

# In the Mood: Why Vibes Matter in Reading and Writing Philosophy

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Please cite the published version: De Cruz, H. (2023). In the mood: Why vibes matter in reading and writing philosophy. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 93, 171–191.

## Abstract

Philosophers often write in a particular mood; their work is playful, strident, strenuous, or nostalgic. On the face of it, these moods contribute little to a philosophical argument and are merely incidental. However, I will argue that the cognitive science of moods and emotions offers us reasons to suspect that mood is relevant for philosophical texts. I use examples from Friedrich Nietzsche and Rudolph Carnap to illustrate the role moods play in their arguments. As readers and writers of philosophical texts, we do well to attend to mood.

## 1. Introduction

In the Preface to the *Genealogy of Morality*, Friedrich Nietzsche muses about philosophical mood:

If anyone finds this script incomprehensible and hard on the ears, I do not think the fault necessarily lies with me. It is clear enough, assuming, as I do, that people have first read my earlier works without sparing themselves some effort: because they really are not easy to approach. With regard to my *Zarathustra*, for example, I do not acknowledge anyone as an expert on it if he has not, at some time, been both profoundly wounded and profoundly delighted by it, for only then may he enjoy the privilege of sharing, with due reverence, the halcyon element from which the book was born and its sunny brightness, spaciousness, breadth and certainty. (Nietzsche, 1887 [2006], p. 8)

Nietzsche's point is that his writings are not always easily accessible: a full appreciation of them requires effort on the part of the reader. If she truly wishes to be an expert on his work, she must

be prepared to be ‘profoundly wounded and profoundly delighted by it’. The form of Nietzsche’s prose is essential to understand it. You cannot be an expert on his work if you aren’t affected by the moods invoked in it.

Nietzsche is far from the only philosopher who plays with his readers’ feelings. Many classic and beloved philosophical works have a distinctive mood. We can think of (among many others) playful Zhuangzi, earnest Augustine, or speculative Pascal. The moods these works evoke have helped to cement their enduring appeal in the history of philosophy. You flutter along with Zhuangzi to experience what it’s like to be a butterfly. You groan inwardly as Augustine obsesses over a few stolen pears. You sense, along with Pascal, horror at the vastness of the universe. What wisdom or insight is gained when these texts carry us away?

In this paper, I examine the role of mood in philosophy – moods such as sorrow, nostalgia, unease, excitement, playfulness, strenuousness, adventurousness, and pathos. On the face of it, they contribute little to a philosophical argument. When we give feedback on student essays, we do not caution them to pay attention to the mood of their writing. If anything, better prioritize clarity and precision over rhetoric and feeling! A typical book review of a philosophical monograph will rarely assess the mood it evokes. However, as I’ll show, the cognitive science of moods and emotions offers us reasons to suspect that mood is relevant for philosophical texts. As readers and writers of such texts, we do well to attend to it.

## **2. What is Philosophical Mood?**

### *2.1 Philosophical and psychological views on mood and emotion*

To get a better grasp of what philosophical mood might be, let’s first look at the general concept of mood, as it is discussed in philosophy and cognitive science. In this literature, a distinction is drawn between mood and emotion. Robert Roberts (2003, p. 112) argues that moods, unlike emotions, do not have clear propositional content; they are not ‘about’ something. You can be depressed or elated, without having a definite object to be depressed or elated about. Roberts argues that we have reasons for our emotions (e.g., a gift makes us grateful or joyful). On the other hand, moods tend to have causes rather than reasons, e.g., a happy tune puts us in a happy mood, but the tune doesn’t give us a *reason* to feel a happy mood, unlike the gift. Adam Morton (2013, pp. 29–36) also distinguishes moods and emotions based on their content. Emotions are about things that happen or that we imagine might happen. In Morton’s view, an emotion might

be the fear that your house will burn down or that you might catch a deadly disease. Moods, by contrast, are not tied to concrete situations or imaginings, but are diffusely in the background. Take the mood of fearfulness, a mood that is in the vicinity of the emotion of fear. Consider a mother in the US who brings her child to school in the days after a school shooting once again made the national news. The first days, she might feel fear the same thing might happen at her child's school. Gradually, the fear ebbs away as it usually does. But the mood, which persists for much longer, does not. Lodged in her stomach remains an inchoate sense of dread, an uneasy feeling she cannot seem to shake, even as she cheerfully bids the other parents good morning. What is the inspiration for these distinctions? Both Roberts and Morton draw on the folk concept of mood. Morton (2013, p. 32) distinguishes between emotion and mood 'on intuitive grounds, without experimental evidence'. He notes that emotion researchers have not carefully distinguished mood from emotion. Until the late 1990s, psychologists indeed used 'mood', 'emotion', and 'affect' interchangeably. However, contemporary psychologists distinguish between mood and emotion. According to a standard distinction (see Ekkekakis, 2012, for an overview), emotions are a complex set of interrelated sub-events. They involve a core affect (e.g., feeling sad), associated behaviors such as smiling or crying, heightened attention toward that object, and neural and endocrine changes. Moods, by contrast, are longer lasting, and are 'about nothing specific or about everything—about the world in general' (Frijda, 2009, p. 258). They influence our global appraisal of situations and specific events, without being specifically directed at events or objects.

