Positivity versus negativity is a matter of timing

Commentary on Menninghaus, W, Wagner, V., Hanich, J., Wassiliwizky, E, Jacobsen, T & Koelsch, S (2017) The Distancing-Embracing model of the enjoyment of negative emotions in art reception. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 40:1-58

George Ainslie

School of Economics, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7710, South Africa

Department of Veterans Affairs, Coatesville, PA 19320

1 610 246-5364

George.Ainslie@va.gov

www.picoeconomics.org

Abstract

"Negative" emotions are never purely negative. They attract attention at the very least, and often stay attractive enough to make rehearsing them an addictive activity. As the authors point out, they also counteract a relentless tendency for positive emotions to become boring. Analysis in terms of reward suggests why this tendency occurs and how symbiosis with negative emotions may arise, in art and in life.

Text
The authors ask why negative emotions are "central in art reception far beyond tragedy" (Abstract). They catalog eight mechanisms by which painful affect increases pleasure, but their hypotheses rest basically on two: making-the-pain-not-so-bad (art context, mere representation, and fiction)—which does not speak to the change of valence—and mixing-pain-and-pleasure, the positive effect of which is itself what they promised to explain (Section 1). The other "embracing" phenomena—aesthetic virtues, meaning construction, and genre scripts—are beside their main quest for what turns the negative into the positive.

This quest should reach well beyond the realm of art. Why are negative emotions central to the pursuit of pleasure generally? To the extent that the world does not impose painful feelings on us, why are we moved to seek them? The authors' core hypothesis about "aesthetic processing" is that *"the pleasure taken in the beautiful representation of wholly positive and beautiful objects and narratives tends to be less intense, profound, and self-supportive and more prone to induce boredom than pleasure that includes a dynamic interplay of positive and negative emotional responses"* (Section 4.1). As in art, so in life. People often seek the adjuvant effect of negativity, for instance in gambling despite a conscious expectation of loss, masochistic relationships, painful sex, and endurance sports. Many apparent pains maintain behaviors over long periods, such as prolonged grieving, nursing grudges, and following disaster-oriented news sources. And these are just cases in which a distinct negative component makes the question of rationality obvious.

In many more ways people court obstacles, defeats, and challenges while concealing from themselves that they are doing so (Ainslie, 2013). Conventional utility theory requires that we set long term goals and defend them from risky, "impulsive" distractions, but we have been warned that such policies may disappoint us. Emotion researcher Sylvan Tomkins noted: "The paradox is that it is just those achievements which are most solid, which work best, and which continue to work that excite and reward us least. The price of skill is the loss of the experience of value-- and of the zest for living" (1978, p. 212). Konrad Lorenz described the result of living in leisure: "The whole glorious amplitude of the waves of human emotions, all that makes life worth living-- is dampened down to a scarcely perceptible oscillation between scarcely perceptible tiny displeasures and pleasures. The result is an immeasurable boredom" (1970, pp. 355-6). A prosperous society has to choose involvements the way it chooses art—finding "a dynamic interplay between positive and negative emotional responses."

So the negative is partly positive, but what properties does this imply? I propose a reward-based analysis to reconcile the sometime positive effect of negative emotions with utility theory. Like the authors, I put aside "functional benefits" (Section 1c) and deal entirely with differential motivation.

1. Reward is whatever makes the processes that precede it more likely to be chosen again. This definition is broader than the commonsense notions of pleasure or satisfaction, since addictive rewards or the rewards of an itch may provide pleasure without the latter, and gratifying an urge to panic provides neither.

2. Emotions are reward patterns that probably evolved to give momentum to one or another behavioral tendency in particular circumstances, but which modern society mistrusts as motives. We try to control emotions while at the same time cultivating them as sources of pleasure. Emotions' power to pre-empt attention implies that they generate quick reward. In "negative" emotions this reward lures us into participation but the subsequently blocks richer sources of reward to a greater or lesser extent: Grief interferes with new attachments, disgust with appetite, anger with openness, fear with any activity requiring relaxation.

3. Emotional patterns compete based on the time courses of their rewards. When a person has a poor prospect for better alternatives, or where her susceptibility to the negative emotion is great, emotions that most people find frankly negative may lure her repeatedly: hence pathological grief, phobic anxiety and paranoid personality disorder. The case of anger involves a closer balance-- Occasions for it are often sought robustly, are cultivated habitually in hatreds, and are negative only to the extent that the anger spoils richer relationships (Lerner & Tiedens, 2006). Such emotional patterns, which engage many people but reward poorly over time, are catalogued in medieval Christianity's seven deadly sins: not only wroth but envy, pride, avarice, sloth, lust, and gluttony. Grief and fear were apparently too aversive to be sins, although depression was sometimes counted as a form of sloth (Irvine, 1999).

4. Positive emotions soon fatigue, at least in part because our innate preference for smaller, sooner reward over larger, later reward leads us to harvest their rewarding potential too early-- as in daydreaming (modeled in Ainslie, 2005, 2017).[i] The fatigue of positive

emotion leads to the "scarcely perceptible oscillations" that Lorenz complained of, and creates an incentive to accept emotions that would simply be negative except for their property of refreshing the pleasurable emotions. At the very least, a negative emotion obstructs our greed for quick satisfactions, letting them build.

5. It is hard to model how relatively negative emotions get a bonus from building the readiness for positive ones. The relationships of emotions are opaque, even with respect to what emotions can be discerned to satiate or fatigue independently (in the way that physical appetites can be-- Herrnstein, 1969). The authors raise the interesting possibility of studying the "family relationships" of emotions in "affective space" by observing the occurrence of "metonymical transfer" (Section 4.2). A study of how an emotion can "inform and partly transform co-occurrent" neighbors would be phenomenological, but not necessarily unrelatable to reward-based analysis. The arts are a rich source of recognizable examples, as used for instance by Elster (1989).

6. We choose art that has an admixture of negative emotions when we expect a net positive effect that is great enough—again, disproportionately discounted for delay. The greatest satisfactions come after the hardest experiences; in the authors' words, "higher levels of negative emotions… support more intense emotional responses" (Section 2). One task of art is thus to invite acceptance of greater negativity during the work. This will be a collaborative task with the audience, who must let the *hedonic importance* of their involvement build over periods of threat and deprivation (Ainslie, 2017). If you distance yourself when a negative emotion is intense-- say to yourself "this is only a story"-- it will reduce your payoff, and likely reduce your ability *not* to say it when you encounter negativity again. Awareness of such a recursive self-predictive effect increases your commitment to accept negativity, in art as in life.

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[i]People in whom this does not happen as much become absorbed in imagination—are "fantasy prone" (Rhue & Lynn, 1987).