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## The problem of emotional significance

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# The problem of emotional significance

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## 1. Introduction: emotional fittingness and personal significance

Imagine that you are suddenly confronted by an angry bear: unsurprisingly, you are afraid. Your fear, we might think, fits the situation: an angry bear is indeed a fitting object of fear. But how should we understand this claim?<sup>1</sup>

It might be thought that this question is easy to answer. Emotions, it is sometimes suggested, are associated with a *core relational theme* (Lazarus, 1991: 122). Fear, for example is associated with danger; sorrow with loss; joy with success; anxiety with the prospect of a setback. To say that an emotional response fits the situation, it might be thought, is to say that the situation embodies the relevant theme. Your fear, then, will fit the situation if the bear really is dangerous; sorrow will fit the situation if one really has suffered as loss; and so on.<sup>2</sup> This seems right, as far as it goes.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in the case of fear, we might think that it is more or less sufficient. For other emotions, however, specifying a core relational theme is only a first step in answering the question. Sorrow, for example, is associated with loss. But not every loss is a proper object of sorrow: the loss of a hair or a headache is not usually a sad loss. Sorrow is concerned only with *significant* losses and harms. Similarly, anxiety is concerned with the prospect of a *significant* setback; joy with a *significant* success; and so on. To account for emotional fittingness, then, we need to explain what constitutes an emotionally significant situation.

This is not a straightforward thing to do. For one thing, there are many types of emotion: there is no reason to assume that they can be covered by a single account. Moreover, there are many possible answers.<sup>4</sup> The objective of this paper, however, is not to survey the possibilities. Rather, I want to focus on a particular *kind* of account –

one that has often been proposed, albeit in passing, by theorists of emotion.<sup>5</sup> As I shall explain, this kind of account can plausibly be applied only to a particular class of emotional response. Hence, my discussion will be concerned only with responses of this kind.

The suggestion that I propose to investigate is this:

P Emotional significance is *personal* significance: emotionally significant situations are ones that bear on the subject's interests or concerns.

I take it that P is a plausible claim – plausible enough to merit further investigation. It is natural to think of emotions such as fear, anger, anxiety, sadness, joy, jealousy, embarrassment and pride as concerned, in different ways, with the subject's interests or concerns. There are, however, two important provisos that need to be made.

First, P is not true of all emotional responses. Most obviously, perhaps, it is not true of moral emotions, such as indignation and remorse.<sup>6</sup> Suppose, for example, that Jo is remorseful about something she has done. To know whether her remorse fits the situation, we need to know whether she was responsible for her action and whether it was wrong. But we do not need to know how it bears on her interests or concerns. We do not even need to know whether she believes or cares that her action was wrong: even if her remorse is fleeting and out of character, it might fit the situation, given what she has done. In the case of moral emotions, emotional significance appears to be moral, rather than personal, significance.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, one can fittingly feel anxious or sad for someone else, even when their situation has no bearing on one's own concerns (Tappolet, 2010). We should avoid understanding P in a way that excludes this possibility. There are two ways in which we might allow for it. First, we might understand 'personal significance' in a way that allows one person's concerns to have personal significance for someone else. Secondly,

we might treat emotional responses of this kind as a distinct category, involving a different kind of emotional significance. I shall not try to adjudicate this issue here.

Despite these provisos, I take it that P is plausibly true of an important class of emotional responses: these might include joy at being alone, sorrow about a lost brooch, anxiety about retirement. As it stands, however, P can be interpreted more than one way. One possibility is that personal significance depends on the subject's *preferences* – desires, values or likes. Another is that it depends on the subject's *interests*, understood as independent of their preferences.<sup>8</sup> My aim here is to consider which of these interpretations is most plausible.

The interpretation that I favour is a kind of preference-based account. It differs from other preference-based accounts in that it appeals to the subject's *likes*, rather than their desires or values. In Section 2, I shall set out this likes-based account. I shall then contrast it with other possible interpretations of P. In Section 3, I shall consider other kinds of preference-based account; and in Section 4, I shall discuss an interest-based account. My aim is to establish that, of the accounts considered here, the likes-based account provides the most plausible interpretation of P.

## **2. A likes-based account**

### **2.1 Introducing likes and dislikes**

My first task is to explain how I am using the terms 'like' and 'dislike'. To like a certain condition – as I shall use the term here – is to have a settled disposition to experience it as pleasant or rewarding; to dislike something is to have a settled disposition to experience it as unpleasant or distressing. My usage here is not intended to reflect the full range of meanings that these terms can have in ordinary conversation: I am using these terms in a much more restricted sense.

Experiences of pleasure or distress are not all of a kind: they include bodily sensations of pain, hunger and comfort; but they also include feelings of excitement, boredom, satisfaction, frustration, relief, disappointment, loneliness, elation and misery. What these feelings have in common is that they signal how things are going for the subject in various ways (Millgram, 1993: 401): these might include the satisfaction of basic biological needs, such as being warm and well-fed; as well as social and psychological needs, such as autonomy, social interaction and intellectual stimulation. Likes, in this sense, concern types of condition, rather than particular people or objects. Nevertheless, a person may develop likes that are quite specific, and these may involve particular objects: for example, a father might like having his own children around him.

Some likes, I take it, are inherited. These include likes for basic necessities, such as warmth and food. We have them because, in the past, human beings who liked these things did better than those who did not. However, this is not to say that everyone likes these things in the same quantities or to the same degree: people differ in temperament; and likes can change with age. Moreover, likes can be learned and even deliberately cultivated: one can become sensitive to noise or accustomed to solitude; one can make an effort to like skateboarding or jazz. A person's likes, then, depend on their particular history: evolutionary, cultural and personal.

