

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 21 | Issue 3

Article 10

7-1-2004

Roberts, EMOTIONS: AN ESSAY IN AID OF MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

Nancy E. Snow

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Snow, Nancy E. (2004) "Roberts, EMOTIONS: AN ESSAY IN AID OF MORAL PSYCHOLOGY," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 3 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol21/iss3/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

2. Colin McGinn, *The Mysterious Flame: Conscious Minds in a Material World* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).
3. William Hasker, *The Emergent Self* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).
4. Lynne Rudder Baker, *Saving Belief: The Case Against Physicalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).
5. For an attempt of this kind, see my *C.S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea: A Defense of the Argument from Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003).

Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology, by Robert C. Roberts. Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. 357. \$70.00 (Cloth), \$25.00 (Paper).

NANCY E. SNOW, Marquette University

This book is the first part of a projected two-volume study of the emotions and their place in moral personality. The volume is ambitious, densely written, and thoroughly argued. Since Roberts' primary concern is to use conceptual analysis to elucidate the nature and moral import of emotions, in chapter one he defends conceptual analysis against critics. In chapter two, he develops his own theory of the nature of emotions. He applies the theory to many particular emotions in chapter three. Chapter four closes the book with an exploration of assorted topics, such as error in emotion, emotions and feelings, emotions and the self, true and false emotions, emotions and literature, and emotional education.

In chapter one, Roberts describes conceptual analysis as "... particularly based on collection of and reflection about examples from everyday human life, many of which can only be understood in the light of a fairly rich narrative background" (p. 5). He defends this method of understanding emotions against two lines of attack, one from Amelie O. Rorty and another from Paul E. Griffiths (among others). The upshot of the labyrinthine analysis of Rorty's view is that emotion is a wide-ranging and complex topic. According to Roberts, a useful understanding of emotion should explain why some concepts, such as anger and fear, are paradigm cases of what English speakers regard as emotion, whereas notions like surprise and startle are marginal cases (see p. 14).

An examination of the second line of criticism of conceptual analysis follows the laborious treatment of Rorty. The second criticism comes from those who believe that emotion should be understood in scientific terms. Roberts' arguments about purely scientific analyses of emotions are genuinely helpful in ferreting out useful methodological approaches to a truly complex topic. Roberts' arguments lead him to the commonsense conclusion that emotions are best studied from a variety of disciplinary angles (see p. 36). Though Roberts endorses conceptual analysis, he is also aware of its limitations (see pp. 57-9).

In chapter two, he uses conceptual analysis to develop his own theory of emotions. Before turning to the substance of the view, two preliminary

points are in order. First, Roberts offers a disclaimer of sorts by calling his view an ‘understanding,’ as opposed to a ‘theory’ of the emotions (see p. 182). This seems a trifle disingenuous, for he clearly intends his “understanding” of emotion to compete with other philosophical theories of emotion. His “understanding” is theory-like in several respects: he argues that it’s superior to other “theories,” such as various views about the roles that judgments play in emotions; he develops terminology specific to his view; he offers “paradigm cases” of emotions that are well explained by his approach; and acknowledges that some emotions are not fully captured by his outlook.

Second, the style of the first few sections of chapter two is tedious. The first section begins with a dozen facts about emotion. These are numbered E1-E12. In the important section on construals, the reader encounters nine numbered sections, and a summary of twelve important points about construals, numbered C1-C12. One of the sections on judgments contains features of the nature of judgments, numbered J1-J6. Perhaps these lists were an attempt by the author to communicate efficiently, but the reader is grateful to see them disappear as chapter two progresses.

According to Roberts, emotions are concern-based construals (see p. 79). He writes: “A construal is a perceptual event or state in which one thing is grasped in terms of something else” (p. 76). A construal is a construction of various elements (see p. 78), or a characterization of how objects present themselves (see p. 80). Later Roberts indicates that emotions are a subclass of construals, or a certain kind of construal (see p. 101). Though he argues against the views that emotions are constituted by judgments or require judgments, he contends that many, though not all, emotions have propositional content (see p. 107ff). He writes:

A sentence expressive of an instance of emotion and referring to the particular items in the emotion’s situational object I will call the emotion’s *material proposition*. The various material propositions expressive of instances of a given type of emotion (say, resentment or nostalgia) should have a form in common. A sentence expressing this form I will call an emotion’s *defining proposition* (p. 110; italics his).

An example is the defining proposition for anxiety: “*X vaguely presents an aversive possibility of some degree of probability; may X or its aversive consequences, whatever they may be, be avoided*” (p. 110; italics his).

Material propositions of a construal can depict valuational features of a situation. This, however, is not enough for a construal to be an emotion. According to Roberts: “Insofar as the material proposition is that of an *emotion*, its value elements must express a concern of the subject, and this concern has to connect with or enter into the rest of the construal as one of its terms” (p. 111; italics his).

What, then, are concerns? The answer is neither simple nor entirely clear. Roberts claims: “I use ‘concern’ to denote desires and aversions, along with the attachments and interests from which many of our desires and aversions derive. Concerns can be biological (‘instinctive’) or learned, general or specific, ultimate or derivative, and dispositional or occurrent” (p. 142). Some concerns are desires, but some aren’t (see p. 143). Moreover,

there can be basic concerns and consequent concerns; bipolar concerns and unipolar concerns (see p. 144). Basic concerns are what Roberts calls “exogenous” causes of emotions, that is, causes that are not parts or aspects of an emotion (as opposed to “analytic” causes of emotion, which are part of the experience of the emotion; see p. 133). Yet basic concerns can also be “taken up” into a construal, to become part of an emotion.

