've drawn between simple and complex instances of emotion has explanatory power in the field of aesthetics. It supports an account of why it is that film is particularly well suited for works of horror and why it is that drama is particularly well suited for works of tragedy. But can the distinction contribute to solving the paradoxes that those two genres produce?

The answers to these puzzles that philosopher, ancient and modern, have proposed function mainly by showing that spectators of tragedy and horror receive some benefit from experiencing the negative emotions that the works arouse. Aristotle is traditionally attributed with the view that, by virtue of *catharsis*, viewers of tragedies purge unpleasant feelings and harmful desires.<sup>24</sup> Countering this view, Nietzsche says that tragedy reminds us that, though the world seems Apollonian (i.e. stable and subject to our attempts at imposing order), human life is chaotic and prone to suffering. This reminder is necessary for maintaining the kind of open-eyed affirmation of life that Nietzsche saw as crucial.<sup>25</sup>

David Hume, in his essay, “On Tragedy” wrote this now-famous passage: “It seems as unaccountable pleasure which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions that are themselves disagreeable and uneasy.”<sup>26</sup> Following this line of thought, Susan Feagin accounts for the pleasure of tragedy as a “meta-response,” a kind of second-order emotion. On her view, we feel pleasure at having had an appropriately unpleasant reaction to the unpleasant events portrayed in great works of tragedy: we congratulate ourselves at being sensitive enough to be moved by the tragic events portrayed.<sup>27</sup>

A similar meta-response view might work for the case of horror as well. An adherent of such a view would argue that the experience of negative emotions in response to works of horror is, by virtue of a second-order emotional response, pleasurable.<sup>28</sup> Or, in accounting for the human attraction to the horrifying, one could invoke curiosity. This is the tack taken by Noel Carroll, whose account of horror emphasizes the fact that works of horror often pique our curiosity by obscuring that which we are afraid of, the monster. To that end, on Carroll’s view, we are “compensated” for our fright by the intrigue of attempting to discern the nature of the monster.<sup>29</sup>

My aim here is not to criticize these views. Indeed, I think that they are all clever and insightful, and, to the extent that they valorize works of art for their value in human life, I find them worthy of the deepest respect. What these views lack is a consideration of the ways in which experiencing these unpleasant emotions might be valuable in and of itself.

A way of thinking that does address such a consideration might look like this: because works of horror and tragedy elicit emotions that are undesirable and therefore



assiduously avoided in “real” life, such works afford us vicarious and “off-line” experience of relatively uncommon, deeply troubling, and perhaps dangerous emotional reactions. This tack is appealing because it puts the negative emotions associated with horror and tragedy front and center in dealing with the paradoxes.

That spectators of horror and tragedy experience emotional arousal in response to such works is a brute fact. Even if you yourself have never screamed at something in a horror film or witnessed someone doing so, it is easy to imagine that someone might be so moved. Similarly, that the emotional responses aroused by works of horror and tragedy are off-line (which is to say dissimilar to emotional responses to real life situations) is also a brute fact. Members of the audience know that Othello will murder Desdemona well before that heinous act takes place, yet they do nothing to intervene and prevent her death, which they likely would do if they learned of a murder plot in real life. To that end, the off-line thesis is both intuitive and evident. But, taken alone, the off-line thesis does not show the value of our emotional responses to works of art, and it therefore fails to provide a robust solution to the paradoxes of horror and tragedy.

In proposing a solution to the two paradoxes, I will accept the “off-line” thesis as a brute fact, and, in addition, I will seek to answer this question: Why is it valuable for us to experience the negative emotions elicited by horror and tragedy off-line? In doing so, I will follow a line of thinking initiated by Kendall Walton, who has argued that fictionality functions much like children’s games of make-believe.<sup>30</sup> In support of his view, Walton draws on studies of play done by developmental psychologists.

By and large, contemporary psychologists who study the relationship between play and human development are cautious about their findings.<sup>31</sup> This attitude is

probably aimed at countering an appealing intuition and urging that it be supported with robust empirical evidence: play is ubiquitous among children, seems to evolve predictably as they age, and occupies their time and attention in ways that other activities simply cannot, so play seems to be central to human development. Add to this the observations that (1) play does not end with the onset of adulthood and (2) children who are denied the opportunity to regularly engage in play often seem stunted, or, at the very least, cheated out of an important stage of their development. It is hard to imagine, then, that play is not an educational activity, one through which children reflect on social norms (through, for example, pretend games like “house”) and develop their own physical capacities (through, for example, athletic games like “tag”).