The distinctions between moods and emotions in philosophy and psychology remind us of how those words are used in everyday contexts. Beedie, Terry, and Lane (2005) compared the usage of the word 'mood' of authors of psychology textbooks with non-specialist English sources, such as cooking books and novels. Both groups distinguished moods from emotions as follows: moods are longer-term, more nebulous, less intense, less focused, and less tied to specific situations than emotions. Given how well folk psychology and psychology textbooks agree on this, I take moods to be a kind of feeling that is not situationally specified, can persist over long periods, and that do not have a clear target. The distinction between moods and emotions is not absolute and admits of degrees. Many philosophers use 'mood' and 'emotion' interchangeably. To ensure some uniformity, I will treat as philosophical mood affective states

that are not emotions (i.e., not clearly directed) and that are elicited in readers or listeners when they engage with philosophical works.

## 2.2 Nietzsche and Carnap: two examples of mood in philosophy

Here are two examples of philosophical mood in two very different philosophers: on the one hand, Friedrich Nietzsche, filled with pathos, verve, concerned with the brilliant individual in a faceless mass. On the other, lucid, clear Rudolph Carnap, worried about the ascent of the far right, concerned with working-class people and their rights. In spite of their differences, both philosophers were faced with a similar problem: what if your philosophical outlook is *radically different* from the mainstream, particularly the political mainstream? How do you convince your audience? Friedrich Nietzsche makes mood (*Stimmung*) central to his critique of the prevailing morality of his time, particularly in *Daybreak* (also sometimes translated as “Dawn”, originally *Morgenröte – Gedanken über die moralischen Vorurteile*, 1881 [1997]). Rebecca Bamford (2019) argues that mood plays a central role in Nietzsche’s overarching philosophical project. Mood is not incidental to his work, but serves to ‘identify, and counter, the highly problematic and deeply entrenched authority of the morality of mores’ (Bamford, 2014, p. 56). In *Daybreak* 9, Nietzsche argues that people obey the morality of customs (or mores) out of a society-wide prevailing sense of fear. This mood of fearfulness has two bad consequences: it further entrenches the customs, and it discourages people from innovating in the moral domain.

Every individual action, every individual mode of thought arouses dread; it is impossible to compute what precisely the rarer, choicer, more original spirits in the whole course of history have had to suffer through being felt as evil and dangerous, indeed through feeling themselves to be so. Under the dominion of the morality of custom, originality of every kind has acquired a bad conscience; the sky above the best men is for this reason to this very moment gloomier than it need be. (Nietzsche, D 9)

Anticipating research on the psychology of mood (as we will see in the next section), Nietzsche argues that the mood of fearfulness stultifies our appetite for action. We need to feel in a positive mood, we need to rid ourselves of this background sense of dread, in order to do something that

goes against the grain, to pull ourselves together and become truly innovative, original thinkers. For Nietzsche, joyous moods were crucial: ‘The good mood was placed on the scales as an argument and outweighed rationality’ (D 28).

Nietzsche harnesses mood as a counter-attack against the dominant dread that entrenches our customs. He notes that we have words for extreme emotions such as love, dread, compassion, and pain, but not for milder, more diffuse moods (D 115). This makes it hard to coin new words that would help us to break free of customary morality and the implicit moods it drives on. The moods Nietzsche evokes in his philosophical works serve to counter the entrenched mores of his time. We should counter the fearful mood of customary morality with a mood of ‘cheerful resolution’ (D 28), a mood that engenders within us a joyful resolve to act (Ansell-Pearson and Bamford, 2021, pp. 57–58).

Indeed, Nietzsche goes as far as to recommend deliberate mood-management: “‘Create a mood!’ – one will then require no reasons and conquer all objections!’ (D 28), i.e., we must counter mood with mood when we engage in ethical theorizing. Nietzsche’s appeal to mood is primarily strategic: if philosophical works are to challenge entrenched ideas, and moods are an important part of the entrenchment, then incorporating a countervailing mood can be beneficial. However, this tactic leaves open the question of whether moods are also beneficial *to help us think*. I’ll return to this in section 4.