Some likes and dislikes can be described as *malformed*. Consider static mechanical allodynia – a condition in which the subject experiences light pressure as painful. In this case, there is an obvious sense in which the subject's aversion is malformed: it is due to neural damage. Conceivably, likes can also be malformed because they have been *mislabeled*. Suppose that Kevin has a profound aversion to crowds, sparked by a single incident when, as a child, he became briefly separated from his mother. Arguably, Kevin's enduring aversion is mislabeled, in that it does not

properly reflect his past experience: rather than being shaped by his experience as a whole, it is an overreaction to a single incident in his childhood.

We can make sense of the idea that likes can be malformed only if we hold that the processes by which we acquire them are governed by norms of some kind. There is room for different views about the nature of these norms: which view we should adopt will depend on our broader theories about the nature of the mind.<sup>9</sup> Nothing that I shall say here turns on this broader issue, however. What matters is just the claim that likes can be malformed. This is important because, as I shall explain later, it might be thought to raise a dilemma for the likes-based theorist.

My next task is to explore, very briefly, the relationships between likes, desires, values and interests. The importance of the points made here will emerge later on, when I contrast the likes-based account with its rivals.

## **2.2 Likes, desires and interests**

Liking something is not the same as wanting or valuing it. Admittedly, a subject's desires and values are shaped by their likes. But someone can like a situation without first having wanted it. Perhaps they never envisaged the situation before it occurred; or perhaps they are mistaken about their likes. Conversely, a person may want or value a situation that they do not like. Again, this might be due to a lack of self-knowledge; but it may be because their desires reflect considerations – moral or personal ideals, perhaps – that are independent of their likes.<sup>10</sup>

The relationship between likes and interests is more complex. It will depend, of course, on what we take a person's interests to be. We might identify a person's interests with the satisfaction of their preferences or with the happiness that results. Here, however, I am casting the interest-based account as an alternative to preference-based accounts: for my current purposes, then, I cannot define a person's interests in

terms of their preferences. Rather, I am going to assume something like an ‘objective list’ theory of interests (Parfit, 1986: 499; Brink, 1989: 231-4). According to objective list theories, there are certain goods that are required for a successful human life: these might include health, autonomy, social interaction and intellectual stimulation. What is in a person’s interests, then, is to possess goods of these kinds.

There are obvious connections between interests and likes. If certain goods are required for a good life, these will be things that people would do well to like. Moreover, it is reasonable to suppose that a plausible list of interests will be a list of things that people characteristically *do* like. For our likes reflect, in part, our nature as biological and social creatures of a certain kind; and it is reasonable to suppose that a plausible list of objective goods will do so too.

Arguably, though, there is a more intimate relationship between interests and likes. Earlier I suggested that the experiences of pleasure and pain that manifest our likes can be seen as signalling the satisfaction or frustration of our biological or psychological needs. If so, it is natural to suppose that our likes, too, will often reflect our interests. More precisely, our likes will often reflect the particular ways in which we are accustomed to satisfy our interests. These will vary, depending on our individual traits and capacities and on the opportunities available to us: one person may satisfy their social needs through amateur dramatics, another by watching sport with their friends. Moreover, our likes do not simply reflect our interests: they also *motivate* us to seek out situations and activities in which, experience suggests, we are able to satisfy our interests. Without this motivation, opportunities may be left unexploited. Perhaps bridge parties could provide me with all intellectual stimulation I need; but I will not exploit this opportunity if I hate playing bridge.

One corollary of this is that there is an important distinction between interests and likes: a person's likes will generally be far more specific than their interests. This is because our interests, as I am conceiving them here, are concerned with goods that are required for *any* good human life; while the likes of particular person will reflect their particular circumstances and experience. Hence, while it may be true that everyone has an interest in maintaining a good social life, *how much* and *what kinds of* social interaction someone likes will vary from person to person.

Moreover, not all our likes are connected with our interests. A person may harbour likes that are quite independent of their interests. These will include malformed likes. But some well-formed likes fall into this category too. Consider, for example, someone who loves parachuting. Conceivably, her hobby makes no contribution to her social or intellectual life; it does not promote her autonomy or even her health. She simply enjoys the sensation of falling to earth. There is no reason, I take it, to think that this is a malformed like. Nevertheless, it reflects the subject's tastes, rather than her interests. (In what follows, I shall refer to likes of this kind as 'idle likes'.)

Our likes, I have suggested, can be distinguished both from our values and desires and from our interests. The relationship between our interests and our likes is intimate, but also complex. Our likes, I have suggested, often concern situations and activities which enable us to satisfy our interests; moreover, they motivate us to exploit those opportunities. But this is not always the case: some well-formed likes are independent of our interests.

### **2.3 The likes-based account**

The likes-based account centres on the following claim:

- L     The personal significance of a situation is a matter of how it bears on one or more of the subject's likes or dislikes.



Suppose that Linda is anxious about the prospect of retirement. On the likes-based account, retirement would be a significant setback for Linda if it would leave her in a condition – of social isolation, say – that she has a settled disposition to experience as unpleasant or distressing. Conversely, avoiding retirement would be a significant success if it would leave her in a situation that she has a settled disposition to experience as rewarding.<sup>11</sup>

In some cases, an emotional response *directly manifests* a like or dislike: Kevin's panicky feelings in a crowd, for example, directly manifest his dislike of crowds. In other cases, the relationship is less direct: Linda's anxiety need not manifest a dislike of retirement as such, but rather her dislike of some condition – social isolation – that she expects to follow if she retires now. We might say that her anxiety *accords with* her dislike. On the likes-based account, then, certain emotional responses fit the situation only if they either manifest or accord with the subject's likes and dislikes.

