

Arne Naess between Reason and Emotion¹

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The title of this lecture was probably chosen because after a very long series of publications of a logical and strictly theoretical kind, I “suddenly” published a book in 1998 centering on emotion as much as on reason. The book, *Livsfilosofi*, which was translated to *Life's Philosophy: Reason and Feeling in a Deeper World*, sold a surprising 120.000 copies in Norway and caused a little stir. But for me, it was by no means “sudden”. I have always been interested in emotion, and in 1972 gave a lecture titled “Emotion and Value” in Canada. That was over 30 years ago!

Let me confess right away that in what follows I try to convince the reader that we all too often consider our decisions more or less unreasonable – and due to emotions overpowering reason. We in many cases seem to employ a concept of reason which widens the conclusion “unreasonable!” unduly, something that has undesirable decisions as a consequence.

Consider judgements of the following very general kind: “Peter was so fond of x (something) that he unreasonably (and unfortunately) chose x in cases he should not have chosen it.” What I argue is that such judgements too often are unwarranted: We may agree that Peter should not have made the choice, but that the reference to reason or lack of reason is misleading. We need to introduce the term “trivial rationality”, a narrow concept of “reason” which often misguides us.

Consider again important examples as the following: “The expedition now got into difficulties that made it highly reasonable to give up the reach the intended goal, but the members persisted, ignoring what evidently was the reasonable decision to stop”. What I often tentatively recommend is to protest, saying for instance “Given the highly positive emotional status of the goal, it was reasonable to persist”. The point is important in education: “Be reasonable!”, “Be more reasonable!” are utterances which are influencing youth to abstain from actions and choices of behaviour which are unconventional but, given the concrete situation, are of positive significance for themselves and sometimes also for others.

At this point it is important to ask ourselves: “What we consider is primarily the relation between reason and emotion. What about the relation between reason and feeling? One way of approaching the subject is to consider emotions to be feelings, but that the term “feeling”

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covers much more than emotions. The question: “How do you feel today?” may often be adequately answered by a single word, “better”, or “worse”. A kind of adequate answer is sometimes to say “nothing!” But it is then likely to be in a context such that a fuller answer would be “nothing – in relation to what we both at the moment are concerned about”.

I propose that we may pretend always to feel (something). That is, our existence as human beings is such that we always feel something. Being bored is a kind of feeling. Children seem to be able to have more intense feeling of being bored than adults. When we as adults say “I was bored the whole evening”, it is quite a job to adequately describe what we *felt* - the the whole evening. Being asked we may find it according to convention adequate just to answer: - “just bored”. The question: “Exactly what are you saying when you say you were bored?” might result in the answer: “I was just bored –nothing else.” Perhaps impatience is part of the existence temporarily as a bored human being.

What about the assertion “You had no reason to be bored”? Here “reason” may adequately be interpreted as “adequate cause”. The assertion: “You ought not to have been bored” might be accepted as valid on the basis of the insight that the “boring” talk or lecture covered items which clearly interest you.

Let us go back to considering the existence of deep and strong feelings elicited by acts of reasoning as such.

In politics we regularly find that strong opposition to certain trends or decisions are fought against with deep emotions. The arguments may seem to many unconvincing or weak. Those who defend a trend or decision characterise the criticism as being emotional and not worthy of being taken seriously. Rather often those responsible for the state of affairs have access to vast first hand information which the opposition lacks: “The leader of the opposition ignores important facts”. We should not forget the heavy and well formulated opposition to historical changes later generations have characterised to one of superb positive value.

Trends considered valuable to posterity must not be expected to seem reasonable to the past currents, but rather to be unreasonable and often due to emotions playing a sinister role. In my opinion one way to characterise a trend of the past as based on sound reasoning involves an overestimation of the role of reasoning. This opinion is likely to be misunderstood as opening the door for dangerous overestimation of emotion. I am at least ready to admit that I have all the time had a certain crucial expression in mind, as to “how we feel”. We do not often enough say “I feel that ...” or “how I feel about this is as follows...” etc. The term “feeling” here is less drastic in its use. Consider the expression: “I feel that we should look for a solution in a different way (or in a different field)”. Using the expression we

may in an acceptable way indicate that we are not completely sure about what we have asserted and that we invite opposition: People who “feel” differently. Think of the expression “I feel we should be more modest in our expectations”, or “more willing to make a compromise” or “less strong in our demands” etc, etc. The use of the term “feel” here does not imply feelings in any ordinary way. It implies that we propose something in a decidedly undogmatic way.

The dualism: reason/emotion may be dangerously misleading. Too often we hear sayings such as:

“Follow your reason, let you not be misled by emotion.”

“He is rather emotional.” Near synonym: he is being dominated by his feelings.