Rudolph Carnap’s Preface to the first edition of *The Logical Structure of the World* (Carnap, 1928 [2003]) shows a different mastery of philosophical mood. Carnap was a proponent of logical positivism and a member of the Vienna Circle. Its members regularly met at the University of Vienna in the 1920s to discuss fundamental questions on the nature of science, how logic could improve our thinking, the limits of reason, and what makes a statement meaningful. They were strongly committed to clarity of thought. Many of them were left-leaning and concerned with improving the lives of working-class people. During this period, Austria increasingly came in the grip of emotionally-charged Nazi propaganda, populism, and antisemitism. This rhetoric had no basis in fact but was very effective in stirring people’s emotions. Carnap, like other members of the Vienna Circle, wanted to counteract this propaganda, but interestingly, he did not want to do away with mood. Rather, like Nietzsche, he wanted to fight mood with mood. In his *Preface*, Carnap states that a ‘requirement for justification and conclusive foundation of each thesis will eliminate all speculative and poetic

work from philosophy' (p. xvii) – eliminating metaphysics from philosophy is an important element of his overarching project, which aims to engineer concepts with utmost precision and clarity (Dutilh Novaes, 2020). At the same time, Carnap acknowledges that philosophers are emotional beings, and that emotions – like purely intellectual rationality – will always play a part in how we engage with philosophy:

The practical handling of philosophical problems and the discovery of their solutions does not have to be purely intellectual, but will always contain emotional elements and intuitive methods. The justification, however, has to take place before the forum of the understanding; here we must not refer to our intuition or emotional needs. We too, have 'emotional needs' in philosophy, but they are filled by clarity of concepts, precision of methods, responsible theses, achievement through cooperation in which each individual plays his part. (Carnap, 1928 [2003], p. xvii)

So, in Carnap's view, the thirst for clarity is part of a distinctively philosophical mood. This mood 'demands clarity everywhere, but [...] realizes that the fabric of life can never quite be comprehended' (Carnap, 1928 [2003], p. xviii). We can see this mood expressed in other areas of human creativity, such as music and architecture. Carnap had a strong connection with Bauhaus, a modernist architectural movement that prized functionality, rationality, order, and the use of technology to help organize life (Potochnik and Yap, 2006). In a guest lecture he gave at Bauhaus Dessau (the Bauhaus school of art, design, and architecture) on 15 October 1929, he argued that philosophy of science and architecture are two manifestations of a single way of life. Logical positivists and Bauhaus architects shared the same opponents: members of the religious right, nationalists, nativists, and Nazis (Galison, 1990). Carnap characterizes this philosophical Bauhaus mood as follows:

[T]here is an inner kinship between the attitude on which our philosophical work is founded and the intellectual attitude which presently manifests itself in entirely different walks of life. [...] It is an orientation which demands clarity everywhere, but which realizes that the fabric of life can never quite be

comprehended. It makes us pay careful attention to detail and at the same time recognizes the great lines which run through the whole. It is an orientation which acknowledges the bonds that tie men together, but at the same time strives for free development of the individual. Our work is carried by the faith that this attitude will win the future. (Carnap, 1928 [2003], p. xviii)

What is this Bauhaus mood in the *Logical Structure of the World*? It is not just a mood of clarity and dispassion, nor merely achieving a balance between analytic and synthetic styles of thinking. It is also, and perhaps more importantly, a mood of fellow-feeling, cooperation, and optimism about modernism and the positivist research agenda. This mood is not just dispassionate. Rather, it involves an *active rejection of passion*. It encourages composed coolness, lucidity, and level-headedness that helps to ground readers and prevents them from being swept away by grand and vague rhetoric, such as that of the Nazis.

Nietzsche and Carnap both hold that philosophical mood matters. They recognize that their philosophical work has a distinctive mood, and that these moods contribute to it. Both compare the mood of their philosophies with that of their intellectual opponents: the joyful resolve versus the dread and fear of custom in Nietzsche, and the clear and dispassionate internationalist mood against the opacity and wild appeal to emotions by members of the political right in Carnap. Carnap also held that his philosophical mood fits within a broader intellectual climate, which, if implemented, would ameliorate the political situation as well (Dutilh Novaes, 2020). He further hints at a function of mood in our thinking: it makes us ‘pay careful attention to detail and at the same time recognizes the great lines which run through the whole’ (p. xviii). As we will see in the next section, Carnap’s remarks prefigure cognitive psychological findings that indicate that mood indeed influences cognitive processing styles. Feel a different mood, and you will process information differently.

