

## But what isn't an emotion? Delimiting the emotional turn in international politics

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### Introduction

Over two decades ago, the seemingly obvious importance of emotions in international politics, coupled with a lack of engagement over the concept, spurred a reinvestigation<sup>1</sup> into the role that they might play in international politics, yielding a growing corpus of activity often referred to as the emotional turn. The emotional turn is one of many recent 'turns' in international politics, many of which intend to take on the various gaps and silences in a posited 'mainstream IR.'<sup>2</sup> These turns, in general, generate an excitement that lead scholars to use the (re)introduced concept to understand and interpret the political situations that we study. While a natural part of our disciplinary work, one downside to this excitement is that it can lead to a certain amount of conceptual overstretch. A steady progression of scholars will use the concept in one way, which then leads other scholars looking to make their own novel contribution to use it in a slightly new way, which then provokes still other scholars. Conceptual overstretch is thus driven by the well-known prioritization of theoretical innovation over other forms of knowledge in our field. Alternatively, conceptual overstretch can also arise through grandiose claims about the inherent universality of the concept – "Xs are everything

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<sup>1</sup> Note that 'reinvestigation' is a necessary term here, given how much the research has a propensity to (intentionally) forget everything that was published before Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*. See (Wohlforth 2011, 500-503) for a discussion of this problem.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the origins and effects of this constant turning in international politics, see (Baele and Bettiza 2021).

and explain everything” – in an attempt to (over)sell the relevance of the new concept in an otherwise crowded conceptual marketplace.<sup>3</sup>

While there is a great merit in having general debates over the importance of emotions and how they affect international political processes – like all concepts from the recent ‘turns’ – this paper focusses on a slightly different research problem that we believe has yet to be properly considered. We are not interested in asking questions about what emotions are or do. Instead, given this inherent problem of conceptual overstretch, we are interested in taking on the problem of what they *are not*. In other words, can we place rough conceptual borders around the concept to mitigate this overstretch problem, bringing the nature of the concept into slightly sharper focus, and start a new conversation over not only what might meaningfully be called an emotion, but what might not.

To demonstrate the problem of conceptual overstretch in the emotional turn and try to provide some meaningful boundaries as to what might be considered an emotion, we examine two concepts that have been labelled emotions in the international politics scholarship: trust and revenge. We argue that neither of these should be understood as emotions unto themselves, but are instead non-emotional phenomena highly related to emotional states. We also generate, through our exploration of why scholars seem to mistake these concepts for emotions when there are seemingly good reasons to exclude them, three proposals to help differentiate an emotion from other phenomena. First, something cannot be an emotion if the phenomenon arises from or generates another emotion state. Second, something cannot be an emotion if it does not encourage a wide variety of options to find a way out of the emotional state. Third, something cannot be an emotion if it has the potential to be temporally invariant. We finally show how these proposals not only help us understand the limits of what might be classified as an emotion in international politics, but how they align with otherwise

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<sup>3</sup> Stephane Baelle and Gregorio Bettiza note that this claim of universality is often paired with arguments about how the subject of the turn is either ignored or dismissed by the ‘mainstream,’ (Baele and Bettiza 2021, 326) which only deepens the supposed research problem.

implicit ideas that can be derived from the broader emotions literature across the social and natural sciences.

In undertaking this challenge, we are of course aware that many, if not all concepts are “essentially contested” (Booth 1991; Guzzini 2002; Hurrelmann et al. 2007; Kurki 2010; Rodriguez 2015) and in this spirit this paper does not aim to come to some type of final settlement over these conceptual borders. Instead, its purposes are twofold. First, we want to provoke a debate over the importance of having these discussions, over not only what a concept might be, but what it might not be, both with respect to the emotional turn and other similar turns in international politics, to push back against the problem of conceptual overstretch. Second, we want to present some initial conclusions about what these conceptual boundaries might be, with respect to the concept of emotions, through our exploration of the concepts of trust and revenge to help start this debate within the emotional turn.

To make this argument, our first section reviews the current scholarship on emotions in international politics to show the basic lines of debate in the emotional turn. We then proceed to a section on trust and a section on revenge to show why, although they are often described as emotions in the literature, there are good reasons to suggest that they are not. Taking these two discussions into consideration, we then generate our three proposals and show how they provide clarity to general judgements over what might meaningfully called an emotion, and what might not, and how these proposals align with the broader multidisciplinary emotions literature.

## Emotions in the Study of International Politics

Scholars of the emotional turn contend that, despite their importance in shaping international behaviors, emotions have remained relatively secondary, if not unacknowledged, objects of study in international relations. When emotions had been considered, they note, the focus was narrow, for

example, on individual emotions such as fear. Moreover, major theoretical perspectives, particularly realism, did not treat these as emotions *per se*, that is, as part of a wider class of phenomena that need to be studied independently, let alone problematized (Crawford 2000, 116-118; Bleiker and Hutchison 2008, 116). No doubt, this was partly due to an emphasis on rationality or 'cold' cognitive processes (Crawford 2000, 118; Lebow 2005, 304-305) in some of the literature, which then juxtapositioned emotions and emotional responses as somehow irrational and therein not phenomena worthy of study – if not overtly normatively undesirable (Crawford 2000, 116-117; Bleiker and Hutchison 2008, 118-120).

But given their centrality to human experience, omitting emotions leaves the study of international relations much poorer with respect to its ability to understand its subject matter, giving us only a partial view of the world (Crawford 2000, 116). As Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchison argue, “Emotions help us make sense of ourselves, and situate us in relations to others and the world that surrounds us. They frame forms of personal and social understanding, and are thus inclinations that lead individuals to locate their identity within a wider collective,” (Bleiker and Hutchison 2008, 123) if not forms of knowledge and evaluative thought unto themselves (Bleiker and Hutchison 2008, 124; Fierke 2012, 91-92).