In applying this account, we should remember that emotional significance is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for fittingness. To judge whether an emotional response fits the situation we also need to consider the core relational theme associated with that type of response. Sorrow, for example, implies that the subject has suffered a significant *loss*; anxiety implies that they face a significant *setback*; and so on. Indeed, in some cases, the core relational theme associated with a particular type of emotional response constrains which likes or dislikes might be at stake. Fear, for example, is associated with physical danger: hence fear relates specifically to our basic biological aversion to injury and death. This is why, in the case of fear, the question of emotional fittingness is not particularly pressing: it is relatively obvious what fearful situations have in common. In contrast, it is less obvious what worrying situations have in common: a setback might relate to any of the subject's likes, including likes shaped by

their particular history. On this account, then, we cannot say that a situation is worrying *tout court*: it is worrying *for* a particular person, depending on their history.<sup>12</sup>

To say that a situation has a certain personal significance for someone is not to make a claim about their likes overall. Indeed, it seems possible to like something in one way, but dislike it in another. Hence, the likes-based account allows scope for what we might call ‘fitting ambivalence’. Suppose that a grandmother finds her grandchildren’s company both charming and exhausting: hearing that they have cancelled a visit, she feels both disappointed and relieved. Her emotions are ambivalent; but each is fitting, on this account, because each accords with a like (or dislike) of hers.

#### **2.4 Misplaced emotional responses**

It might be objected that the likes-based account does not allow for misplaced emotional responses.<sup>13</sup> This is because, in many cases, liking a certain condition involves having certain emotional dispositions – for example, a disposition to experience a certain situation as uplifting or depressing. It might be thought, then, that the account amounts to nothing more than the claim that an emotional response fits the situation if the subject is disposed to have that emotion in that situation. If so, an emotional response could never be misplaced: for the fact that the subject has that emotion entails that they are disposed to have it in that situation.

I shall concede that, on the likes-based account, there are cases in which an emotional response fits the situation simply because the subject has a (settled) disposition to experience that emotion in that kind of situation. Suppose that a hiker is standing by the side of a lonely mountain lake, rejoicing in his solitude. Suppose too, that he really is alone; and that he really does love solitude.<sup>14</sup> In this case, the likes-based account does indeed imply that the hiker’s joy fits the situation; and that this is

because this is just the sort of situation in which he has a (settled) disposition to rejoice. In this kind of case, there is nothing more to say.

Even in this case, however, there is no guarantee that the hiker's joy fits the situation. First, he may not actually be alone: perhaps he has failed to notice the crowd of boy scouts silently gathering behind him. If so, his joy is misplaced because the situation fails to embody the appropriate core relational theme: he has not succeeded in being alone. Secondly, his joy may not manifest a *settled* disposition: perhaps he is the kind of person who cannot bear to be alone for five minutes, but has been briefly caught up in a fantasy of himself as a self-reliant backwoodsman. If so, his joy is misplaced, because it does not, after all, manifest a like. Similar possibilities arise in a case in which an emotional response accords with, rather than directly manifests, the subject's likes: Linda's anxiety will be misplaced if she is not, in fact, facing the prospect of retirement; or if retirement will not affect her as she expects.

There are, then, at least two ways in which an emotional response might turn out to be misplaced, on the likes-based account. As we, shall see in the next section, there is room for a third, depending on how the likes-based theorist deals with cases involving malformed likes.

## **2.5 Malformed likes**

Earlier, I suggested that some likes can be described as malformed. What should the likes-based theorist say about malformed likes?

Suppose that Mitch is a compulsive hoarder. Assume too that his love of hoarding is malformed: it is the product of some psychological or physiological process that has not occurred as it should.<sup>15</sup> Suppose too that Mitch is devastated when relatives clear out his collection of old newspapers. Does his sorrow fit the situation? Certainly, he has suffered a loss; moreover, he has lost something that he cared deeply about.

Nevertheless, there is surely *some* sense in which Mitch ought not to feel sad: his sorrow accords with a like that (in one sense) he ought not to have.

There are two responses that a likes-based theorist might make in this case. First, they might insist that Mitch's sorrow fits the situation, insofar as it accords with his likes. Someone who takes this line can still allow that, in most conversational contexts, it would be misleading simply to assert that Mitch's sorrow fits the situation. The assertion would be misleading, not because it is false, but because it overlooks the more pressing point that his sorrow reflects a love of hoarding that is itself malformed. There is an important sense, then, in which Mitch ought not to feel sad. This is not because he has misevaluated the personal significance of his loss; rather, it is because his loss ought not to have the personal significance that it has. Alternatively, a likes-based theorist might adopt what I shall call an *ideal* likes-based account. On this kind of account, the personal significance of a situation is determined only by the subject's *well-formed* likes – likes that properly reflect the subject's history. On this view, Mitch's sorrow is misplaced, because it does not accord with any of his well-formed likes.

There is room, then, for dispute between likes-based theorists about this kind of case.<sup>16</sup> Both accounts imply that Mitch ought not to feel sad, but they suggest different ways of understanding this claim. As a result, it is difficult to resolve the issue by appealing to what we might naturally say about this case.<sup>17</sup> I am not going to try to resolve the dispute here. Instead, I shall bear both versions of the account in mind in what follows.