Roberts deploys other technical notions, such as the idea of a “term” of a construal, in the explanation of his view. These ideas are complex and, at times, elusive, and he rightly spends considerable time and effort sifting through them. The concept of a concern, so crucial to his understanding of emotion, is especially hard to pin down, but essential to Roberts’ view of emotion as both conative and cognitive (see p. 178).

Chapter three is a lengthy analysis of specific emotions. The main task is to identify defining propositions for emotions and emotion types. Roberts recognizes that some of the defining propositions he identifies are debatable (see p. 192; p. 218). For example, the defining proposition for anger has a lot of embedded cognitive and evaluative content: “*S has culpably offended in the important matter of X (action or omission) and is bad (is to some extent an enemy of what is good); I am in a moral position to condemn; S deserves (ought) to be hurt for X; may S be hurt for X*” (p. 204). To me, this seems more appropriate as defining justifiable anger than as defining anger in general. Further, one would think that defining propositions of similar or closely related emotions would be similar in form and content. Yet, the defining propositions of resentment and an emotion that he calls “impersonal resentment” differ not only in form but also in content, since resentment expresses a desire to hurt some culpable offender, whereas “impersonal resentment” does not express the desire to harm, but the desire to be compensated by some presumably culpable “System” (see pp. 214-15).

A deeper issue, I believe, is that the content of defining propositions seems heavily culturally influenced and thus, culturally relative. Roberts addresses this concern by asking whether emotions found among the Ifaluk and Ilongot (groups living near or in the Philippines) are fear or anger. His general conclusion is that his approach to emotions can help us to understand when emotions found in other cultures correspond to emotions found in ours, and when they differ. This is useful, provided that the defining propositions of emotions found in our culture are accurate and can be reasonably generalized across cultures.

Chapter four concludes the volume with an examination of assorted topics. They include, among others, the distinction between emotions and feelings — the feeling and the emotion are two aspects of one mental state (see p. 60; p. 322) — an explanation of the difference between true and false feelings, and truth criteria for feelings. Some of the arguments presented in this chapter seem counterintuitive. For example, in his treatment of false feelings, Roberts claims: “On this book’s account of emotion a construal is not an emotion unless it is based on an appropriate concern . . .” (p. 330). This invites the question, “What counts as an appropriate concern?” It is difficult for the reader to arrive at a clear answer. Roberts suggests that an appropriate concern results in motivation, at least for some emotions, such as indignation (see p. 330; pp. 335-36). He writes: “Thus lack of proper

motivation is, for these emotions, a strong indicator that the emotion itself is absent. If the individual feels it, nevertheless, the feeling is a sham" (p. 330). I find this puzzling. Why can't someone feel mildly indignant over some slight, yet remain unmotivated to act, perhaps because of resignation or forbearance? I would say that such indignation is mildly felt, yet genuine – not a sham.

Readers can judge for themselves the merits of Roberts' positions. Let me conclude with a final observation. I found several of his examples to be politically charged and, at times, offensive. For example, in discussing anger, he tells a (presumably imaginary) story about a colleague suggesting that Roberts be given last choice of upper division courses because Roberts is "... nothing but a middle-aged white protestant male ..." (p. 60). A woman's unusual rage at a man is explained by reference to her monthly menstrual cycle – this is supposed to illustrate that emotions presuppose a background of normal neurochemical functioning (see p. 134). Horror is illustrated by asking the reader to consider "A wastebasket of human fetuses, some whole and some in parts ..." (p. 202). He continues: "... it is even more horrifying if one of them is still moving" (p. 202). Perhaps I am being too sensitive about these examples (my monthly cycle?), but their content distracts the reader from Roberts' main points, which could easily have been made using other cases. To me, these illustrations mar an otherwise impressive philosophical contribution.

Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions by Martha C. Nussbaum. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 751 pages, inc. index. \$39.95, cloth.

GENE FENDT, University of Nebraska

"Is that what grief is, then?" I said, "A malfunction?"¹

Upheavals of Thought is as long and varied as a Russian novel. Fortunately, one does not have to read it straight through for fear of losing track of the characters. Fruitfully, I took up the assignment of this review at the same time that I picked up David Lodge's novel, *Thinks...*, in which a female novelist, Helen Reed, is dealing, as Professor Nussbaum while writing her book, with that emotion—"so excessive, so disproportionate to any possible evolutionary payoff" (Lodge, 69)—we pin down in the five letters of grief. Helen Reed faces her grief against a former philosopher entirely transformed into an adulterous director of an AI institute. Martha Nussbaum faces hers in the company of the Stoics and Proust, Joyce and Whitman, and against Plato, Dante, Augustine and others. The Lodge novel and the scholarly book make the reader consider several thought experiments from quite different angles; the novel performs, the scholarly book represents and argues; I ruminate: perhaps the scholarly book performs as well

Nussbaum's continuing project is to develop and implement what she calls a "cognitive/evaluative" theory of the emotions (3), a theory which, "accompanied by a flexible notion of intentionality" (129) will show how