These factors are even more salient to the study of international politics if emotions are not simply seen as the property of an individual, but as something that groups can experience. For instance, Jonathan Mercer argues that some emotions can be experienced as a group, such as guilt or pride (Mercer 2014, 516-517), and should be seen as part of an ideational structure of social norms and rules emerging from interacting individuals resulting in the properties of the group (Fierke 2012, 92; Mercer 2014, 521). In some cases, this can result in stronger, larger political responses, than one might expect from the influence of individual emotion(s) alone (Mercer 2014, 526; Keating and Abbott 2021).

Following the proponents of the emotional turn, we agree that emotions deserve to be taken into consideration in our study of international politics because: (1) they affect cognitive and social abilities by impacting our openness to information and our capacity to focus; (2) they have tangible consequences in that they lead to actions, they hold a “action tendencies” (Frijda 1986) that then shape our behaviors and decision-making; (3) they affect the relations between persons, creating larger macropolitical effects. It is therefore crucial, given the centrality of emotions for many types of phenomena we are interested in studying in international politics, in light of the problem of conceptual overstretch presented in the introduction, that we have some type of guidance that helps us to differentiate between what is, and what is not, an emotion.

Surprisingly, this question of exactly where the boundary might be is rarely considered in the larger corpus of emotions research. No doubt, scholars have engaged in numerous debates over the nature and effects of emotions. For example, do emotions always, sometimes, or never involve cognition? (Nussbaum 2001, 129; Prinz 2006, 46; Salmela 2014, 4, 43) Are they individual or collective (Crawford 2000; Nussbaum 2001; Dolan 2018), can they be “felt” by an impersonal entity such as a state (Mercer 2014), and do they vary culturally (Mesquita and Frijda 1992; Nussbaum 2013)? Emotions scholars have also reflected on how emotions drive action (Frijda 1987; Marcus 2000; Moïsi 2015; Dolan 2018; Sirin and Villalobos 2019), how they participate in decision-making (Bechara et al. 2000; Lerner et al. 2015; McDermott 2017), information collection (Schlösser et al. 2013) and, on whether emotions can be rational and/or instrumental (Petersen 2011; Scherer 2011 Meier, 2021 #146; De Sousa, 1979 #147; Van Rythoven 2015; Koschut 2018; Primiano 2018).

While there are obvious merits to these debates, there has been, we contend, less attention paid to where the boundaries of emotions might be placed. This has already been recognized as a potential problem for this avenue of research. As Klaus Scherer (2005, 696) notes, in fact, it can have:

... stifling consequences for the advancement in the field and for collaborative research between different disciplines. At a time when it is increasingly recognized that affective and emotional phenomena need to be addressed in a genuinely interdisciplinary fashion, it becomes imperative to generate a minimal consensus about the defining features of the different types of affective phenomena.

Very little consensus exists as to what constitutes an emotion in the social sciences, and it is highly noticeable that in the literature defining emotions, across the social sciences more generally, that scholars have primarily engaged in what we call a positive identification of emotions, generating sometimes extensive lists (Kleinginna Jr and Kleinginna 1981; Frijda 1986; Frijda and Mesquita 1994; Izard 2010; Cowen and Keltner 2017). This propensity to focus on positive identification, which focusses on positively identifying emotions in terms of their type, effect, and management – and not in setting boundaries between what is and is not an emotion – drives the goals of this paper. Our intuition is that identifying when phenomena are something other than emotions, *i.e.*, when they should not make it onto a list, is a necessary step to ensure that we better understand where these boundaries might lie and avoid accidentally treating non-emotions as emotional phenomena.

In summary, our argument is that there is a heuristic value in refining what is meant by emotions not only positively, but also negatively, to mitigate the structural problems of conceptual overstretch. To do so, we have chosen two concepts that are often referred to as emotions in the international politics literature: trust and revenge. Our choice of these two concepts comes first from a recognition of their status as border cases. This means that there is already some uncertainty over whether they should be considered emotions in the literature. Some scholars include them, others exclude them, though the reasons for this disagreement have not yet been considered in a sustained and theoretically informed manner. We take the latter opinion and argue why they should not be considered emotions, and show how the mislabeling of them as emotions helps us to generate proposals about the limits of what we should considered emotions in general.

Second, we have chosen trust and revenge for their importance as phenomena in international politics. Both are central concepts in a myriad of scholarship on contemporary international problems such as climate change (Vogler 2010; Lahsen 2016), global health (Kittelsen and Keating 2019; Anderson et al. 2021), terrorism (Davis 2003; Rosenberger 2003; Hosking 2009; Cox and Wood 2017; Brodersen 2018; Grace 2018; Bowman Grieve et al. 2019; Cottee 2020; Godefroidt and Langer 2020; Robin 2021), nuclear non-proliferation (Ruzicka and Wheeler 2010b, 2010a; Considine 2015), state conflict (Kim and Smith 1993; Scheff 1994; Larson 1997; Kydd 2006; Mead 2014; Stein 2015; Liberman and Skitka 2017; Keating and Abbott 2021), cycles of group violence more generally (Harkavy 2000; Verdier 2004; Sherry 2005; Löwenheim and Heimann 2008; Lebow 2010; Souleimanov and Aliyev 2015; Stein 2015; Christensen 2016), and, in the case of revenge, as a tool in the fight against impunity and grave crimes (French 2001; Eisenstat 2004; Matwijkiw 2009; Mendeloff 2009; Chauvaud et al. 2010; Green 2011; Robin 2021). There are therefore potentially real stakes across these subject areas in coming to an understanding of whether these concepts are emotions or not – should they be treated as automatically having the characteristics ascribed to emotions, or should we consider them in a different manner? We will therefore take each of them in turn.