Their caution notwithstanding, developmental psychologists are, by and large, willing to accept the hypothesis that play fosters “flexibility” and “adaptability.” Athletic play challenges children to be physically and strategically adept. The one who is “it” in a game of tag must constantly assess and adapt to the current positions and movements of the other players on the field. Children who regularly play tag, then, are given many opportunities to test and hone their own athletic abilities and to adapt to the constantly changing field of play. Pretend play invites children to adopt roles they don’t ordinarily play. Participants in a game of house, then, are afforded the opportunity to rehearse various responses to the situations that arise. This means that, for example, the one playing the “child” (or “husband”) character can test various responses to demands that they do the dishes from the “mother” (or “wife”) character. The flexibility hypothesis advanced by developmental psychologists says that these opportunities teach the participating children how to adapt to analogous situations in real life, a valuable lesson

indeed.

Another feature of games is that they allow participants first-hand experience of situations that may be unavailable in real life or that are potentially dangerous or that are apparently unpleasant and therefore avoided. Seven-year-olds cannot be parents or astronauts, but they can imaginatively simulate such experiences. Similarly, no self-respecting mother would allow her young child to run around with grizzly bears, but she would likely be amused to see the same child running from an uncle pretending to be a bear. These examples are mere *simulations*—simulations created by children, who are surely ignorant of the true nature of parenting, space travel, and bears. They are, therefore, prone to error, as anyone who has witnessed a game of “house” can attest. Nevertheless, it is likely that children who play “house” invent strategies for interpersonal relationships that are applicable in real life and that children who play chase games are somewhat better equipped to evade a real threat.

Games, then, give rise to what Dorothy Walsh calls “knowing what it is like,” which “is not the acquisition of information, or the inferential knowledge about something [...] it is knowing in the sense of realizing by living through.”<sup>32</sup> Though they are error prone, games allow their participants to imaginatively—and, in many cases, physically—“live through” situations that are otherwise restricted. Importantly, playing a game offers first-person experience.<sup>33</sup> It is one thing to watch Albert Pujols make a stunning play at first base during a televised baseball game, but it is quite different to be the one playing first base. Though participants in an informal softball league cannot possibly get a complete picture of what it is like to play on a championship team—and though they may come to some faulty conclusions, I suspect that they will have a better

understanding of the mental and physical demands of the sport than someone who has no first-hand knowledge of the game of baseball.

On my view, works of horror and tragedy provide similar opportunities with regard to the emotions that they elicit. Just as participants in informal games of softball can come to know something of what it is like to be a major league baseball player, spectators of horror films can come to know something of what it is like to be frightened and spectators of tragic plays can come to know something of what it is like to grieve. And they do so in fundamentally the same way: by virtue of first-person experience. When spectators view works of horror and tragedy, they react emotionally, barring impediments (e.g. deficits in the spectator's psychology or in the work's quality). Seeing works of this sort, then, allow us first-hand experience of our own emotional capabilities.

I suspect that such experiences inform analogous situations in real life. Children who play tag are likely to be more adept at evading a real threat because they have honed the requisite physical and strategic skills. Similarly, people who watch horror films are likely to be better acquainted with their own simple emotional responses, and people who watch tragic plays are likely to be better acquainted with their own complex emotional responses.

Like the contemporary developmental psychologists mentioned above, I am cautious about this claim. Though some measure of "desensitization" may occur for those who watch horror films regularly, I am skeptical that even prolonged exposure to horror films causes spectators not to be frightened. Indeed, it seems that part of the appeal of works of horror issues from that genre's capacity for provoking fear. And though lovers of tragedy may have more experience with grief, I am skeptical that this

makes them better at grieving (whatever that may mean). Instead, I want to extend the flexibility hypothesis to our interactions with works of horror and tragedy.

It seems that children learn to adapt to real life situations by virtue of the first-person experiences afforded by the games they play. When they encounter real life analogues of situations that they have experienced in this way, such children are better equipped to respond. If we see works of fiction as functioning in the way that games do, it is likely that our experiences with fiction similarly prepare us for real life analogues. The extent to which we can learn from works of fiction is a subject of fierce debate, and it is an issue that I cannot take a position on here.<sup>34</sup> Instead, I mean only that our experience of emotions elicited by works of fiction informs us about the emotions elicited in real life.

In the real world, the circumstances under which we feel fear and grief are catastrophic—or apparently or potentially so. On this basis, Nussbaum says that emotions are, in effect, “acknowledgements of neediness and lack of self-sufficiency.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, when we hear reports about heroism or cowardice in the face of disaster, we often wonder how we ourselves would act in such circumstances. This wondering stems, in part, from the fact that our emotions sometimes surprise us: even the most stalwart individuals may be frightened of mice or spiders or snakes; we sometimes grieve unexpectedly, at the death of someone we hardly knew or barely liked. While there is no guarantee that aficionados of horror and tragedy will be especially calm or courageous in the face of chaotic events, it is likely that such people will be particularly familiar with their own emotional capacities. But such familiarity doesn’t make the world any less scary or sad.