### **3 The Influence of Mood on the Appraisal of Philosophical Ideas and Arguments**

#### *3.1 Two hypotheses on mood and cognitive processing*

As we saw previously, moods are not clearly directed at objects or events. A nostalgic mood does not mean we are nostalgic for something, we just feel a vague sense of longing for we-know-not-what. Nevertheless, mood has a strong influence on our motivations and on our

evaluation of situations and ideas. For example, it influences our appraisal of the difficulty of a task and our ability to succeed in it. A chore that might seem insurmountable when we are in a negative mood can look eminently feasible when we are in a positive mood (Gendolla and Brinkmann, 2005).

Mood has a significant influence on our evaluation of persuasive communications, a finding that is of interest to marketing specialists as well as philosophers. A happy mood tends to make participants more vulnerable to accepting weak arguments. Participants in a sad mood give lower ratings to weaker arguments than happy participants; sad people can differentiate better between stronger and weaker arguments than happy people (Bless, Bohner, Schwarz, and Strack, 1990). Negative moods tend to enhance both attention to detail and critical thinking. But positive mood also has positive aspects. For example, positive moods enhance creativity and focus, and increase cognitive flexibility (Baas, De Dreu, and Nijstad, 2008).

How does mood influence cognitive processing styles? This is a matter of continued debate among cognitive scientists. An influential proposal (Blanchette and Richards, 2010) holds that positive moods promote big-picture appraisals of a situation, and hence lead to schematic, goal-oriented, global thinking, whereas negative moods help us to focus on details, and to resolve specific problems.

Cognitive psychologists have offered two main hypotheses on how mood and evaluative attitudes relate, and why positive mood promotes schematic and global thinking, and negative mood encourages paying attention to details. The *affect-as-information hypothesis* states that ‘affect assigns value to whatever seems to be causing it’ (Clore and Huntsinger, 2007, p. 393). Differently put, cues from the environment influence our mood, and that mood gives us affective and valuable information about our surroundings. For example, if we are in an environment that induces a mood of fearfulness (even if we can’t quite identify the specific triggers for why we should be afraid), that mood provides valuable information that we are in a dangerous situation. Applied to evaluative attitudes in philosophy and other contexts: if an argument puts us in a positive mood, we are more likely to evaluate it positively than if it puts us in a negative mood. Our current feelings guide cognitive processing, with positive feelings promoting greater reliance on accessible information. For example, an atheist scholar reads a paper that tells her that atheists are better at analytic thinking than theists. Because the paper makes her feel good about herself, she does not critically look at potential weaknesses in the experimental design of the study.



The *alternative mood-as-priming hypothesis* (Bower, 1981) states that moods prime us to recall information stored in long-term memory that is relevant for the given situation. A sorrowful mood focuses us on negative memories that elicited those moods in the past, whereas a joyful mood makes us think of earlier positive occasions when we felt happy that are similar to the situation we are confronted with. Here the link with the environment and our moods is less direct than in the previous hypothesis. If, for some reason, a feature in our environment triggers a memory that evokes a mood, that mood will color our evaluation of our current situation. For example, you sit in a restaurant eating escargots and you suddenly feel sad, without knowing why. The escargots bring to memory the last time you ate them (years ago), which was when your boyfriend texted you to break up with you.

These two hypotheses point at potential pathways through which mood can influence our evaluation of philosophical ideas. The affect-as-information hypothesis indicates that mood tends to influence our judgments directly, by serving as experiential and bodily information regarding how one feels about the object of judgment. The mood-as-priming hypothesis also points to the value of mood, but in this case the mood depends less upon the object and more upon analogous situations in the past. One could simply evoke a positive or negative evaluation of an object by inducing the relevant mood. At present, the affect-as-information hypothesis enjoys better empirical support (Clore and Huntsinger, 2007). For this reason, I use this hypothesis as the psychological theoretical background to think about the importance of mood in philosophy, though many of the claims I will make would stand with the mood-as-priming hypothesis as well.

### 3.2 Heidegger's *Stimmungen*

The affect-as-information hypothesis has a striking parallel in Martin Heidegger's work on mood (*Stimmung*) and its ability to shape our sense of being in the world. Lauren Freeman (2014, p. 446) characterizes Heideggerian *Stimmungen*, or moods, as follows:

Moods are not mere mental states that result from, arise out of, or are directly caused by our situation or context. Rather, moods are fundamental modes of existence that are disclosive of the way one is or finds oneself [*sich befinden*] in

the world. Mood is one of the basic modes through which we experience the world and through which the world is made present to us.

