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The Reasons of Emotion

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In the last decades powerful efforts to prove the rationality of emotion have been made by philosophers whose accounts of emotion may generally be labelled cognitive. Contrary to the negative view of emotions as passive occurrences, interruptions or disturbances in rational thinking and deliberative action, emotions are shown to be sensitive to reasoning and criticism. They have even been shown to inform our reasoning, or to constitute a form of reasoning themselves. The analysis grounding these claims is usually founded in a discussion of the intentionality of emotions. (See Kenny 1963 for one of the first expositions of this idea.) The term, initially coined by the psychologist Franz Brentano (1973, 88), is usually taken to address the sense in which emotions take objects. They are directed at or about something or someone, and identified as the particular emotions they are by their formal object, such as fear by the thought “It is dangerous”.

In more cognitivist accounts of emotion the discussion of intentionality has often been reduced to an attempt to explicate emotions in terms of the beliefs (Taylor 1975, 1979) or judgements (Solomon 1980, 1993, Nussbaum 1990) on which the emotions are either based, or simply are. Other accounts have rather emphasized the sense in which emotions constitute more complex embodied phenomena, involving a “seeing-as” (Hamlyn 1983, Roberts 2003, de Sousa 1980) or a way of taking the world as being in a certain way (Hutchinson 2008). According to the more cognitivist view, the kind of criticism that can be directed against emotion receives a straightforward treatment. If emotions are beliefs or judgements about something being in a particular way, and if we can examine the accuracy of the beliefs a person holds about the object of her emotions by investigating its object, we can judge whether a certain emotion is in place in a certain situation. If her beliefs about the object, say that a bear is dangerous, are rational—the bear is indeed dangerous and is able to attack—she is “justified in

experiencing an emotional reaction based on them” (Taylor 1979, 165-168). If this is not the case, the fear is irrational and unjustified.

The kind of examples of irrational emotions favoured in these accounts are connected with situations in which my reaction is not in line with the situation or based on a mistaken assumption. I am afraid although the situation is not dangerous, or I am angry although I lack a reason to be. A central example is also when my emotional response is disproportionate to the danger or injustice of a situation. These cases presuppose a particular understanding of what the situation is like that is available both to those under the influence of emotion, and to those taking a rational stand on it. Here, I simply stand in need of more if I am to change my mind about the meaning of a situation. I may, say, be angry at a colleague for not handing in her share of a plan at a settled date, regarding this as an aspect of her constant sloppiness. When she excuses herself to me and tells me that some family problems prevented her from doing it, I am struck by remorse at my previous anger. I now find it to be too harsh a response. Here, one might well say that my anger was not justified, or not justified to the extent in which I was angry.

Let us, however, imagine a messier case. (Many philosophers like to keep their examples tidy, but I believe that one’s philosophizing is really put to the test when one places one’s arguments in a real life context.) Suppose a married couple is having a quarrel. Suppose they had both entered the marriage with exaggerated fantasies and idealizations about what the marriage would offer them. She had envisaged a meeting with a stranger, which would take her out of her usual surroundings. He had found her to be “grace itself ... perfectly lovely and accomplished”, the kind of wife that would adorn his home with female charm. If you have read George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* you do not have to use your imagination any longer but can simply recollect the story of doctor Tertius Lydgate and Rosamond Vincy, henceforth referred to as Rosamond and Lydgate. If you are not acquainted with the novel, or fail to remember the details of their struggles, you may now suppose that our doctor has run into economic problems and suggested to his wife that he would sell their house. She is anything but willing to agree with him. Without his knowledge, she averts his plans and writes a letter to the uncle from whom he has estranged himself asking for money.

When Lydgate reads the stinging reply of his uncle, the couple is caught up in an “I said” “You said”.

He says:

“It will be impossible to endure life with you, if you will be always acting secretly – acting in opposition to me and hiding your actions.”

...

“Will you only say that you have been mistaken, and that I may depend on your not acting secretly in future?”

She is quick to perceive the request in his tone and answers with coolness.