Why do we willingly submit ourselves to works of art designed to elicit negative emotions? In part, it is because they allow us to experience “off line” emotions that we avoid in real life. And this experience is valuable in and of itself, because it affords us an opportunity to explore our own emotional capacities. This first-person encounter with our emotions facilitates greater flexibility in the face of the chaos of real life.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper has two main goals, one primarily involving the philosophy of emotion, and one primarily involving the philosophy of art.

Prinz and Nussbaum occupy opposite poles of the affective-cognitive divide in the philosophy of emotion. Prinz’s theory is especially apt at analyzing quick bodily reactions to environmental stimuli, such as proximate fear. Nussbaum’s theory is aimed at addressing the long-lasting and deeply personal phenomena that we talk about when discussing our “emotional lives.” Nevertheless, both see emotions as, fundamentally, appraisals. On this basis, I propose dividing instances of emotion into two distinct types: the simple and the complex. Simple instances of emotion are those best described by affective theorists such as Prinz: they are immediate, perhaps automatic, and most closely associated with bodily changes. Complex instances of emotion are those best described by cognitive theorists such as Nussbaum: they are or entail cognition, and they often fester.

Horror and tragedy are paradoxical because, though they are designed to elicit negative emotions, they are widely sought and highly venerated. By appealing to the particular strengths of the media with which horror and tragedy are most closely associated—film and theatre respectively—I argued that the paradox of horror is

primarily a puzzle about simple instances of emotion and that of tragedy is primarily about complex instances of emotion. As ingenious and compelling as the famous solutions to the paradoxes are, they largely work by showing that spectators are “compensated” for the negative emotions provoked by the works. On my view, this line of thinking attempts to solve a paradox about emotional reactions by treating those reactions as acentral. Following the “flexibility hypothesis” posed by contemporary developmental psychologists, I sketched a possible solution to the paradoxes that sees the emotional reactions, negative though they are, as valuable in and of themselves. On such a view, horror and tragedy afford us the opportunity to become familiar with our own emotional capacities, which, I suspect, has real world benefits.

## Notes



<sup>1</sup> This classificatory scheme is not particularly robust, nor need it be for the present purposes. The views that I call *affective* are also sometimes called *perceptual* or *embodied*. *Affective* theories admit of no cognitive component to emotions. *Cognitive* theories hold that at least some emotions have some cognitive component. In other words, all theories that do not meet my strict standard for being considered affective are cognitive. Some philosophers of emotion (for example, Charles Starkey) speak of affective-cognitive hybrid theories as a way of making a fine-grained distinction between the many variant theories of emotion. On my classificatory scheme, such views are simply *cognitive*. As far as I can tell, no one—not even the most cognitive of the cognitive theorists (Robert C. Solomon and Martha Nussbaum are good candidates for this distinction)—holds that all emotional phenomena lack bodily affect, since such a view would be absurd.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, his “Embodied Emotions” in Robert C. Solomon, ed. *Thinking about Feeling*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 57. It is somewhat odd, given Prinz’s position, that he uses the word “perception,” since that word often connotes a mental act. Since Prinz has assiduously asserted that emotions are not in any way cognitive, I take Prinz to be saying this: an emotion is a bodily change, which the subject—consciously or unconsciously—feels. Unlike James, Prinz believes that emotions may be unconscious.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 57.

<sup>5</sup> See her, “Emotion: Biological Fact or Social Construction?” in Solomon (2004).

<sup>6</sup> “Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance” in Solomon (2004), p. 185.

<sup>7</sup> See his “The Emotional Basis of Moral Judgments,” *Philosophical Explorations*, 9, No. 1 (2006), pp. 29-43. and “Emotion and Aesthetic Value,” delivered at the Pacific APA (2007).

<sup>8</sup> Prinz (2006), p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 32

<sup>10</sup> Prinz’s book-length study of emotion is entitled *Gut Reactions*.

<sup>11</sup> “Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance” in Solomon (2004) p. 186.

<sup>12</sup> Damasio (1994) p. xii.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 192-193.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 36.

<sup>15</sup> For a helpful outline of the literature on natural kinds, see, Slater, Matthew H. and Borghini, Andrea, “Introduction: Lessons from the Scientific Butchery” in

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Ellis, Brian, *Scientific Essentialism* (), p.

