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Roberts, EMOTIONS IN THE MORAL LIFE

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BOOK REVIEWS

Emotions in the Moral Life, by Robert C. Roberts. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 220 pages. \$90 (hardcover).

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This lively and systematic work extends the account of emotions that Roberts defends in his *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology*.¹ The current volume explores emotions' roles in moral judgment, action, personal relationships, and happiness. He intends this work as a prolegomenon to a further future study of emotions and related motivational states in their connection with human virtues.

Roberts deepens and defends his account of emotions as concern-based construals. A construal, in Roberts's terminology, is a gestalt perception (a perception-as), and an emotion is a construal that gathers together features of a situation insofar as those features impinge in some way on the subject's concerns or cares. The concerns make the perception evaluative. Consider fear. To fear something is to see it as a threat to something one cares about (e.g., one's own wellbeing or the wellbeing of one's child). But a threat is a probable harm, and thus something to be forestalled or avoided.

In his first chapter Roberts objects to moral theories on the model of consequentialisms, deontologies, and virtue theories that propose some single foundation for ethical concepts. He proposes instead that we think of moral concepts as belonging to moral outlooks such as Christianity, Stoicism, and the evaluative outlook that forms the background of Aristotle's ethics. Virtue concepts would then always be situated in one outlook or another, but would not function foundationally, and the detailed exploration of virtue concepts could be the philosopher's contribution to moral wisdom. Chapter 2 outlines the roles that emotions play in the moral life both for better and for worse.

¹Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).



Chapter 3 is the first of three chapters about emotions' roles in moral judgments. Like ordinary sensory perceptions, emotions as concern-based construals often come prior to our judgments about some matter, and we can refrain from forming an evaluative judgment about a situation, even if our emotion is representing the situation in that manner. But if the person is emotionally well formed (virtuous), then she may trust her emotions to be fairly reliable in their evaluative presentation of situations. Now, while I might come to have an evaluative belief independent of any emotion, Roberts argues in great detail that my having an emotion can confer greater *justification* as well as a greater *understanding* of my evaluative belief. The emotion may also make for a greater *acquaintance* with the relevant evaluative situation.

In further articulating his perceptual account by responding to a host of objections in the fourth chapter, Roberts contrasts his view with the neo-Jamesian "perceptual" view. Roughly, Jesse Prinz holds that an emotion is a perception of one's bodily reactions to some eliciting event, and that such bodily reactions represent or indicate a certain core relational theme, where a core relational theme is a relation between an organism and its environment that bears on that organism's well-being such as a demeaning offense, a threat, an achievement, etc. Our bodily reactions represent such core relational themes by being reliably caused by states of affairs that instantiate such core relational themes. Roberts gives bodily reactions a much more subordinate place in the emotion. They are "accompaniments of the emotion that supply part of its familiar phenomenology, rather than . . . the emotion itself" (74). Roberts suggests that Prinz's theory cannot adequately explain why certain mental states with intentional content give rise to certain bodily changes if those very mental states are not already emotions. After all, "in Prinz's terms, the core relational theme has to have been detected already before the bodily change kicks in" (74).

While I am in fact sympathetic to Roberts's criticism, consider two lines of reply that a proponent of Prinz's view might make. First, the detection itself of a core relational theme (which gives rise to a bodily change) need not consist in a *thought* or a *reflection* on the core relational theme. So if the detection itself of the core relational theme need not require such a cognitively mature mental state such as a thought or a certain level of awareness, then it would seem that there is more of a need to focus upon the bodily change (and the perception of the bodily change) rather than the mental state causally preceding the bodily state. Must Roberts grant that the detection of a core relational theme need not consist in a cognitively mature mental state such as a thought? Yes. For, one of the more serious objections to "cognitive" accounts like Roberts's is that they are unable to account for the fact that non-language-users such as "beasts and babies" can undergo emotions. Roberts accommodates this worry by emphasizing that, on his view, emotions are not thoughts (which might be thought to depend on language) but rather are perceptions (albeit with conceptual or propositional structure). Second, Prinz can highlight that on

his view, since the bodily state that we perceive (which in turn is an emotion) is reliably caused by events that have a certain core relational theme, our perception of such bodily states—the emotion—can be individuated by the events which reliably elicit such bodily changes. In other words, while the mental state that gives rise to certain bodily changes is not itself the emotion, the salient mental state still has a deep connection with the bodily state in virtue of both states being reliably caused by the relevant kind of event.