## Is Trust an Emotion?

The tendency to link trust and emotions in international politics scholarship arises from a recognition that trust is not simply the result of rational decision making, but is also related – in some way – to emotions and human psychology (Walker 2022, 6).<sup>4</sup> Several scholars openly contend that trust is an emotion (Crawford 2000) or “emotional belief,” (Mercer 2005, 95) characterized by, “a feeling of optimism in another’s goodwill and competence,” (Mercer 2005, 95), or a feeling of “warmth and

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<sup>4</sup> For a review and conceptual framework of how trust is conceptualized in international politics, see (Ruzicka and Keating 2015). For examples of empirical cases using this framework, see (Haukkala et al. 2018)

affection.” (Mercer 2005, 95)<sup>5</sup> This is sometimes linked to the propensity for an actor to cooperate in a given situation, since “cooperation behaviour leads to a feeling of trust, and the feeling of trust is evidence that one should cooperate.” (Mercer 2010) In Minseon Ku and Jennifer Mitzen’s discussion of “system trust,” they argue that trust is a positive emotional orientation, and that at a macro-level, “The production of trust in its continuity entails emotional governance, a disciplining of individual dispositions through a set of feeling rules, rituals, and practices that maintain the calm confidence that the states system is the natural order of things.” (Ku and Mitzen 2022, 809) Trust is, as they put it, a “feeling of knowing.” (Ku and Mitzen 2022, 809) In a similar fashion, Torsten Michel argues that trust is “an emotive disposition,” (Michel 2013a, 879) or “an emotional attitude,” (Michel 2013a, 887), a form of practical knowledge which is both inarticulate and emotive, which affects actors’ perceptions of reality (Michel 2013a, 879) and helps them to cope with the uncertainty they face (Michel 2013a, 885).<sup>6</sup>

While all these scholars are clear about their understanding of trust as an emotion, there are two inconsistencies that flow through this research that, as we will see, call this claim into question. First, when defining trust, these scholars consistently use analytical language to describe what is supposed to be an emotion. Second, once trust is declared an emotion, further discussion of its purported emotionality disappears. Instead, these scholars engage solely in discussions of precursor or successor emotional states.

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<sup>5</sup> This concept of affect based trust found across social science literature broadly, is characterized as arising from positive emotions, such as “liking, admiration, respect, faith, acceptance, confidence, and security.” (Young and Daniel 2003, 140) This emotional state then inspires “the feeling of confidence concerning one’s own judgment of another,” (Barbalet 2009, 371) or “emotional trustworthiness,” as some scholars have characterized it, which then has consequent effects on an actor’s behavior than what might be expected from purely cognition-based trust (McAllister 1995, 30)

<sup>6</sup> Here, he draws on Pouliot, who calls trust “the perfect example of an inarticulate feeling derived from practical sense” (Pouliot 2008, 278) that leads people to “‘feel’ (practical sense) that they could believe despite uncertainty.” (Pouliot 2008, 278)

We can see the first problem, the slippage into analytical language, in Michel's work when he discusses what trust does for an actor. Here, he claims that it creates a "rupture of our horizon of *expectation*,"<sup>7</sup> or "a challenge to our *view of the world*." (Michel 2013a, 879) Similarly, Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler, even while drawing directly on Mercer and his claim that trust is an emotion, and particularly its importance for what they call 'trust as bond' (Booth and Wheeler 2008, 237), end up defining trust as a *belief* in the likely behavior or characteristics of another (Booth and Wheeler 2008, 230). Wheeler later argues that he sees it as an "*expectation* of no harm in contexts where betrayal is always a possibility." (Wheeler 2018, 2) Even while he notes that trust allows for an engagement in another's emotional states (Wheeler 2018, 56), this simply results in the generation of knowledge (Wheeler 2018, 54). This idea of trust as being somehow emotional yet simultaneously defined as an expectation, belief, view, or type of knowledge is very common in the literature (Larson 1997, 19; Böller 2020, 303; Anderson et al. 2021, 426; Pursiainen and Forsberg 2021, 301). However, this framing is odd, since the use of analytical language not only seemingly ignores the purported emotionality of trust itself, but actually echoes more rationalist scholars of trust, who also define trust as a type of cognitive belief (Kydd 2000, 326; Kydd 2007, 3) or estimate (Herrera and Kydd 2022, 728).

The use of this analytical vocabulary when talking about a concept that has been defined as an emotion, we argue, is likely connected to the second problem we identify. Here, scholars will suggest that trust is an emotion, but then ignore its supposed emotional nature in favor of discussing precursor and successor emotions related to it. For instance, Hutchison and Bleiker argue that trust has been a central element in liberal visions of world order, despite the fact that "these emotions have rarely been addressed and theorized directly." (Hutchison and Bleiker 2014, 494) – suggesting that trust is an emotion. Later in the same article, they discuss the study of "emotions associated with trust

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<sup>7</sup> Emphasis ours throughout this paragraph.

...” (Hutchison and Bleiker 2014, 498), which not only suggests that there might be some independence, but places the focus on the emotions that lead to/come out of trust, instead of the emotionality of trust itself.<sup>8</sup> We can see a similar problem when Mercer argues that identity produces emotions that create trust (Mercer 2005, 95), or when Naomi Head argues that, “making a decision to trust ... can only be explained by accessing the emotions which underpin this decision,” (Head 2012, 37-38) again each focusing not on the emotional nature of trust, but on how *precursor* emotions create trust. Likewise, in Nicholas Wheeler’s empirical chapters of *Trusting Enemies* he often points to leaders having, or not having, emotional states with respect to their adversaries (Wheeler 2018, 151,154,162,164,220-221,231), but this is never linked to how trust itself might be an emotional state. Finally, when Michel attempts to demonstrate the importance of understanding trust as an emotion, he does so not through an appeal to trust’s intrinsic emotionality, but by how misplaced trust leads to *subsequent* emotional states characterized by betrayal (Michel 2013a, 881-882).