“I cannot possibly make admissions or promises in answer to such words as you have used towards me. I have not been accustomed to language of that kind. You have spoken of my ‘secret meddling,’ and my ‘interfering ignorance,’ and my ‘false assent.’ I have never expressed myself in that way to you, and I think that you ought to apologise. You spoke of its being impossible to live with me. Certainly you have not made my life pleasant to me of late. I think it was to be expected that I should try to avert some of the hardships which our marriage has brought on me.” (Eliot 1994, 633-635)

The example is much richer than anything I can account for here, and there are aspects of it that I cannot touch upon. I hope, however, that this marital strife allows you to see the *different* perspectives on the situation which is a characteristic feature of many angry quarrels. In many cases of fear, there is considerable agreement as to what situations are dangerous. In Rosamond and Lydgate’s case, however, their different ways of thinking that that the other has done them a wrong is constitutive of our understanding of their being angry. If they, as it were, described their situation in the same terms, there would not be anything for them to be angry at in the other.

What distinguishes this situation from the situation where I had been ignorant of a fact, is the impossibility of separating the *reasons* they give for their respective feelings of anger and betrayal, from their feeling this way, and vice versa. What makes the attribution of anger or betrayal intelligible is their giving expression to their feelings in such terms. Lydgate’s words “It will be impossible to endure life with you, if you always act in opposition to me” is both a description of how he sees his situation and an articulation and expression of his emotions.

This case then points to examples of emotion where our engagement in the situation is internally related to what our situation is. We cannot therefore meaningfully speak about the kind of situation it is, without considering the emotions of which our different descriptions are expressive. It is in the light of Lydgate’s anger, and Rosamond’s more withheld distaste for her husband that our understanding of contested claims of doing

something wrong comes to life. These cases, then, reveal an important indeterminacy in what we can come to think of as relevant facts in a situation, since what we come to think of as facts in the first place is itself dependent on our ways of emotionally being engaged in our situation (cf. Hertzberg 2004). In this respect, a proper investigation into the intentionality of emotion does not only serve to loosen up the classical distinction between reason and emotion by showing the rational features of emotion. It also asks for a serious revision of rationality, and of thinking as a whole. We can no longer hold on to accounts of reasoning that largely regards it as a conscious process we undergo to realize our aims, but have to include spontaneous embodied responses, as well as unconscious elements in what we think of as acting reasonably.

Here, it is also significant to remember, that words, such as, “That was wrong” or “You went behind my back”, “You betrayed your promises to me”, do not simply have the role in conversation of constituting descriptions of facts. They are means of hurling accusations at each other, and themselves form reasons for the other, not primarily to believe certain things, but significantly to feel certain ways, such as hurt, offended, remorseful, and to act in certain ways. They are meant to make someone listen, put an end to the wrong, or ask for forgiveness.

This has repercussions for how we are to perceive the kinds of reasoning concerned when we speak of understanding another person’s emotional response, or lack thereof. What is it in this conflict that Rosamond and Lydgate fail to understand? If we suggest that either of them is not getting the facts right we do not grasp the depth of their conflict. We do not capture the sense in which they can be said not only to have differing beliefs about the same world, but the sense in which they *inhabit different worlds*. This way of speaking about the couple as living in different worlds is inspired by Wittgenstein’s remark in the *Tractatus* where he writes, “The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man” (1993, 6.43). It is not that Rosamond and Lydgate, in any simple sense, misunderstand or make mistakes about their situation. Neither is it that they merely value the situation in different ways; Lydgate finding that “acting secretly... in opposition to him” is a terrible thing to do, while Rosamond thinks it is perfectly acceptable. Rather their whole quarrel revolves around *what* it is that each of them had done. They embody two meaningful perspectives on what their situation *is*.

The kind of difficulty facing Rosamond on Lydgate, as it were, is not the difficulty of acknowledging a fact they had foregone in their previous reasoning. It is on the whole

not a difficulty in understanding any one particular thing. Their failure, rather, lies in them not understanding *each other*.