<sup>17</sup> See Boyd, Richard,

<sup>18</sup> See his “Is Emotion a Natural Kind?” in Solomon (2004).

<sup>19</sup> One might argue that some works in the horror genre horrify by virtue of what I’m calling complex emotions. Indeed, we can talk sensibly about “psychological horror” as a sub-species of the genre—think, for example, of Hitchcock’s classic *Psycho*. Such a work might elicit horror directed at a serial killer’s capacity to do violence without remorse or at the very psychological disorder that gives him that capacity. Works of this sort blur the line between horror and tragedy, and, on my view, they are best classified as a special case of the latter. The villains in such works are human, and what horrifies me is that someone like me could behave so heinously. Because they lack a non-human monster, these works are not ones of psychological horror but something like “frightening tragedy.” (See note 20 below).

<sup>20</sup> Noel Carroll argues that monsters (which he defines as “interstitial” creatures, unnatural beings that frighten because they do not fit neatly into any single category) are a necessary component of works of horror. Paralleling Aristotle, Carroll says that these monsters elicit fear and disgust. Some interpret Carroll as precluding humans from being monsters of this sort, since even the most deranged or psychotic person is not, strictly speaking, interstitial. See his, “Why Horror?” in Neill, Alex and Ridley, Aaron, eds. *Arguing About Art* (Routledge, 2008). (See note 19 above).

<sup>21</sup> I owe this point—and much more—to Stephanie Ross.

<sup>22</sup> For an in-depth discussion of this, see the section “Variable Framing” (pp. 124-133) of Noel Carroll’s *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Some styles of theatre, particularly so-called Environmental Theatre and Total Theatre, do achieve something closer to the environmental dominance of film, the former by producing plays in locations other than traditional theatres (such as warehouses or mansions), the latter by using atypical seating arrangements and “breaking the fourth wall.” I’m thinking here of the much more common proscenium style stage.

<sup>24</sup> Though this is frequently taken to be Aristotle’s view on the matter, it is somewhat difficult to find it in the extant texts. The extant portion of the *Poetics* that discusses the pity and fear aroused by tragedy (§ 14) is focused on *how* tragedians evoke these emotions in spectators, not the effects of having done so. A portion of the *Politics* (8, 7, 1341b38) briefly mentions “catharsis” in response to music and refers to a discussion of the matter in the *Poetics*, which is now lost.

<sup>25</sup> See his *Birth of Tragedy*, especially the “Attempt at Self-Criticism,” which the author added to the 1886 edition.

<sup>26</sup> “Of Tragedy” in *Of the Standard of Taste and other Essays* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p. 29.

<sup>27</sup> See her “The Pleasures of Tragedy,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 20, No. 1 (1983).

<sup>28</sup> One challenge for such a view: As Susan Feagin points out (*Ibid.*), many of the works of narrative that are widely revered and considered most significant are tragic. Horror does not seem to enjoy the same universality, as some people—even people deeply interested in the arts and who exhibit sensitive aesthetic judgment—consciously avoid works of horror like the plague.

<sup>29</sup> See his *The Philosophy of Horror*. This view of horror fits nicely with Carroll’s “erotetic” conception of narrative structure, on which stories engage our intellectual curiosity by posing questions, some of which are answered in the course of the narrative.

<sup>30</sup> See his *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Pelligrini, Anthony, *The Role of Play in Human Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). For a useful overview of this aspect of developmental psychology, see Fagen, Robert M., “Play and Development” in Pelligrini, Anthony, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of The Development of Play* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Dorothy Walsh, *Literature and Knowledge* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), 101. She offers “knowing what it is like” as an addition to Ryle’s distinction between “knowing how” and “knowing that,” and she uses it to describe the sort of knowledge gleaned from literature. Though I am skeptical of its application in that case, [see John Gibson, *Fiction and The Weave of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)] I think it is apt in describing the sort of knowledge made available by participating in games.

<sup>33</sup> Eleonore Stump is another philosopher whose work has valorized first-person experience as a means of knowing. In her *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), she distinguishes propositional knowledge (“knowledge *that*”) from first-person experience, calling the former *Dominican* (after St. Dominic, who was known for his logical argumentation) and the latter *Franciscan* (after St. Francis, who was known for his passion in modeling his own life on that of Christ).

<sup>34</sup> For a cogent overview of this debate and its consequences, see John Gibson’s *Fiction and The Weave of Life*. Gibson defends the position that fictional literature does convey knowledge about the real world, which is as intuitive as it is difficult to support.

<sup>35</sup> “Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance” in Solomon (2004), p. 185.