It should be said that there is no intrinsic problem with the use of analytical language when describing the effects of emotions. Indeed, much of the broader literature speaks exactly to how emotions affect our analysis of the world, leading us to, for example, emphasize certain details and minimize others. However, this continuous use of analytical language, which is much more similar to rationalist understandings of trust than one might expect for scholars stressing how trust is an emotion, opens up a question: when these scholars say that trust is an emotion, are they conflating it with trust affecting/being affected by emotions? We can see how this suspicion feeds into the second

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<sup>8</sup> In broader social science, this also happens, where scholars focus on the way that trust is an outcome of certain emotional states. People can “make emotional investments in trust relationships ... [which] can provide the basis for trust.” (McAllister 1995, 26) suggesting independence between the emotion(s) and trust. Others argue that there is independence by looking at the effects of emotional displays or perceptions of emotional authenticity by others on propensities to trust (Kim et al. 2017, 1381). From a business perspective, Young and Kerry use the phrase “the emotions of trust,” and refer to a “trust that contains both emotion and cognition,” (Young and Daniel 2003, 142) in the same sentence, at other times talking about “trust-generating emotions” (Young and Daniel 2003, 142) generated out of a sustained relationship, suggesting both that trust is an emotion unto itself and also somewhat independent and affected by emotions.

claim, where we showed that there is a consistent lack of specification of trust as an emotion when it is related to other emotions – it is rare to read “the emotions associated with *the emotion of trust*.” Instead, there is a persistent focus on the relationship between the phenomenon of trust and precursor or successor emotional states. Together, these two claims suggest that something is crucially missing, namely, that while these scholars claim that trust is an emotion, when they operationalize it, there is no real emotional content defined for trust. Instead, the way they use trust falls more into a model where trust is a 1) type of judgement that is 2) affected by or creates emotions – but is not an emotion unto itself.<sup>9</sup>

We believe that this problem unto itself gives us good grounds to doubt whether we should consider trust as an emotion, that some scholars have perhaps taken the concept of emotions too far and mistakenly applied it to a phenomenon that should be excluded. But we wish to pursue the argument a little bit further by asking what other consequences might there be in defining trust as an emotion that might be theoretically or methodologically problematic? Here, we argue that there are at least two issues that need to be addressed.

The first problem with characterizing trust with an emotional state comes out of a scholarly focus on the strength and immediacy of certain emotional effects associated with trust, for example, how scholars to focus on the emotional effects of betrayal (Michel 2013b, 99; Keating and Abbott 2021).<sup>10</sup> In the focus on the strength of betrayal as an argument for an inherent emotionality of trust, there seems to be a logical corollary that the strong emotions of betrayal must arise from the disruption of some type of oppositional emotional precedent – that if breaking trust results in so spectacular an

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<sup>9</sup> We can see these two problems in broader social science literature, for example when Barbalet declares that trust is an emotion (Barbalet 1996, 84) while at the same time arguing that “trust requires a positive feeling of *expectation*.” Equally, he claims that “trust is *supported*, then, by a feeling that one can rely on, be dependent on, another,” (Barbalet 2011, 41) which suggests that while emotions and trust are related, they are not the same thing. So while trust “*includes* an affective or emotional acceptance of dependence on others,” (Barbalet 1996, 78) but does not seem to be subsumed under this idea of trust as being ontologically an emotion, in this sense. [emphasis ours throughout]

<sup>10</sup> Outside of international politics, see also (Barbalet 2011, 42) in this respect.

emotion state, that there must be something deeply emotional about trust as well. Michel argues that this is the case because of how betrayal occurs within an emotional field of trust and presupposes “a willful act to cause harm” (Michel 2013b, 100), leading to a reassessment of the actor’s horizon of expectation (Michel 2013b, 101).<sup>11</sup> However, is it necessary that the cause of a strong emotional state must be unto itself another emotional state? It does not seem that there is any necessary correlation here – we can clearly imagine that strong emotions can be provoked by many phenomena. In addition, and as we will discuss below in detail, it is difficult in the broader emotions literature to find any support for one emotional state directly inducing another. So not only is this relationship not a necessary one, that there can be many different types of triggers for strong emotions that are not emotional unto themselves, but that any suggestion of an emotion triggering another emotional state directly is actually not supported by any of the broader emotions literature.

Second, understanding trust as an emotion has other problematic theoretical consequences. If trust is an emotion, it therefore must be defined as some type of lived and consciously recognized experience. But this then runs contrary to potentially one of most important qualities of trust, namely, that trust can develop into a habitual, even everyday experience (Lewis and Weigert 1985, 969). Instead of focusing on trust as the outcome of an analytical effort, which arguably reduces it to nothing more than the calculation of expectations, some scholars argue that trust does something conceptually unique: it removes us from a purely calculative/experienced mode of being (Luhmann 1979; Eggeling and Versloot 2022, 3). While there might be emotional states that encourage trust, trust itself, from this perspective, is a state of suspension (Möllering 2001), or a state involving the cognitive reduction in an actor’s perception of risk (Keating and Ruzicka 2014, 755).<sup>12</sup> Although there is no doubt that

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<sup>11</sup> In making this move, and as noted above, Michel unpredictably shifts to ‘expectations’ here and away from trust-as-emotion – it is unclear what role emotions play in this case, despite the fact that they should be the most important effect of betrayal – if trust is indeed an emotion.