The likes-based theorist, then, holds that the personal significance of a situation is a matter of how it bears on the subject's likes and dislikes, where these are understood as settled dispositions to experience a certain situation as either pleasant or unpleasant. I have considered how the likes-based theorist might deal with emotional

responses arising from malformed likes; and I have explained how the account can allow for misplaced emotional responses. My next task is to explain why we might prefer this kind of account to other possible interpretations of P. In the next section I shall contrast the likes-based account with two other preference-based accounts. I shall begin by introducing these rival accounts.

### **3. Preference-based accounts**

#### **3.1 Varieties of preference-based account**

The likes-based account has two important features. First, it focuses on a particular *type* of preference – that is, the subject’s likes. Secondly, it is a relatively *undemanding* account: according to the likes-based account, the personal significance of a situation depends on how it bears on *one or more* of the subject’s likes, rather than their likes overall. It is possible to envisage other preference-based accounts that share these features. For example, we might envisage a *desires-based account*, on which the personal significance of a situation is a matter of how it bears on one or more of the subject’s desires or values.

In contrast, Bennett Helm (2001) has developed a preference-based account that differs from the likes-based account in both these ways. Underlying Helm’s account is a claim about evaluative rationality. According to Helm (2001, 60-98; 152-6), we are under a rational obligation to ensure that all our preferences – evaluative judgments, desires, emotional attitudes and likes – are mutually coherent, in the following sense: someone who judges something to be valuable without desiring it, or who desires something that they neither like nor value, is guilty of a kind of irrationality. On Helm’s view, then, a fully rational person can be ascribed a single, overarching evaluative perspective, determined by all their preferences taken together: an emotional response will fit the situation only if it coheres with the subject’s evaluative perspective overall

(Helm, 2001: 125-160; 153). On Helm's account, then, the personal significance of a situation does not depend on a particular type of preference, but on preferences of every kind: likes, desires, values and emotional attitudes. Moreover, Helm takes personal significance to be determined the subject's preferences *overall*.

The two accounts under consideration, then, can be summarised as follows:

- D The personal significance of a situation is a matter of how it bears on one or more of the subject's desires or values (The desires-based account).
- H The personal significance of a situation is a matter of how it bears on the subject's evaluative perspective overall (Helm's account).

Both these rival accounts imply that our desires and values help to determine personal significance. This is the claim that I need to test in what follows. To do this, I shall explore three scenarios in which the subject's desires and values clash with their likes. I shall argue that the likes-based account offers the most plausible way of characterising these cases.

### **3.2 Scenarios 1 and 2**

Linda believes that changes at her workplace may soon force her to retire. Moreover, she wholeheartedly wants to retire and judges that it would be best for her to do so. She believes that retirement would provide the freedom and tranquillity she needs to thrive. In fact, as her friends know, Linda thrives on the 'buzz' that her working environment provides. If her desire were satisfied, she would be miserable.

*Scenario 1* When Linda's manager suddenly summons her to a meeting, she is gripped by anxiety: freedom and tranquillity suddenly strike her as terrifying.

*Scenario 2* When Linda is told that she will not have to retire, she feels disappointed.

In the first scenario, the likes-based account implies that Linda's anxiety fits the situation: since retirement would make her miserable, her anxiety reflects the personal significance that the situation has for her. The desires-based account, in contrast, implies that Linda's emotional response is misplaced: for, given that she wholeheartedly wants to retire, her anxiety accords with none of her desires. The result would be different if Linda's desires were ambivalent. As I have constructed the example, however, Linda's anxiety is at odds with *all* her desires.<sup>18</sup> Hence these accounts produce opposing verdicts in this case. In the second scenario, the verdicts are reversed. Since Linda would take no pleasure in retirement, the likes-based account implies that her disappointment is misplaced. The desires-based account, in contrast, implies that her disappointment fits the situation, because she has failed to get something that she wants.

What should Helm say about these cases? For Helm, the personal significance that the situation has for Linda depends on her evaluative perspective overall. One question, then, is whether Linda can be ascribed a single evaluative perspective on the situation. According to Helm, this depends on how far her judgment is supported by her other preferences (Helm, 2001: 150). Suppose, first, that Linda's preferences are sufficiently coherent to constitute a single evaluative perspective in favour of retirement. If so, Helm should concur with the desires-based theorist: Linda's disappointment fits the situation, while her anxiety is misplaced. Alternatively, it may be impossible to ascribe a single evaluative perspective to Linda (Helm, 2001: 134-142). If so, there is no clear standard against which her emotional responses can be judged: they are neither fitting nor misplaced.<sup>19</sup>

I would like to suggest that, of these three accounts, the likes-based account gives the most plausible set of verdicts in these cases. In the first scenario, Linda's anxiety comes as a surprise to her. Plausibly, though, her later unhappiness shows that

she did, indeed, have something to be anxious about, even if her feelings were hard to understand at the time. Again, in the second scenario, we can easily imagine Linda's friends telling her that she has nothing to be disappointed about, and that she should feel relief at her manager's decision; for retirement, they know, would only make her miserable.<sup>20</sup> As we have seen, the desires-based account gives precisely the opposite verdicts in these cases. Helm's account raises a third possibility: that in these first two scenarios, Linda's emotional responses are neither fitting nor misplaced. On the face of it, though, it seems clear what we should say.

### 3.3 Scenario 3

Consider, now, a third possibility.

*Scenario 3* Linda judges that that it would be best to retire. She makes this judgment, knowing that retirement will make her miserable, believing that her ideals require her to live in a more challenging and precarious way. When her manager summons her to a meeting, she is gripped by anxiety. After retirement, she finds that her new life fulfils her ideals, even though, as expected, she does not enjoy it.