Heidegger holds that human beings are not impartial spectators who can gaze upon the situations they find themselves in from an idealized perspective. We never hold a view from nowhere, but are always situated, fully immersed in the world. Some things present themselves to us because of their practical significance, whereas others remain irrelevant and invisible. This practical significance is a holistic web of significance relations – things are not significant or insignificant to us in isolation. This web of significance depends on mood. For Heidegger, moods are like lenses through which we see the world. They are not some colourful add-on or extra, but are a part of how we are basically constituted (Freeman, 2014). We are always in some mood. With his account of *Stimmung*, Heidegger rejects the commonplace view that mood merely colours our experiences.

The fact that moods can deteriorate [*verdorben werden*] and change over means simply that in every case *Dasein* always has some mood [*gestimmt ist*]. The pallid, evenly balanced lack of mood [*Ungestimmtheit*], which is often persistent and which is not to be mistaken for a bad mood, is far from nothing at all. (Heidegger, 1927 [1962], 29: 175).

For Heidegger, finding ourselves in a world is a precondition for having objects of experience, and we would not find ourselves in a world without mood (Ratcliffe, 2013, p. 159). Mood is an essential element of being-in-the-world, ‘It comes neither from ‘outside’ nor from ‘inside’, but arises out of Being-in-the-world, as a way of such Being’ (Heidegger, 1927 [1962], 29: 176). Differently put, there is a dynamic interaction between an agent and her environment, and mood arises because of that interplay.

Through mood, we get attuned to our environment. This shapes our experiences, thoughts, and beliefs. In this respect, mood is more fundamental than even beliefs or desires, as moods shape what beliefs and desires we might form in a given situation. Freeman (2014) observes that this embodied framework of mood is largely missing in contemporary cognitive psychology. Nevertheless, there are important ways in which Heidegger’s account resonates with findings in cognitive psychology. Take the observation that our appraisals of the difficulty of a

task and probability of success are influenced by mood. It's so much easier to get anything done when you're in a happy mood than when you feel a bit down. When you are depressed, tasks that are trivial for others, such as filling in a form, answering an email, or putting a letter in the mail, can become formidable. Mood is contagious: Kramer, Guillory, and Hancock (2014) showed how affects can be transmitted through social networks such as Facebook, even in the absence of direct verbal cues and direct interaction.

The Heideggerian picture of mood also agrees with the extensive literature on mood management and on mood disorders, such as bipolar depression. In neurotypical people, mood varies throughout the day and shapes their engagement with the world. They scaffold moods using music (Krueger, 2014), listening to epic orchestral music, light classical music, or hip-hop as they go through our everyday tasks. Somewhat surprisingly, people sometimes deliberately seek out fictions and music with a negative mood, such as tragedies and sorrowful music even when they don't feel happy (Mar, Oatley, Djikic, and Mullin, 2011). Perhaps it is because we feel the mood of tenderness when we listen to sad music, and we find comfort and solace in that feeling (Oliver, 2008). However, mood disorders disrupt this mood management. In bipolar depression, for example, patients experience swings between elevated moods and depressed moods, with depression being the hallmark of the disorder. As one patient describes his periods of low mood (cited in Mitchell and Malhi, 2004, p. 531):

Profound melancholia is a day-in, day-out, night-in, night-out, almost arterial level of agony. It is a pitiless unrelenting pain that affords no window of hope, no alternative to a grim and brackish existence, and no respite from the cold undercurrents of thought and feeling that dominate the horribly restless nights of despair.

This mood disorder has a wide range of effects. It leads to low self-perception, inability to get simple tasks done, negative evaluation of neutral social interactions, among many others. Sometimes people who suffer from mood disorders are told by unsympathetic acquaintances to 'just pull yourself together'. But, using Heidegger's framework, we can say that this doesn't work. Mood constitutes a way of being, it fundamentally preconditions how we experience the world.

#### **4. Why Mood Matters for Philosophizing**

Taking together the psychological and philosophical ideas on mood in the previous sections, we now begin to see how mood is fundamental for how we evaluate situations. Mood influences our thinking, and it influences how we appraise certain arguments. In this section, I'll show that philosophers who pay attention to the mood of their work help their readers to evaluate it. Readers who are attuned to the mood of a philosophical work, likewise, are better able to evaluate it. For the longest time, I had difficulties reading French phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre, trying to puzzle out their thoughts and lines of argument. But my difficulties vanished once I realized that you need to read French phenomenology 'on vibes', feeling along with the various moods the authors evoke. I'll now look more closely at *how* moods can help us to read and write better philosophy: control of background mood, making us care, and transforming us in the long term.