<sup>12</sup> For an example of how decisions to see trust as a calculation, or the suspension of calculation, leads to very different understandings of how trust might be formed and sustained, see (Keating and Thrandardottir 2017)

trust can be variant, it can also be relatively stable, habitual, and non-cognitive – to trust means to some degree *to not contemplate* the worst possible outcome in a situation, only to do so if the preexisting trust is disrupted. Emotions, alternatively, and by definition, are not about a lack of cognition about the world – they are a felt experience that is both produced by and affect our cognition about the world.

We can see how this idea of the potential habituality of trust can explain why betrayal is such a powerful emotional reaction without having to say that trust itself is an emotion. Some scholars like Niklas Luhmann argue that betrayal is so disorienting and shocking because it not only abruptly opens up a “gulf of unfamiliarity” with the betrayer (Luhmann 1979, 33), but does so over critical normative standards from the perspective of the truster (Keating and Abbott 2021, 1091-1092). This means that, in betraying, the betrayer 1) is suddenly alien to the truster, having 2) has broken critical norms in the truster's view which 3) has harmed the truster in some way – the combination of which provokes a strong emotional reaction. This jarring move out of cognitive suspension over normatively important standards is a reasonably coherent perspective to explain the relationship between trust and subsequent emotions, which also avoids the problem of having to claim that an emotional state is directly producing another emotional state.

This section has demonstrated that there are a number of international politics scholars who have claimed that trust is an emotion. It has furthermore shown that there are certain tensions within this literature, particularly a tendency to speak of trust in analytical terms even after declaring it to be an emotion and focusing more on precursor or successor emotional states rather than the supposed emotional nature of trust itself. It has finally suggested that there are additional reasons, independent from these problems, for why we should not treat trust as an emotion, namely there is no necessity that a strong emotion must be triggered by another emotion, and that focusing on emotions as conscious experience prevents us from theorizing one of the most important elements of trust that

differentiates it from the mere calculation of expectations: how it allows us to cognitively reduce or suspend our perception of prevailing risk.

## Is Revenge an Emotion?

The case of revenge also illustrates some of the difficulties linked to the overexpansion of the concept of emotions. Traditionally coined as an action anchored in behavioral mechanisms, revenge is also often – and quite surprisingly – described as an emotion within the social sciences (Burnett 1973; Hegel 1993; Hume 2007; Löwenheim and Heimann 2008; Lebow 2010; Balcells 2017), without necessarily establishing a clear link between both dimensions of revenge.

This duality of revenge as both involving emotions and behaviors may be the cause of various conceptual doubts about the relationship linking revenge and emotions. In international politics, therefore, “revenge emotions” seemingly refer to particularly inescapable emotional states that generate (Lebow 2010; Hassner 2015), escalate (Silke 1999; Lavi and Bar-Tal 2014; Balcells 2017), or maintain conflicts (Bass 2000; Elster 2004; Triantafilou 2005; Ohlin 2007; Peou 2016; Robin 2021). In this literature, the desire for revenge is described as an intense and irrational state (Crombag et al. 2003, 333) – characteristics which are traditionally associated with emotions. Revenge is seemingly an emotion which triggers violence.

Emotive descriptions for revenge vary extensively, with some scholars suggesting that revenge is an emotional reaction (Crombag et al. 2003, 333; Eadeh et al. 2017, 28; Bowman Grieve et al. 2019, 5), while others depict it as a bestial instinct (Majumdar 2009; Shary 2019), to name but a few examples. The examples above raise a significant concern. As in the case of trust, revenge shows an uncertainty: vengeance is simultaneously seen to be an emotional state, as suggested in the cases of “emotional reaction,” “puzzling emotion,” “emotional motivator,” “bestial instinct,” but it is also sometimes the qualifier of an emotion, as in the case of “revenge emotions,” as well as the

apparent goal of an emotion, as in the case of “desire for revenge,” or “lust for revenge.” While revenge and emotions, like trust, are seemingly inextricably related in some sense, the scholarship seems to be uncertain about the exact nature of this relationship.

To delve into this duality a little deeper, we can see that revenge indeed holds some of the characteristics traditionally ascribed to emotions, both physiologically and cognitively, and that the central arguments of both major schools of emotions suggest that there is something emotional about revenge. At the physiological level, revenge generates bodily manifestations also found in standard emotions, such as muscle tightening, increased heart rate, and excitement, even leading primatologists to identify bodily manifestations of revenge in chimpanzee groups, as well as among elephants or jackals (De Waal 1991; Aureli et al. 1992; Maynard et al. 2010, 2). At the cognitive level, too, revenge may be associated with emotions. Like standard emotions, avengers are known to exhibit a cognitive, relational state when seeking vengeance. Just like being fearful requires to assess a situation and one's relation to this situation, avengers need to label a specific situation as one deserving of revenge: when there has been a norm violation in need of repair (Brodersen 2014; Christensen 2016), framed, including at the community level, as a moral imbalance requiring action. Psychologists see in emotions something that is “elicited by something, are reactions to something, and are generally about something” (Ekkekakis 2013, 322). Emotions also have a clear referent, distinguishing them from notions like moods (Batson et al. 1992; Russell and Barrett 1999; Beedie et al. 2005; Schwarz and Clore 2007, 386). Revenge matches both concerns, by being a reaction to something, and by requiring a referent to exist. As argued by Kit Christensen, revenge, to exist, needs an object – what he calls an intended target – rightly or wrongly identified and against whom revenge should be directed (Christensen 2016). In so doing, revenge seemingly includes both physiological and relational-cognitive elements traditionally found in Nico Frijda's Cognitive Appraisal approach to emotions.