Once again, the likes-based account implies that Linda's anxiety fits the situation: for she will not enjoy her retirement. In this case, the desires-based theorist might well agree: for in this scenario, Linda is aware that retirement will make her miserable; as a result, it seems likely that her desires are ambivalent. Suppose then that Linda continues to harbour a desire to go on working, despite her ideals. If so, her anxiety will reflect this recalcitrant desire. Both these accounts, then, allow that Linda's anxiety fits the situation, while allowing that her judgment might also be correct. These accounts permit this kind of ambivalence because they assume that Linda's anxiety reflects a narrower range of considerations than her judgment. As a result, her emotional response and her



judgment do not directly contradict each other. They clash, rather, in motivating different kinds of practical response: Linda's judgment implies that she should welcome retirement; her anxiety impels her to resist it.

What might Helm say about this third scenario? In this case, it seems likely that Linda's judgment represents her evaluative perspective overall. For it reflects the broad set of values to which she is committed; moreover, she has not overlooked her likes, but has chosen to set them aside. If so, Helm should conclude that Linda's anxiety is misplaced – contradicting the likes-based account.

The third scenario is more complex than the first two. On the one hand, Linda believes, rightly, that retirement will be disruptive and unpleasant. On the other hand, she clear-sightedly wants to retire; indeed, she values retirement precisely because of the disruption it will cause. It might be suggested, then, that Linda's commitment to her ideals alters the personal significance of the situation: retirement will be a significant success for Linda because it will give her what she values overall, just as Helm's account implies. I would suggest, though, that this does not quite ring true. For no matter how much Linda wants to retire, no matter how well-considered her judgment, the fact remains that retirement will be a painful and disorientating experience. Plausibly, she has good grounds to balk at it.

Linda's situation might be compared to others with a similar structure. Suppose that a woman who loves to keep busy is told by her doctor that she needs to slow down; she accepts this, and wants to follow her doctor's advice; yet she finds the prospect depressing. Or suppose that a father's much-loved daughter is leaving home; he wants her to have an independent life; he judges, too, that this would be best for both of them overall; yet, he is sad that she will no longer need him. In these cases, too, the subjects'

emotions balk precisely at what they want and judge best overall. Yet, on the face of it, they do have something to be sad about – as the likes-based theorist suggests.

What, though, of Helm's claim that we are rationally obliged to ensure that our preferences are mutually coherent? Given that Linda is aware of the clash between her emotional response and her other preferences, is her anxiety not irrational? It is important to note that this claim is very controversial. It is far from clear why people should be under any general obligation to ensure that their preferences are coherent overall.<sup>21</sup> In the case of beliefs, it is possible to explain why knowingly harbouring inconsistent beliefs is irrational: our beliefs reflect an independent reality which is itself assumed to be consistent; hence, if one belief contradicts another, at least one must be false. A value realist might hold that this is true of values, too; but Helm, I take it, is not committed to value realism. It might be suggested, perhaps, that evaluative coherence is required for effective agency: evaluative ambivalence makes it impossible to decide what to do. But this seems false: characteristically, our practical decisions are shaped by a host of considerations: ambivalence over one is unlikely to lead to paralysis. Indeed, it has been argued that maintaining a degree of ambivalence is beneficial because it allows for some flexibility and creativity in an uncertain world (Greenspan, 1980; Rorty, 2010). Of course, these brief remarks are not enough to establish that Helm is wrong about this. Nevertheless, the case for evaluative coherence does not itself appear to be so strong that it compels us to re-evaluate this case.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, there is another, more modest objection that might be pressed against the likes-based account. Whatever her grounds for anxiety, Linda surely has a reason to overcome her feelings in this particular case. This might be true, regardless of whether there is any general requirement to maintain evaluative coherence. If so, it might be taken to show that her desires and values help to determine the personal

significance of the situation after all. For what other reason could she have to bring her feelings into line? Now, I accept that Linda has a reason to overcome her anxiety. I would argue, though, that this is not because her anxiety is misplaced. For Linda has another reason to conquer her feelings: her anxiety motivates her to resist retirement. Hence her anxiety constitutes a practical obstacle to the pursuit of her ideals.

This leaves a problem, however: if Linda's anxiety fits the situation, how can she reasonably try to overcome it? Would this not require a kind of self-deception – of the kind someone might employ to eradicate a true but inconvenient belief? The problem dissolves, however, once we consider what practical steps Linda might take to deal with her anxiety. In the short term, perhaps, she might remind herself that she wants to retire; but we need not assume that she is thereby re-evaluating the personal significance of the situation. Rather, she may be reminding herself that there are other things at stake. In the longer term, she might prepare herself for the change by learning to enjoy different kinds of activity and by forging new friendships and commitments. In doing this, she is not re-evaluating the personal significance of the situation. Rather, she is trying to *change* it – by changing her likes.<sup>23</sup>

I have considered three scenarios in which the subject's desires and values clash with their likes. I have suggested that the first two scenarios give clear support to the likes-based account and that the likes-based account offers a plausible verdict in the third scenario. Moreover, the account offers a credible explanation of why and how Linda might try to overcome her anxiety. I would conclude that there are good reasons to prefer a likes-based account to the rival preference-based accounts considered here. If this is right, it suggests that the emotional responses such as sorrow and anxiety answer to the subject's likes, and not their desires or values.

There remains, however, a further possibility. It might be suggested that Linda's anxiety fits the situation, not because retirement will leave her in a situation that she dislikes, but because it will damage one or more of her interests, where these are understood as independent of the subject's preferences. It is possible, then, that personal significance is determined, not by the subject's preferences, but by their interests. It is now time to consider this suggestion.