This failure to understand each other, should not be understood in the epistemological sense of saying, "I don't understand this". It is rather reminiscent of the moral desperation or outrage that is expressed in cries such as, "I don't get you" or "You don't understand me!" Here, then, it is meaningful to mark a contrast between being angry at *something* (the other has said or done) and being angry at *someone*, a contrast cognitive accounts mostly leave unnoticed. Whereas the first sense points to their response to some object, the second points to the kind of relation they have with each other. What is needed if their situation is to change is not more information, but *forgiveness* in their emotional attitude towards each other.

Their difficulty of coming to see the situation in the light of the other's understanding of it, and accepting what regarding it in such a way could mean to them, is the difficulty of listening to the other and taking seriously the suggestion that he or she could give a meaningful depiction of what had happened. It is a failure to realize that the other's differing perspective is not only something for them to judge, but to *learn* from and also be *changed* by. It is their lack of trust in each other to open up to each other, to be there for each other and allow the thoughts and feelings of the other to matter to their own. It is the difficulty of admitting that they too had done something wrong, the difficulty of abstaining from self-righteousness. Their difficulties of understanding each other, as I hope it should be clear from the above descriptions, are revealing of their difficulties and failures to love.

This sense in which emotions at times embody different meaningful perspectives on the same situation, is not meant to exclude the sense in which we may emphasize the need for becoming clear about the truth of what has happened, or the sense in which different emotional responses can be judged to be better or do more justice to what has happened. It does, however, encourage us to search for more nuanced ways of understanding the kind of criticism that can be directed at emotions than cognitive accounts of emotion have offered us so far.

Speaking about Rosamond and Lydgate's quarrel, we may well reach a stage at which we say, "Now we know what really happened". We find a description that brings us peace. The tragedy in speaking about them as inhabiting worlds that do not meet, in one sense of "world", of course, is that they, in another sense of the word, clearly live in the

same world. What I want to criticize is rather the idea that there could be *one neutral (rational) description* with reference to which we could judge once and for all whether their emotions are in place or not. It is not so that the only position from which we can criticize emotionally distorted understandings is a disengaged one.

Even if I, as a reader, may feel that Rosamond is in the wrong—“she really did go behind his back”—this conviction is also expressive of my feelings in the matter. As I read on, I am gripped by Lydgate’s growing desperation at her lack of understanding. I experience it myself. We could even say that my ability to understand Lydgate’s anger presupposes the ability to react to his situation or similar situations with anger. Even before their confrontation when I learn what Rosamond is up to, my irritation grows. I anticipate Lydgate’s response as he finds out, for it is also my response. Someone unable to feel anger would not understand what the situation was about.

Rather than thinking that the internal relation between what we feel and what we take as facts of the situation, disqualifies all talk about facts, I suggest that we seriously consider what it means for these kinds of facts to be partly constituted by our emotions. How do my emotions come into the judgement, say, whether Rosamond really went behind Lydgate’s back, or how their different idealizations of middle-class marriage contributed to their difficulties of understanding each other? This turn to emotion, involves a move away from the primarily *epistemological* perspective from which cognitive accounts approach the question of the truth of a judgement. It points our direction at the *moral* implications of that same question.

To see the truth of this kind of situation, I am not required to step out of it as an emotionally responsive human being. I am asked to scrutinize how I am already involved in it. Through reflection on my own involvement in a situation, what I say, think and feel in it, I learn something both about the situation and about myself. The recognition that what I say, can never be completely separated from taking a stand on how things are, also calls me to question what kind of emotions and thoughts I want to take responsibility for. What emotions are predominant in my meetings with other people? Of what character are my ways of perceiving them? Is my world full of joy or anger, pride or disappointment, hope or bitterness, love or hate? Does my understanding, and my philosophizing, give expression to a love that tells us that our emotions are not only there to be criticized for blinding us to the facts of the world, but

that our conversations with each other, enlivened by emotion, can give us new possibilities to rediscover our world and what the human mind and heart can grasp in it

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