But if this is indeed the case, the question is then to understand a paradox, namely, given these strong ties between revenge and emotions, why most treatises on emotions not list vengeance as an emotion? (Watson 2000; Izard 2010) Indeed, there is a clear divergence between revenge scholars who argue that revenge is an emotion and emotions scholars, where nearly all the works<sup>13</sup> do not mention revenge among the lists of human emotions. For example, Alan Cowen and Dacher Keltner investigated emotional states elicited by 2,185 short videos using self-reporting methods, resulting in what they claimed were 27 different human emotions (Cowen and Keltner 2017). Revenge is not among them. Similarly, and prior to this study, Frijda proposed a list of universal emotions, including happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, disgust, and of social emotions – embarrassment, jealousy, guilt, pride – but did not mention revenge (Frijda 2009).

This ambiguity over the emotional status of revenge thus leads to a conceptual interrogation: as with trust, is it better to conceptualize revenge as an emotion or should we rather consider revenge as something different, but indeed related to, emotional states? We argue that there are two reasons why defining vengeance as an emotion is likely incorrect, and how doing so might lead us to miss out on some of its important characteristics and dynamics.

First, suggesting that revenge is simply an emotion can lead us to miss out on some of the ambivalence of revenge, both hot and cold. David Hume, for example, suggested that revenge as one of the hot passions (Hume 2007), reflecting a general sense of it being hot and unescapable. But the saying also goes, revenge is a dish best served cold. In this respect, vengeance involves a calculating dimension that might distinguish it from hot emotions. Vengeance can be planned. Vengeance can

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<sup>13</sup> The Dutch psychologist Nico H. Frijda, the leading scholar on Cognitive Emotion Theory, had an evolution in thinking on emotions that is illustrative of the ambiguity over whether revenge is an emotion. Frijda initially makes no mention of either revenge, vengeance, or vindictiveness in his 1986's *magnum opus: The Emotions*. In a separate essay published in 1994 however, revenge appeared among the listed emotions, along with anger, fear, shame, etc. This evolution is tied to a change in how Frijda defined emotions throughout his career. In his main opus of 1986, Frijda argued that appraisal preceded action readiness. In contrast, at the beginning of the 1990s, Frijda argued that appraisal was in fact the content of the emotion rather than its antecedent.

even be codified as a norm, for example in the Code Duello, concerning the practice of dueling. For Whitman, “vengeance has a logic, a logic governed by rules, not by the sorts of disordered emotions that prevent us from engaging in rule-bound behavior” (Whitman 2003, 907). When calling revenge an emotion, therefore, one arguably gets a good sense of the “hot” dimension of vengeance, *i.e.*, of its bestial and immediate dimension. But in doing so, one may minimize or exclude a second – but no less important – aspect of vengeance: its deliberate, planned dimension, as something best served cold, rationally thought upon and organized, which is a characteristic not traditionally found in standard emotions (Müller 2021; Scherer 2011, 2005)

Second, suggesting that revenge is an emotion can also lead us to miss out on some of the emotional effects of vengeance. Emotions may lead to action – what Frijda calls action tendencies – which generates tangible effects. In other words, one might shout or run around if scared, or adopt an open posture and smile if happy. Vengeance also arguably generates such tangible effects: an avenging behavior, a use of force. But revenge also does more than this. In contrast with traditional emotions, we argue that vengeance not only generates action, but it also engenders additional emotions. Revenge seemingly generates sensations, sometimes called a sense of felt satisfaction (Löwenheim and Heimann 2008; Lebow 2010) or a bittersweet taste (Eadeh et al. 2017), something that is not arguably found in traditional emotions. Much in line with our discussion about trust and emotions, we suggest that revenge as an emotion unto itself might conflate something being an emotion with something generating emotions.

Our argument, therefore, is that revenge – because of its ambivalence as both hotly desired and coldly prepared and because of its effects in generating emotions itself – may convincingly be coined not as an emotion but as the next step following an emotional state. Revenge, therefore, should rather be understood as the proposed solution to the emotion felt, for example, anger, shame, or humiliation, translated through a social environment, but not as an emotion unto itself. When feeling

the desire for revenge, the individual is already partly resolving his or her own emotional state. In that respect, revenge is not an emotion, we propose, but *a way out* of the emotion; it is the decision taken to solve the emotion.

Proponents of the emotional turn highlight how “once emotions occur, they become powerful motivators of future behaviors” (Coicaud 2014, 489). One of the main proponents of emotional theory, Nico Frijda, highlighted in his cognitive appraisal theory that emotions matter because they hold a tendency to act (Frijda 1986). In other words, emotional states encourage some type of action to solve the felt experience of the cognitive state. What we want to argue here is that by coining revenge as an emotion we might miss out on what exactly happens after the emotion, at the level of this tendency to act, *i.e.*, on how individuals act upon their emotional state. Revenge, we argue, plays a role at this specific moment – that is, after emotions, by giving shape to this tendency to act. In so doing, revenge arguably links felt emotions to an action able to solve the emotional state. Revenge in that respect has emotional precursors but is not itself an emotion. Instead, it is the direction that one gives to the emotional state. Vengeance, just like trust, rather than being an emotion, has emotional precursors (shame, anger, humiliation), and consequences (satisfaction, bittersweet taste).

## Towards a Delimitation of the Emotional Turn

The previous two sections have demonstrated that while there is some dispute in the literature over whether trust and revenge should be considered emotions, there are very good theoretical reasons to not consider them emotions, but rather phenomena that are highly related to emotional states. This last section takes this discussion one step further by asking what these discussions about the problematic emotionality of both revenge and trust have helped us to understand about our original research problem, namely, the expansion of the concept of emotions to areas that they should not

cover, and how might these errors be generalized to help provide better boundaries over what is and is not an emotion?