#### **4. An interest-based account**

##### **4.1 The appeal to interests**

Earlier, I suggested that we should identify a person's interests with their possession of certain goods – health, prosperity, autonomy, social interaction, intellection stimulation, and so on – conceived as goods required for a good human life. On an interest-based account, then, a situation will have positive personal significance for the subject insofar as it allows the subject to secure one or more of these goods; it will have negative personal significance insofar as it deprives the subject of a good of this kind. This will be true, regardless of whether the subject likes, desires or values these things.

Consider, for example, the case of Linda. Retirement, I suggested, will restrict Linda's social life. In doing this, we might think, it deprives her of an important good, so damaging her interests. It looks then, as if the interest-based theorist should agree with the likes-based theorist that Linda has cause to be anxious about retirement. Nevertheless, the two theorists will describe this case in different ways. For the interest-based theorist, what matters is that retirement will deprive Linda of something valuable, regardless of whether she finds the loss distressing. Exactly the same point applies in the case of Mitch, who is sad to lose his collection of old newspapers. For the interest-

based theorist, Mitch's sorrow will fit the situation only if the loss of his collection will damage one or more of his interests.

So far there seems to be little to choose between the two accounts. In what follows, however, I shall argue that the interest-based theory faces three difficulties: the specificity problem; the problem of idle likes; and the problem of motivation. As we shall see, all these problems stem from the complex and intimate relationship between interests and likes explored in Section 2.

#### **4.2 The specificity problem**

Earlier, I suggested that we should expect a person's likes to be more specific than their interests. This is because interests are common to all human beings, while a person's likes reflect the particular ways in which they are disposed to satisfy their interests. A person's likes, then, will normally reflect their particular circumstances, traits and capacities. This contrast between interests and likes raises a difficulty for the interest-based theorist.

Consider, once again, the case of Linda. Linda's social life, I suggested, will be curtailed when she retires. So far, I have assumed that this will damage her interests. In fact, this was too quick: it is possible, after all, that Linda's social life is currently *too* active, and that it would be in her interests to socialise less. What matters, as far as her interests are concerned, is not whether she will have *less* social interaction, but whether she will have less than she needs. The challenge for the interest-based theorist, then, is to explain what this means – and to do so without appealing to Linda's desires or likes.

For some goods, perhaps, there is a common standard to which we can appeal: perhaps medical science can define what constitutes good health for someone of Linda's gender and age. But there seems to be no common measure that determines how much social interaction or intellectual stimulation people should have: this is a matter on

which individuals vary. But perhaps it might be suggested that there at least some *minimum* amount of social interaction needed to live a good life, and that Linda's interests will suffer if she drops below this minimum standard. On this view, Linda would be entitled to feel anxious about retirement only if retirement would push her below this standard. But this seems implausibly harsh: it implies that Linda has cause to care only about meeting this minimum standard, even if it falls well short of satisfying her preferences. If retirement will leave her lonely and bored, this is surely sufficient to warrant her anxiety.

More plausibly, it might be suggested that it is in Linda's interests to have as much social interaction as possible, provided that she does not have too much. She has too much, perhaps, if her social activities are seriously damaging her other interests. So long as she is not in this position, it might be thought, any diminution in her social life will leave her worse off; hence she is entitled to feel anxious at the prospect.

It is worth noting that this solution implies a rather different interpretation of the objective list account. It implies that we should understand the account, not just as a claim about what is required for a good life, but as a claim about what constitutes the *best possible* life. The suggestion is that, up to a certain point, the more of these goods one has, the better one's life will be; conversely, the less one has, the worse one's life will be. This is a much stronger claim.

Moreover, it is not obviously true. Suppose that, prior to retirement, Linda enjoys a rich social life – though not so rich that it damages her other interests. Linda's brother, Lee, also has an active social life, but one that is quieter than Linda's. He fills his spare time tending his garden or fixing an old boat – activities that he enjoys, but which do not promote his interests. Linda and Lee find their lives equally satisfying; indeed Lee would not welcome a fuller social life. Nevertheless, on the view under

consideration, Lee is worse off than Linda: it would be in his interests to socialise more. It is far from clear, though, that this is true. Given that Lee not only has plenty of social contact but also as much as he would like, it is not clear how he would benefit from having more. But if this is right, it is not clear why (her preferences aside) Linda would be worse off if her social life were more like Lee's.

I am suggesting, then, that the interest-based account is unable to determine whether retirement would constitute a personally significant loss for Linda. The problem arises because the conception of interests underpinning the account is concerned only with *what kinds* of goods are needed for a good human life: it does not determine *how much* of these goods any individual should have. As a result, the interest-based account does not determine at what point a diminution in her social life would damage Linda's interests. The problem would be easily solved if we could appeal to people's likes: Linda's interests, we might think, will be damaged if she has less social interaction than she would like; while Lee will not benefit from having more than he would enjoy. To take this line, however, would be to give up the attempt to account for personal significance without appealing to the subject's preferences.<sup>24</sup>

#### **4.3 The problem of idle likes**

In Section 2, I suggested that people can have idle likes – that is, well-formed likes that are independent of their interests. I gave the example of an enthusiastic parachutist, whose hobby does nothing to satisfy her interests. Suppose, now, that this enthusiastic parachutist has been advised that her hobby is damaging her health, and she must give it up. She is frustrated and sad. On the likes-based account, her sorrow fits the situation: she has lost something that she loves. In contrast, the interest-based account implies that her sorrow is misplaced: giving up parachuting damages none of her interests; rather, it promotes them.