##### *4.1 Better control of background mood*

As we saw, moods can influence thinking styles (global and schematic versus attention to detail and critical), and this influences the appraisal of philosophical texts. We come to a philosophical text, like we come to anything, while we are in a particular mood. For example, you might be in an anxious mood because of many teaching and administrative tasks ahead, or in a nostalgic mood because you were just reminded of a happy school day. This baseline mood that we bring to the text will influence how we appraise it. It will make some aspects of the text more salient, and help us make certain connections. Since, as an author, you have no control over the background mood readers bring to the text, the influence of the initial moods of the readers on their initial appraisal of your text is unpredictable and variable. However, if you write a text in such a way as to instill a mood that is congruent with the aims of your paper, this can help to draw the reader's attention to relevant aspects of your argument.

The affect-as-information hypothesis helps us see why: an appropriate mood allows us to better attend to the author's intent. Moods point us to relevant aspects of the text and draw our attention to it. Philosophy texts tend to be obtuse. For example, a recent quantitative study found a higher number of hedge words (probably, possibly, etc.) in philosophy compared to other disciplines, and these words hinder comprehension (Hartley, Sotto, and Fox, 2004). An

appropriate mood can help the reader grasp the main lines of an argument better. Since we also pay attention to other aspects that help the reader grasp the argument, such as clarity of structure and sentence-level prose, we should pay attention to mood as well, for example, by ditching hedge words and using more evocative examples.

#### *4.2 Giving a sense of why a philosophical position would matter to us*

Intellectually grasping an idea is not the same as fully grasping *why* it matters or why we should care. As Heidegger suggested, moods are prior to desires and beliefs. They shape which desires, beliefs, and appraisals we form in a given situation. An appropriate philosophical mood puts us in a better position to fully appreciate a philosophical position and its wider ramifications by shaping our beliefs and appraisals. This allows countercultural gadflies such as Nietzsche to counteract prevailing moods that a reader is subject to, such as the background sense of dread that stifles creativity, or an internationalist positivist such as Carnap to counteract the emotionally-charged propaganda of the Nazis.

We can see the persuasive function of mood in the method of cases in recent analytic philosophy. The method of cases involves writing vivid thought experiments that help a reader see how an abstract point can play out in different situations, thus eliciting intuitions. Why do philosophers rely on fanciful scenarios to make philosophical points, rather than laying it out straight (e.g., Norton, 1996)? While Herman Cappelen (2012) has argued that thought experiments and their appeal to intuitions are merely a form of hedging, other authors (e.g., Nersessian, 1992) argue that thought experiments can stir our imagination and help us construct mental models. If these latter authors are right, the moods thought experiments evoke is not incidental, but central to the overall argument. Take the mood evoked in Judith Jarvis Thomson's people-seeds thought experiment:

Suppose it were like this: people-seeds drift about in the air like pollen, and if you open your windows, one may drift in and take root in your carpets or upholstery. You don't want children, so you fix up your windows with fine mesh screens, the very best you can buy. As can happen, however, and on very, very rare occasions does happen, one of the screens is defective; and a seed drifts in and takes root. (Thomson, 1971, p. 59)

This is one of three vivid thought experiments to get us to think about the ethics of abortion. They evoke a mood of horror and disquiet which is in tune with the sense of horror one might feel at the prospect of an unplanned, perhaps unwanted, pregnancy. These weird fictions help to set the mood, and the mood helps the reader to grasp the argument. Crucially, none of the arguments require the reader to have the biological characteristics to become pregnant. Any reader can appreciate the dark, uncanny mood of these pieces. This helps to scaffold the reader's mood, and in this way, shapes his attunement to the paper he's reading, and through this, his appreciation of Thomson's argument in favor of abortion. Paying attention to mood and making mood consonant with the point one makes thus increases the effectiveness of the way we communicate philosophical ideas.

#### *4.3 Mood and philosophical self-transformation*

Think about works of fiction you have read, that have transformed how you think, that have deeply influenced you and resonate with you long after you put them down. Such works are transformative, to use L. A. Paul's (2014) terminology. Reading them is a transformative experience: they change both who we are and what we know. How does this transformation happen? A large literature indicates that narratives can radically change their readers' outlook on life. For example, nineteenth-century novels by authors such as Charles Dickens and Harriet Beecher Stowe were able to help overcome stubborn empathic bias against people from different social classes and racial groups. They have helped to overcome prejudice and effect societal change (Harrison, 2011). Can we discern whether mood played a role in this? Experimental studies have attempted to tease out the importance of mood (as evoked by the quality of writing, the effectiveness of setting, the atmosphere of the text) versus the pure effect of the plot itself in such personal transformative situations. In one study, participants read either Chekhov's short story 'The Lady with the Toy Dog' or a control text with similar plot, length, and complexity, but without the artistic qualities of the original story (Djikic, Oatley, Zoeterman, and Peterson, 2009). Participants who read Chekhov's original short story experienced greater changes in personality (as assessed by a 'Big Five' questionnaire before and after the study), Moreover, they reported feeling more moved than control participants.