To begin with, we believe that in each section we have demonstrated that although some of the literature labels these phenomena as emotions, there are very good reasons to doubt that they should be included. But moreover, our engagement with trust and revenge has led us to three proposals that we believe can draw the line between something that should be considered an emotion, and something that should not. Importantly, these proposals not only help us to answer this question in the context of international politics, but all contribute to the broader scholarship on emotions in the social sciences.

First, something cannot be an emotion if the phenomenon arises from or generates another emotion state. As we previously discussed, this problem likely arises from a conflation of the characteristics of phenomenon affected by/affecting trust and revenge with the characteristics of the phenomenon itself. As we argued, requiring something or being in relation to something is not the same as being that something. In this case, whereas feelings of warmth and affection might help to generate trust, or feelings of anger and humiliation might help to generate revenge, it does not follow that trust and revenge must be emotional. Trust or revenge do not have to be emotional states to create or be affected by strong emotional states.

While this might be a general note of caution, we would furthermore like to reinforce the fact that, taking the emotions literature broadly, there is a general consensus among scholars that specific triggers give rise to emotions – though they often disagree about exactly how this happens – and it is difficult to find literature that argues that emotions trigger or are triggered by other emotions. Instead, across all the different philosophical schools of emotions, be they cognitivists, non-cognitivists, social constructionists, etc., the facilitators of emotions are always connected to some other internal or

external event or trigger, which are never characterized as other emotions (Baier 1990, 5-8; Mesquita and Frijda 1992, 180; James 1994, 206; Frijda et al. 2000, 1; Nussbaum 2001, 27-33; Kenny 2003, 132; Robinson 2005, 59-60; Scherer 2005, 700; Prinz 2006, 68; Scarantino 2010, 733; Scherer 2011, 334-335; Salmela 2014, 54, 58, 61). We might as a means of illustration take a known example about how feelings of lust might induce feelings of shame in certain cultures, which might suggest a direct relationship. But this transition cannot happen outside of a trigger where lust is seen as shameful within a particular social context – which is exactly why it socially varies.<sup>14</sup> Even when emotions scholars take up longer-term emotional processes such as grief, in which there might be “many types of representations and processes that interact with each other in producing and reinforcing emotions,” (Salmela 2014, 8), other emotions are not mentioned explicitly as being part of the representations and processes that underpin the long-term emotional state.<sup>15</sup> Therefore we are reasonably certain that we can set this boundary for what might constitute an emotion: something cannot be an emotion if it, absent an internal or external trigger, is induced by another emotional state.

Second, something cannot be an emotion if it does not encourage a wide variety of options – what Frijda calls “action tendencies” – to find a way out of the emotional state. Unlike standard emotions, revenge, we showed, already contains a specific prerequisite for action. As emphasized by Christensen, instances of revenge, even when imagined, do not generate a variety of options, and instead follow a very specific and shared behavioral pattern where:

*an intended target, a perceived victim, and an avenging agent, either the victim himself/herself/themselves, or some party acting as a proxy for those victimized (in which case the avenger may or may not be emotionally neutral, e.g., a professional assassin as opposed to a family member. Finally, without redundancy I think I can*

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<sup>14</sup> The only potential source for emotions leading to other emotions in the literature comes from their social nature, how emotions can be contagious among people through the witnessing of other peoples' emotional states (Magai and Haviland-Jones 2002, 10) – but there is nothing about the potential for already-existing internal emotions to be the triggers for other emotions within the individual.

<sup>15</sup> Equally, in a reasonably exhaustive examination of the classification of emotions across 18 different dimensions, there is no differentiation between emotions that arise from other emotions and emotions that arise from other stimuli (Thamm 2006, 34).

include here the role of a *vengeance advocate*, *i.e.*, someone who decides that revenge actually should be pursued, and then either convinces others to carry it out or upon reflection chooses to be the avenger oneself.” (Christensen 2016, 25).

Revenge therefore specifies the class of action is required. In this, it falls short in meeting the characteristics that traditionally characterize emotions, namely, that it gives rise to various action tendencies. Instead, revenge is one potential action tendency arising from other emotional states; it is experienced once options have been narrowed down, through calculation – with scholars even building models explaining why individuals choose revenge rather than forgiveness (Black 2013 Eadeh, 2017 #73; McCullough et al. 2013), for example when they calculate that it would deter an aggressor or a third-party. McCullough and his colleagues, for example, contend that “deciding whether to take revenge, then, should reflect a computation that weighs the expected benefits of revenge ... against its costs (e.g. will the aggressor or his or her allies engage in counter-revenge?” “The key consideration”, they argue, “is whether the act of revenge will deter future cost impositions upon the victim”. Revenge, therefore, does not offer various options to solve it; it is instead one of the action tendencies proposed to solve another emotion, which individuals will choose or not.

Similarly, trust cannot be an emotion according to this proposal because it also points to specific behavioral outcomes and not others. In other words, in trust, one does not find multiple action tendencies, but instead, there is a narrowed-down, specific set of behavioral actions, namely, a decrease in hedging activities on the part of the trustor (Keating and Ruzicka 2014; Brugger et al. 2016; Ruzicka and Wheeler 2016; Edwards 2018; Juntunen and Pesu 2018; Wheeler 2018; Keating and Abbott 2021).<sup>16</sup> Hedging, here is a form of self-insurance where an actor takes some sort of present action, at a cost, that, if the other actor defects, reduces the cost of this outcome. We might consider a state that signs a peace treaty, but at the same time sustains military spending and planning

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<sup>16</sup> Importantly, this observation is valid independent of the model of trust used in international politics (Ruzicka and Keating 2015) – we would expect the same hedging behavior whether trust is achieved by rational calculation, a product of a psychological state, or existing social mechanisms.

related to a potential military engagement with the other state. This spending and planning is costly, and the state pays this cost because they do not trust the other. But should they be correct in this assessment, these hedging activities will reduce their potential losses. The opposite is also true – if the state trusts the other state to not take advantage of them, then behaviorally they will not engage these activities nor suffer their costs. The point is that the presence or absence of trust has specific behavioral outcomes. In the face of prevailing risk, having trust reduces the manifestation of self-insurance mechanisms that otherwise allow an individual to cope with the risk of defection, and vice versa – and in having a set response to these situations, there is no action tendency, so it cannot be an emotion.