Once again, though, this seems unduly harsh. Plausibly, the subject's loss is a fitting object of sorrow, even if it is unequivocally in her interests to abandon her hobby. The situation is similar to the case of the woman who is depressed by the thought of giving up her active lifestyle, or the father who is sad at the thought that his daughter no longer needs him. In those cases, the subjects' emotions balked at what they judged best; in this case, the subject's emotions balk at what is actually in her interests. Yet all these subjects have something to be sad about: the loss of something they care for.

The interest-based theorist might object that I have misdescribed this case. Our lives, they might claim, are enriched by doing things we enjoy: to live a good life, we need to be able to satisfy some of our well-formed likes. Hence, giving up parachuting will damage the subject's interests, after all.<sup>25</sup> If we take this line, however, it will become much harder to distinguish the interest-based account from the likes-based account. For the interest-based theorist will hold that, in nearly every case, the subject's interests and likes coincide. I have already suggested that if something is in someone's interests, we can normally expect them to like it, at least to some degree. But now it turns out that the implication also runs in the other direction: if there is something that someone likes, it will be in their interests to have it. The interest-based account will all but collapse into the likes-based account.

#### **4.4 The problem of motivation**

The collapse, however, is not quite complete. It remains possible to find a kind of case in which the two accounts continue to diverge: this a case in which the subject has no liking at all for something that it would be in their interests to have. It is not altogether easy to manufacture this kind of case. Someone who is healthy to a degree that impacts upon their interests can surely be expected to have pleasant experiences as



a result, at least in the long term. Hence, situations that bear upon the subject's health will also bear upon their likes. Autonomy is a harder case, if only because it is unclear what it involves. But it is hard to imagine someone acting autonomously on a desire without caring about it – that is, being disposed to feel some degree of satisfaction when it is fulfilled or frustration when it is thwarted – even if their feelings overall are ambivalent. If so, situations that bear on the subject's autonomy will also inevitably bear upon their likes.

However, in the case of goods such as social interaction or intellectual stimulation, we can imagine the subject's well-formed likes diverging from their interests. For example, consider the following case:

Neil is a recluse, who takes no pleasure in social contact. He has learned that a birthday party, organised in his honour by his relatives, has been cancelled. If the event had gone ahead, he would not have enjoyed it; nor would it have helped him to enjoy similar events in the future. Yet – sentimentally, perhaps – he feels sad about the cancellation.

The interest-based theorist will hold that the Neil's sorrow fits the situation: whatever his preferences, it is in his interests to have some social contact. The likes-based theory in contrast, implies that his sorrow is misplaced: Neil has no cause to feel sad about missing an event that he would not have enjoyed. Of course, the likes-based theorist can allow that there is a sense in which Neil ought to be sad about the cancellation: it would be in his interests to care about events of this kind; still, no matter how regrettable his feelings may be, his sorrow does not reflect the personal significance that the situation has for him. This dispute, then, is similar to the dispute between the two likes-based theorists over the case of Mitch. Both theorists can agree that there is some sense in which Neil *should* feel sad: but they will disagree about how to understand this claim.

In this case, though, there is a reason to prefer the verdict offered by the likes-based account. In Section 2, I suggested that people's likes not only often reflect the different ways they have found to satisfy their interests; they also enable them to exploit those opportunities, by motivating them to seek out situations and engage in activities that benefit them. In this case, however, Neil has no motivation to exploit the possibilities for social contact that the party would have offered: the social contact on offer would have been endured, rather than pleurably pursued. Under these circumstances, it is hard to see how he would have benefited from the event.<sup>26</sup> To say that it is in Neil's interests to have some social contact surely implies more than that he should sometimes converse with other people; it implies that he should engage with them in ways that he finds enjoyable and worthwhile. A similar point can be made about cases involving intellectually stimulating activities.

Of course, it is open to the interest-based theorist to take account of this point: they might allow that satisfying one's interests sometimes depends on having the capacity to enjoy certain kinds of situation or activity. If they make this move, though, the interest-based theory really will collapse into the likes-based account. For not only will it turn out that satisfying one's (well-formed) likes constitutes a way of satisfying one's interests, it will also turn out that satisfying one's interests will always imply satisfying one's likes.

I have argued that the most plausible version of the interest-based account is, in effect, identical to the likes-based account. The reasons for this can be traced back to the complex and intimate relationship between interests and likes. Moreover, in Section 3, I argued that there are good reasons to prefer the likes-based theory to preference-based accounts that appeal to the subject's desires or values. If this is right, the conclusion to

draw is that, of these accounts, it is the likes-based theory that provides the most plausible interpretation of P.

## **5. Summary**

I began by suggesting that, for some emotional responses, it is plausible to suppose that emotional significance is a kind of personal significance. There are several ways in which this claim might be understood: I have argued that there are good reasons to take the view that personal significance is determined largely, and perhaps wholly, by the subject's likes. If this is correct, it suggests a certain picture of the role of emotion in our practical lives. On this account, our emotions constitute a mode of evaluation that is independent of our desires and values, and which is only indirectly responsive to reason. Yet it also implies that our emotional susceptibilities are not simply imposed upon us from outside: they reflect our history as individuals, and answer to our most fundamental concerns.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> Fittingness, I shall assume, is one of many standards we might use to assess your response. In particular, to say that fear fits the situation is not to say that it is beneficial or morally commendable: it might sometimes be useful or admirable to be unafraid, even if the situation warrants fear (D'Arms and Jacobson, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> There are several ways in which this suggestion might be developed. A tempting possibility is Jesse Prinz's (2004: 64-7) suggestion that the core relational theme helps to constitute the representational content of the emotional evaluation.

<sup>3</sup> See Mulligan (2010) for a more sceptical view.