In chapter 5, “Emotional Truths,” Roberts rightly notes that it is quite natural to find ourselves supposing that it can be *appropriate* or *inappropriate*, *right* or *wrong* for a person to have a particular emotion in certain circumstances. An emotion can be appropriate to a situation in either or both of two ways: pragmatically (fear moves you to avoid a threat) and factually (the feared object actually *is* a threat). So, such representations can be true or false: “emotions [have to] conform to standards that are not themselves emotions” (93). Roberts takes the putative existence of objective standards for displaying emotions not to fare well for non-cognitivist positions, such as the one standardly attributed to Hume. For the appropriateness of an emotion seems to depend upon the evaluative aspect of a situation the emotion is representing rather than the situation’s evaluative aspect depending somehow upon the response of the person. Otherwise, we are committed to an “outlook-pluralism” whereby emotional truth is a matter of “emotional ‘truth’ *for me, for you*” (107), etc. This sort of evaluative relativism which in turn gives rise to moral relativism does not fit well any sort of view worthy of the name moral realism. In a memorable line, Roberts says in regard to a non-cognitivist’s view of emotional truth that Mackie “has a name for such truth: ‘error’” (107).

Must one who holds that the evaluative features of a situation depend in some sense upon the response of the person be committed to a form of moral relativism whereby emotional truth *for me* may differ from emotional truth *for you*? Roberts thinks that Ronald De Sousa is overly optimistic in suggesting that an equilibrium or emotional convergence can be achieved through an “inter-emotional testing.” Roberts notes that even if emotional convergence were possible within a single generation at a time, it is still unlikely that such convergence would hold for all people across time.

I’d like to make a tentative suggestion on behalf of the constructivist. Very roughly, according to the Kantian constructivist procedural realism defended by Christine Korsgaard, normative truths are invariant across rational agents even though normative truths are grounded in (rather than independent of) what is constitutive of agency itself. If one found such a naturalistic grounding of normativity to be plausible, then there might be a way to ground the rational standards of emotions similarly in what is constitutive of agency, so that emotional truth is invariant across rational agents, and thus emotional convergence is achieved. I say that

this suggestion is tentative because I am less than confident that normativity can in fact be grounded in what is constitutive of agency.

Roberts distinguishes between affect and motivation in his discussion of the relationship between emotions and action in the sixth chapter. Affect is the way an emotion feels; it is a feature of the construal. Motivation, on the other hand, is the product of an emotion. It is crucial in morally significant situations that the affect of the emotion motivate one to act in a way that bears upon the *object* of the emotion rather than motivate one simply to eliminate or sustain the relevant emotion. Chapter 7 discusses how emotions are good or bad for personal relationships. In addition to generating actions that can foster or undermine our relationships, emotions can be constitutive of such relationships as friendship, enmity, good and bad parent-child relationships, collegiality, and civic relationships. Roberts argues that the value of emotions as bearing on our relationships is not reducible to their value as fitting situations or as motivating actions. Gratitude to one's friend, joy in the friend's good fortune, anger at offenses against the friend, and so forth are partially constitutive of friendship. Anger at the enemy, rejoicing in the enemy's bad fortune, and gratitude to those who thwart the enemy's purposes, are partially constitutive of enmity. In chapter 8, Roberts proposes that happiness be conceived of in terms of two kinds of emotional "attunement." Circumstantial attunement is attunement to one's "local" circumstances and metaphysical attunement is attunement to one's real nature and the nature of the universe. The emotions characteristic of such attunement (or misattunement) also come in five happiness-relevant dimensions: hedonic valence (negative or positive), scope (narrow or wide), import (about the trivial or serious), depth (shallow or deep), and value (bad or good). Because the metaphysical nature of human beings and their universe is contestable, judgments of an individual's happiness can also be highly contested. For example, a life with a great deal of suffering in it might be judged happier than one with less suffering, in case the hedonically negative emotions had serious import, depth, and value relative to what the judge takes to be the metaphysical truth. The final chapter discusses the structural differences and commonalities among a variety of virtues. This chapter also serves as a preliminary sketch of Roberts's intended next volume, in which individual virtues are to be analyzed in greater detail, in the pursuit, not of a virtue theory in the modern sense, but of wisdom.

This book is an extraordinary study of the emotions, both in its precision and in its scope. Without a doubt, it is a significant contribution to the literature. Roberts's work should be read by anyone wishing to gain a deeper understanding of emotions and their bearing upon a variety of aspects of the moral life.²

²I am grateful to Robert Roberts and Travis Timmerman for helpful feedback.