“It was unreasonable not to turn back, but emotions prevented us from to turning back.”

Unfortunately we do not have quite as strong warnings against unfortunate appeals to reason. “It was unreasonably late to continue, but of course we ought to have understood that we should absolutely have continued.”

The life of mathematicians is often described as if it was dull and as if emotions during work were more or less absent. Some mathematicians are said on the other hand to feel deeply well only when doing mathematics, and being enthusiastic when discovering something “beautiful”.

Education in schools may be hindered or may be slowed down by not regularly appealing to feelings. Because Italian Renaissance – the leaders, the policies, ... are such that one may so to say constantly talk about sentiments, emotional attitudes, fierce conflicts between attitudes and feelings, it is educationally defensible to spend much more time in schools to describe and discuss the Italian Renaissance.

Causal weight, level of historical importance, etc, should not prevent teachers to use a great deal of time to what is emotionally exciting. It may be acknowledged that so and so had little weight historically in the sense of causal weight. But as themes worthy of taken up lengthily, those which are emotionally exciting should be given preference. The teachers should feel it to be defensible to use extra time to the emotionally extra exciting. They may say that so and so, A, is causally very important, but not worthy of being described in detail, whereas B is much less important in that way, but for us emotionally highly important and interesting. A and B may be themes, or related to emotionally exciting historical personalities. The relative purely historical weight should be mentioned, and taken into account, but it should not heavily determine the time used to talk about it.

In the 1920s much time in school was spent on details in wars because victory had such vast consequences, but it would have better to use more time on emotionally important consequences of war, and relating less descriptions of the wars themselves.

In short, I am, as pointed out, in favour of teachers who again and again mention briefly the relative causal weight they attribute to events they describe, but who permit themselves to use relative little, time to descriptions of events of relatively great purely causal weight but little present interest.

“Theory of Knowledge”

It is easy to limit myself to purely cognitive, non-emotional, arguments when discussing philosophical questions, for instance in theory of knowledge. But what if I say “I feel it to be an exaggeration to call this argument clearly valid”? Some listeners might class this saying not relevant as an argument because it is an expression of emotion (in a wide sense). But mostly it will be classed as cognitively relevant. The same holds good of even “I feel that your argument is wrong”. Relevant, yes but perhaps not adequate or complete. One expects an explanation of what seems to cause our feelings, and the explanation is expected not to be in terms of feelings, but of facts. Often the use of the term “feelings” in such cases is a kind of invitation to critically examine the argument. The term should be used in more cases than it usually is. This would sometimes prevent dogmatism and opens collaboration. On the other hand, should we more often distinguish between feelings from emotions? Experiencing an emotion we are, by definition, expected to be moved, whereas an experience of feelings, for instance of being thirsty or cold, it may not disturb us at all.

Why is the expression “reason and emotion” seemingly a rather easily understood as an expression of opposite phenomena, as if one precludes the other? One explanation I find interesting is a negative attitude we have towards what we call “getting emotional”. In serious discussions it happens that one of the participants “gets emotional”. He or she turns from expressing arguments to expressing what is mostly negative characterization of one or more of the participants. Less often, but often more important is a shift from benevolent to neutral interpretation of a point of view to more or less extremely negative interpretation. It is valuable to express deep disappointment of the view of somebody, but one should be very careful not to misinterpret that view.

My work on “interpretation and preciseness” partly concerns the tendency to choose clearly negative interpretation of the formulations put forth by one’s opponents, and

positive ones to formulations of friends and adherents. We can daily find examples in discussions between adherents of different political parties. More trivial cases occur daily between conflicting members of a family. An increased “preciseness” of utterances reduces misconceptions. Some may be trivial, others essential. Unfortunately it is normal to presume that our own sentences are “unambiguous” and not open to any kind of misunderstanding. This presumption has grave cultural consequences.

Conclusion

It is a major task for us when trying to increase our maturity to find the real reasons for our likes and dislikes. We should take it as very likely that some or most of the reasons we more or less spontaneously believe or postulate do not belong to what a “neutral” judge would find are the real reasons or the main reasons.

Psychoanalysis may be said to have been the first systematic effort to help us find the real reasons for our important decisions and views, and to help us change our life style in so far as it has been based on untenable, often unconscious premises. The most important premises corresponding behaviours are here those we would reject as bad, or stupid if they were fully brought to light consciously. This process may be viewed as a victory of reason. But to add that it is a victory over emotion would be misleading. The strength of our emotions may be retained, and perhaps in certain relations even be greater, but will be attached to other behaviours and be part of a conscious lifestyle.

If a conclusion formulated in a few words is demanded, we might say that personal maturity involves both strength of emotions and clearness of thinking.