<sup>4</sup> We might adopt a robust subjectivism, on which emotional significance is in the eye of the beholder; or we might adopt some kind of non-reductive value realism (Mulligan, 2010); there are many other possibilities besides.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Arnold (1960:171); Lyons (1980: 35); Solomon (1993:128-9); Ben Ze-ev (2000: 18-23); Nussbaum (2001: 30-33); Roberts (2003: 141-8); Prinz (2004: 63).

<sup>6</sup> Intellectual and aesthetic emotions are likely exceptions too.

<sup>7</sup> The line between personal and moral responses is not clear-cut. If Jo is ashamed of her action, her response might involve a mix of personal and moral shame; and these feelings may be hard to disentangle. In anger, the personal and the moral are even more closely intertwined. I am not assuming, though, that it is always easy to make this distinction. I am assuming only that there are some cases that are clearly non-moral cases. These are the cases that I am trying to account for here.

<sup>8</sup> For examples of these different approaches, see Aaron Ben Ze'ev (2000: 18) and Martha Nussbaum (2001: 30-33).

<sup>9</sup> My own view is that these norms are at root biological and historical norms. The idea will be that the processes by which we acquire likes and dislikes is controlled by developmental and psychological mechanisms of some kind; historically, these mechanisms have functioned to ensure that our likes and dislikes develop in a way that (very roughly) promotes our capacity to survive and produce healthy offspring, and they have done this in a particular way. In Kevin's case, perhaps, these mechanisms have not operated as they (historically) should. This notion of a historical norm derives from Millikan (1983: 33-34); see also [Author (2001: 48-49).] However, there are other ways in which a likes-based theorist might understand the relevant norms.

<sup>10</sup> Admittedly, people tend to dislike having their desires frustrated. But to say that people like to satisfy their desires does not imply that their desires are necessarily for things that they like.

<sup>11</sup> The likes-based account might be compared to claims that Elijah Millgram (1993) and Robert Audi have made about desire (2001: 86-88). Millgram and Audi both argue that certain kinds of desire are both rooted in and justified by experiences of pleasure or distress. The likes-based account makes a similar claim about certain kinds of emotional response.

<sup>12</sup> de Sousa (2002: 255-56) appeals to the evolutionary, social and personal history of our emotional capacities to define a notion of semantic success for an emotional response. However, he makes no appeal to likes in his account. Compare also Baier (1990), who emphasises the historical character of emotional fittingness.

<sup>13</sup> I am using the term 'misplaced' to refer simply to emotional responses that fail to fit the situation.

<sup>14</sup> In what follows, I shall assume that the hiker loves being alone, not merely feeling *as if* he is alone. The difference, I take it, lies in how he is disposed to respond were he to discover that he is not, in fact, alone.

<sup>15</sup> As I mentioned earlier, this presupposes the existence of norms that governing the processes by which likes and dislikes are acquired. To say that Mitch's love of hoarding has not been acquired as it should does not preclude other ways of evaluating his situation: for example, it might turn out that Mitch benefits from his love of hoarding.

<sup>16</sup> A likes-based theorist might take different views about different cases. It might be suggested, for example, that where an emotional response *directly manifests* a malformed like, the emotional response is itself at fault; but where an emotional

response *accords with* a malformed likes (as in Mitch's case), it is the subject's like, and not the emotional response, that has gone wrong. Indeed, this seems to me to be a natural thing to say; but I shall not press this suggestion here.

<sup>17</sup> Perhaps it is simply unclear what we *would* say. Still, this leaves room for a debate about what we *should* say. To decide that, though, we would need to appeal to theoretical and empirical considerations that go beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>18</sup> It is tempting, perhaps, to suppose that Linda's anxiety is due to some unconscious desire to continue working. I am supposing, though, that this is not the case. Perhaps her anxiety stems from an unconscious appreciation of her likes, or perhaps it is simply an aberration.

<sup>19</sup> In this case, Linda's anxiety may signal that she should reconsider her judgment (Helm, 2001: 146-147). However, this does not imply that her feelings fit the situation, on Helm's account. This is because we cannot say *how* she should resolve the conflict: she might adjust her judgment to fit her likes or her likes to fit her judgment.

<sup>20</sup> Admittedly, Linda might have cause to feel frustrated that her desires have been thwarted.

<sup>21</sup> See Marino (2010) for a sustained discussion.

<sup>22</sup> To be fair, Helm does not present this claim as obviously true, but as an element within a broader theory of value. But if I am right about the cases described here, this theory leaves some of our intuitions about emotional fittingness unexplained.

<sup>23</sup> To do this, Linda does not need to modify her most *fundamental* likes: perhaps she will continue to take just as much pleasure in social interaction, while learning to like new kinds of social activity. Rather, modifying her fundamental likes (for example, by learning to enjoy a quieter life) would constitute a more radical way of changing the

personal significance of the situation. This would, perhaps, be hard to do, though it does not strike me as impossible.

<sup>24</sup> There is, perhaps, scope to develop a *hybrid* account. In other words, we might take the view that personal significance is determined by a person's interests, but that it is their likes that determine *how much* of these goods they need – within certain parameters. This looks like a promising way of resolving the problem. Still, concedes that the subject's likes play a crucial role in determining personal significance.

Moreover, the hybrid account does not escape my remaining objection to the interest-based account.

<sup>25</sup> An interest-based theorist who took this line might deny that Lee is worse off than Linda: for while Linda socialises more, Lee has more time for hobbies. Still, this theorist must insist that it is in Lee's interests to extend his social life as far as he can without detracting from his hobbies, regardless of his preferences.

<sup>26</sup> Indeed, it may be this thought that makes it hard to accept that Lee should socialise more, despite the fact that he would not enjoy it.

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