In a similar vein, mood in philosophy can help us to achieve self-transformation. But for that, we need to have a philosophical practice that allows us to shape the moods of our readers. The remarks about professional philosopher that Arthur Danto made in his presidential address to the Eastern APA in 1984 still ring true today. Philosophy, he pointed out, has become homogenized and standardized in academic papers and monographs, at the expense of a plenitude of genres that all come with their own, distinctive moods. We used to have dialogues, genealogies, *pensées*, ramblings, rants, letters, essays, autobiographies, aphorisms, plays. Now most we have is 8,000-word papers and 80,000-word monographs. (Indeed, I am aware of the irony of writing this within the limits of an 8,000-word paper.) The peer review process, meant to make the evaluation of philosophy less prone to bias, also dampens our writing, turning it into cookie-cutter philosophy, devoid of mood and personality. As Danto complained,

The journals in which these papers finally are printed [...] are not otherwise terribly distinct from one another, any more than the papers themselves characteristically are: if, under the constraints of blind review, we black out name and institutional affiliation, there will be no internal evidence of authorial presence, but only a unit of pure philosophy, to the presentation of which the author will have sacrificed all identity. This implies a noble vision of ourselves as vehicles for the transmission of an utterly impersonal philosophical truth, and it implies a vision of philosophical reality as constituted of isolable, difficult but not finally intractable problems. (Danto, 1984, p. 7)

Yet, as Danto goes on to point out, this author-effacing vision of philosophy is an illusion, because it discounts the fact that philosophy texts are being *read*. Reading is not a passive process of absorption; we're not sponges soaking in philosophical knowledge. Rather, we actively think along with the author. As we think and read along with a work such as Descartes' *Meditations*, we identify not with the protagonist of a fiction that we are in the thralls of an evil demon, but with the author who carefully devised this thought experiment. Through this identification, we can become transformed in our philosophical outlook.

As Richard Pettigrew (2020) points out, when we choose to transform ourselves, we will seek out a social environment that is conducive to this change. Although we do not meet the

authors of philosophical texts that transform us in the flesh (at least, not in the moment of reading), we can be transformed by identifying with them through their writing. Mood can facilitate this process of identification, and thus deepen our understanding of a philosophical work. Pettigrew provides some examples of how self-transformation works in typical cases where we consort with people we wish to emulate. Take, for example, the case study of Giang, a man who values seriousness but who would like some levity and light-heartedness in his life. To become more frivolous, he hangs out more with his friend Gail, who he feels strikes the right balance (Pettigrew, 2020, p. 5). This is achieved in part through social contagion of moods: the playful mood of Gail can help Giang become more attentive to fun and frivolous situations in his life. In a similar vein, imagine a philosopher who, for many years, has deepened her expertise in analytic philosophy, but would now want to work more in continental philosophy. She might do well to seek out continental works that aid her self-transformation, and that, through their specific moods, get her more into the mindset of continental philosophy in the specialization she is interested in (e.g., phenomenology) and less in the analytic tradition she usually works in (e.g., philosophy of mind). This shows how mood-management in philosophical texts is a bidirectional process. The author can frame the work's mood such that the reader becomes more receptive to her arguments. The reader can deliberately seek out works with a particular mood to facilitate her self-transformation.

My remarks are tentative and speculative. Future experimental philosophical studies may allow us to see if mood indeed aids personal transformation. I predict that a text by Nietzsche or Zhuangzi has a greater transformative effect upon the reader than a control text with similar philosophical content, length, and complexity that is devoid of mood. Philosophical mood helps to countervail existing moods and tendencies that a reader might be subject to. The joyous and irreverent mood of Nietzsche's *Daybreak* and other works counters the mood of fearfulness and dread invoked by custom, and makes us braver, hence better able to take his radical ideas serious, rather than dismiss them out of hand. Zhuangzi seeks to free his readers from the earnestness of Confucianism. His playful and cheeky scenarios, such as the expert butcher who cuts up an ox in front of an impressed king, helps readers to free themselves from the rigid demands of living up to one's social role. The mood that Nietzsche and Zhuangzi evoke in their work frees the imagination from the grip of customary morality and makes freer thought



possible. This helps their readers become different people who walk through life with a lighter step (Moeller and d'Ambrosio, 2017).

### **5. Should we Worry about the Use of Mood in Philosophy?**

Suppose you are on board with my claim that mood does matter to philosophy, you might still feel a little worried about what this means for our evaluations of philosophical arguments. We can think of this in a broader context: rhetoric aims to persuade, to move the reader or listener to accept your arguments, but is a piece with better rhetoric also more *truthful*? Indeed, we might worry that mood is what Katia Vavova (2018, p. 136) calls an 'irrelevant influence', which she defines as follows:

An irrelevant influence (factor) for me with respect to my belief that  $p$  is one that (a) has influenced my belief that  $p$  and (b) does not bear on the truth of  $p$ .