As with our first claim, this finding sheds some light onto an implicit dimension within the emotions literature, namely that something is an emotion when it contains multiple *options* designed to solve the emotional state (Frijda 1987; Coricelli et al. 2007; McCullough et al. 2013; Phelps et al. 2014; Lerner et al. 2015; McDermott 2017) – in other words, they *propose* solutions. Implicitly, emotions scholars tie emotions with encouragements to act in certain ways, among which the emotional individual ought to choose (Frijda 1986; Rolls 1990; Rogan and LeDoux 1996; Brodersen 2018). Nothing is said however, about the process driving this choice. Why does one scream rather than hide out of fear? Why does one undertake revenge rather than forgiving – or doing nothing at all? While the literature on emotions focuses extensively on how emotions arise, how they relate to rationality, or how they might be countered, the decision on how to act upon an emotion seemingly lies beyond the realm of pure emotions, leading us to argue that phenomena that already contain a specific, narrowed-down action – a strict behavioral tendency – are not emotions unto themselves. Our second finding therefore contends that a phenomenon is not an emotion if it does not offer a multitude of – a repertoire of – actions.

Third, a phenomenon cannot be an emotion if it has the potential to be temporally invariant. Emotions are both cognitively present and, if not fleeing, variant. This means that phenomena that are known to be (come) non-cognitive, habitual, or invariant over long periods of time cannot be emotions. Some scholars have already noted that emotional consciousness allows individuals to experience a unique reality, and that the stream of emotional experiences link the present with the immediate past and future (James 1890, 609-610; Denzin 1984, 58; Mattley 2002, 368-369), which stresses the temporary and fluctuating nature of emotional life. Even emotions that might be seen as simply background conditions for human existence, such as the fear of death (Ben-Ze'ev and Ben-Ze'ev 2000, 16; Nussbaum 2001, 42), are not phenomenologically invariant in our lives. Instead, the strength of these emotions, even if we take them to be omnipresent to some degree, will grow and recede in strength, triggered by either external or internal factors – the external trigger of the loss of a friend or loved one, the internal trigger of contemplating one's own mortality. Emotions, by their nature have a temporal dimension (Mattley 2002, 363-364), a variance over time that makes any reasonably invariant phenomenon unlikely to be an emotion.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that the international politics scholarship on emotions has (re)introduced a much-needed explanatory tool to our field. In doing so, the scholarship has taken a familiar root of many other 'turns' in exploring how far one might stretch a concept to help answer important questions about our world. This paper takes the opposite approach. Under the idea that a good theoretical tool is a precise theoretical tool, we hope to start a conversation about what the meaningful limits of the use of emotions are by demonstrating how two phenomena, revenge and trust.

First, we have demonstrated first that there is ambiguity over whether these phenomenon should be understood as an emotion already in the literature. In the case of trust, there is a

disagreement between those scholars who see it as an emotion and those that see it as a type of behavior. Similarly, we have shown that revenge seems to hold both emotional and non-emotional characteristics, also leading scholars to see it both as an emotion and as a behavior. This ambiguity seems to result in a paradoxical result: while scholars of revenge tend to argue that it is an emotion, scholars of emotions almost never do.

Second, we believe that there may be a conflation between trust and revenge being labelled as emotions and trust and revenge being phenomena that are highly linked to emotional states. With trust, one might say that emotions of warmth and closeness brought on by commonality might induce one to trust another, and that if this trust is broken, it might result in emotions of betrayal. With revenge, one might say that emotions of rage and humiliation might trigger the phenomenon, and emotions of satisfaction might come as a result. But to have emotional antecedents and consequences does not mean that these phenomena must unto themselves be emotions.

Lastly, we have generated through this discussion three proposals that might guide us to consider when a concept should not be considered an emotion, namely, if the phenomenon arises from or generates another emotion state, if it does not encourage a wide variety of options to find a way out of the emotional state, and if it has the potential to be temporally invariant.

As we stated at the beginning of this paper, our aim is not to come up with a final definition of emotions, from either a positive or negative perspective. Indeed, we are quite aware that scholars can treat concepts in slightly different ways due to, for instance, differences in ethics or views of epistemology, and that this plurality of conceptual voice, while sometimes leading us to talk past each other, is likely a sign of a healthy academic research agenda. However, we are also driven by the often-quoted idea that if a concept explains everything, it explains nothing, and therefore in light of

the pressures of conceptual overstretch it is useful to start a discussion over where the boundaries of a particular concept might lie, and what the consequences of different choices might be.

In putting this agenda forward, we of course can generate many further questions. For example, have other precursors of emotions or consequences of emotions been conflated with an emotion itself? Can the examination of these other border cases allow us to develop further proposals about how to define this boundary, or refine or problematize the proposals we have put forward here? In other words, in bringing forward these arguments, we hope to use this as a proof of concept to provoke a more general discussion about exactly where these borders might be, and more importantly, what are the theoretical, empirical, and ethical ramifications of making these types of choices.

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