We can see irrelevant influences play out in experimental philosophical studies that probe how the framing of philosophical problems influence our appraisals. Take the well-known trolley problem where a participant evaluates if you should (or are allowed to) pull a lever to divert a trolley so that it drives on to kill one person, rather than five if you had not interfered.

Schwitzgebel and Cushman (2012, 2015) found that the order in which various scenarios are presented (e.g., pushing a lever versus pushing someone from a footbridge onto the track) changes people's evaluation of these scenarios. Not only that, philosophers were also influenced in their evaluation of abstract philosophical principles, such as the doctrine of double effect, depending on which scenario they see first (e.g., switch-first or push-first in trolley scenarios). These order effects persist even if participants can think about the task, even if they're experts, such as PhD holders in ethics. Given that philosophers likely thought about such principles as the doctrine of double effect before they enrolled in the experiment, these effects are surprising.

How to explain them? Mood may play a key role. In one study (Valdesolo and DeSteno, 2006), participants received a positive or neutral affect (mood) induction, by watching either a happy or a neutral video. Immediately after watching these videos, participants were presented with footbridge and switch trolley dilemmas. While there was no difference in evaluation of the switch trolley dilemma, participants in the happy condition were three times more likely to say it was

appropriate to push a large man off a footbridge to save five people from a hurtling trolley than those in the neutral condition. Strohminger, Lewis, and Meyer (2011) used a similar set-up and found that mirth (evoked by humorous audio clips) increased the perceived permissiveness of pushing a fat stranger off the footbridge, whereas elevation (evoked by inspirational narrations) did not. Given this influence of background mood on our evaluation of philosophical positions, readers and writers of philosophical texts should pay *more*, not less, attention to mood.

Okay, you might say, I can see why mood is important for philosophical texts, but isn't it cheating to mood-manage your readers, rather than try to convince them through the sheer quality of your arguments? My brief answer: it is never just the quality of the arguments. We can read Nietzsche's exhortation 'Create a mood! One will then require no reasons and conquer all objections!' (D 28) as a call to counter mood with mood. Nietzsche thinks that the prevailing mood of fear is so strong we have no choice but to try to counter it with a joyful mood, if readers are to take away anything substantial from his works. This claim needs to be contextualized within his aims in *Daybreak*, namely his campaign against customary morality, where mood can be a practical tool to overcome customs. But we might also read the exhortation as recommending mood in lieu of argument, as a lazy fallback for a philosopher who is unable to convince readers with proper arguments or doesn't bother to convince them but merely massages their moods.

In response to this worry, I want to caution against the construction of philosophy in narrow terms as just arguments. Philosophical arguments have never been pure units of isolable truth. This vision of philosophy does not accord with the sociological reality in which philosophy is practiced, where a variety of factors play a role in how we evaluate philosophical positions. As Danto (1984) pointed out, we aspire to this vision in anonymous peer review, but even then, we are receptive to background cues, such as idiomatic English and citation networks. Moreover, once a paper is published, it's no longer anonymized. Now, we know the author's gender (or can make a good guess at it), their institutional affiliation, and their relative standing in the field. In the social context of practicing philosophy, during events such as the seminar discussion, the colloquium talk, the peer-reviewed journal, the book symposium, we never merely respond to the bare-bone arguments. Our appraisal is influenced by a variety of factors, including the mood of a paper, how evocative a thought experiment is, how engaging the talk is, and the identity of the

speaker or author. Philosophical expertise is a complex skill set that involves the ability to make evocative thought experiments, to write in a fluent and persuasive way (Ayala, 2015), to be socially pleasant at professional venues, and so on. The practice of philosophy has a thick, diffuse skill set. Being able to control background mood or to better gauge what the mood of a paper is, is one of the elements in this skill set. It's good to hone skills that are part of a professional practice.

## **6. Conclusion**

I've offered some reasons to think mood is not incidental to philosophy. Mood essential to provide clarity, focus, and attention for the reader. It scaffolds the reader's attunement and takes away the background noise of varying moods the reader brings to the text. More tentatively, thanks to an appropriate mood, a philosophical text can profoundly transform us. Mood is not just window dressing but an important element of philosophical writing and understanding, which cannot be reduced to the cogency of arguments.

## **Acknowledgments**

Thank you to Julian Baggini, Rebecca Bamford, Johan De Smedt, Ian Olsav, and Will Buckingham for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and to the online audience at The Royal Institute of Philosophy lecture series for their helpful suggestions and comments.

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