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On Emotion and Rationality: a response to Barrett

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ABSTRACT *In a recent paper Richard Barrett criticises Solomon (and the so-called cognitivists in general) for dismissing irrational emotions as marginal and atypical. This paper argues that Barrett's criticism is unwarranted. Two explanations are suggested for his misconception of Solomon's view (and, more generally, of the cognitive view) on irrational emotions. First, Barrett mistakenly conceives the reconciliation of emotion and reason as a conciliation of emotion and rationality in an evaluative or normative sense. Secondly, Barrett disregards the difference between the cognitive conception of (ir)rationality and his own definition of (ir)rationality in terms of coping. Some implications of the argument for the education of (moral) emotions are spelled out.*

Introduction

Not long ago Richard Barrett (1994) wrote an interesting paper in which he reproaches the philosopher Robert Solomon for dismissing irrational emotions as marginal or peripheral experiences. Within the framework of his paper, the words "marginal" and "peripheral" are used in different ways. Barrett says that Solomon regards irrational emotions not only as atypical and uncommon but also as unimportant or insignificant. Against this view Barrett maintains that irrational emotions occur frequently and play a significant role in our lives.

However, in his well-known book *The Passions* Solomon deals with irrational emotions at great length (Solomon, 1977, pp. 375–431); he certainly does not conceive of these emotions as marginal phenomena. On the contrary, he argues that irrational emotions are experienced frequently. In his view, the many ways in which the rationality of emotions can be affected or disrupted are worth a separate study. Moreover, he argues that irrational emotions are important because they can endanger central values and interests, such as personal dignity, self-esteem, mutual respect and intimacy. On account of these undermining effects, irrational emotions have to be examined and superseded.

In other words, although Barrett's argument is otherwise careful and well-considered, he seems to misunderstand Solomon's view concerning the place of irrational emotions in our lives. In this paper we shall try to find out what lines of reasoning could possibly underlie Barrett's questionable interpretation. First, we will

summarise the so-called cognitive conception of emotions—of which Solomon is an important advocate—as well as Barrett's critical comment on this 'modern' view. Secondly, we shall try to offer two plausible explanations for the fact that Barrett mistakenly believes that cognitivists in general, and Solomon in particular, regard irrational emotions as unimportant or trivial phenomena. In the final section we will sketch briefly some important (moral) educational implications of our argument.

The Cognitive View and Barrett's Criticism

In the last 20 years or so, the view that emotions have a cognitive core has been dominant among philosophers. However, this *communis opinio* does not mean that controversies concerning the different components of emotions are absent. On the contrary, the specific nature of the cognitive core is a subject of heated discussion (cf. Armon-Jones, 1991, pp. 16–26). According to some philosophers, the characteristic cognitive component of an emotion is truth-asserting. They conceive of such a cognition as a belief (Taylor, 1985, pp. 1–16) or a judgement (Solomon, 1977, pp. 185–191; 1980, pp. 257–258). For example, a person who is angry at someone *believes* or *judges* that the other person has culpably offended. Other philosophers, however, prefer a broader explanation of the cognitive component. They acknowledge that experiencing an emotion normally involves conceptualising the situation in a certain way, but they deny that such a conceptualisation always is accompanied by a truth commitment. For example, a person who is angry at someone *sees* or *construes* that particular person as having culpably offended, but is not necessarily claiming that this conceptualisation is true. For that reason these philosophers do not speak of beliefs or judgements, but prefer expressions such as “appraisals” (Lazarus, 1991, pp. 39, 127–170), “construals” (Roberts, 1988, pp. 190–192) or “determinate patterns of salience among objects of attention” (De Sousa, 1980, p. 137; 1987, pp. 40, 107–139).

In his paper Barrett criticises not only Solomon's view but *all* versions of the cognitive conception of emotions. His main objection to this conception is that conflicts between reason and emotion are seriously neglected. With reference to the “traditional” view, in which the dichotomy between reason and emotion is highlighted, he sets himself the task of drawing attention to the disruptive effects of irrational emotions.

Barrett makes a distinction between two types of irrational emotions: namely, emotions that hamper proper participation in a civilised or rational discourse, and emotions that are impediments to the accomplishment of demanding tasks. He explains the former type by means of an example in which two people are engaging in a relatively difficult conversation. At some point one of the speakers makes annoying and irrelevant remarks, as a result of which the level of discourse deteriorates. Uttering such remarks, says Barrett, “is an emotional occurrence if it is done through a *felt incapacity* to continue talking at the more demanding level” (p. 137). Of the latter type of irrational emotions, Barrett offers the following example. A person has bought a harpsichord kit and tries to build the instrument on her own. This is, without doubt, a long and painstaking task. After a while she becomes

impatient. Driven by “a *felt exasperation* with the demands of the job”, she throws some parts across the room and damages other parts with a hammer (p. 137).

According to Barrett, the educational remedy for irrational emotions does not consist in improving skills of self-control and certainly not in cultivating such feelings. What should be stimulated is “the development of abilities to cope with practical and discursive matters, together with a respect for these abilities and for the disciplined habits that they require and sustain” (pp. 142–143).

Two Possible Explanations

As already stated, Barrett argues that according to the cognitive conception in general, and the view of Solomon in particular, irrational emotions are marginal experiences in our lives. We think that Barrett is manifestly wrong on that point. In this section we shall underpin our criticism by indicating two lines of reasoning in his paper that could possibly explain his misinterpretation.

A first line of reasoning is presented in particular at page 140 and, in a concise form, in the last sentence of his abstract. Briefly stated this argument runs as follows. Cognitivists are of the opinion that emotions have a cognitive core. In view of this interpretation, cognitivists think that reason and emotion can be reconciled; by conciliating reason and emotion in this way, there can hardly be any room for irrational emotions within a cognitive conception.

This argument explains why Barrett thinks that cognitivists regard irrational emotions as peripheral phenomena. However, in our view this line of reasoning is defective. Surely, by defining emotion to include a cognitive component, reason and emotion are reconciled. But Barrett seems to confuse two senses of “rational”: namely, “rational” as opposed to *nonrational* (or *arational*) and “rational” as opposed to *irrational*. In the former sense the term “rational” is used in a descriptive or classifying way (just like “moral” versus “*nonmoral*”). Indeed, within the cognitive view emotions are reconciled with rationality in this particular sense of the word. Owing to the fact that emotions have a cognitive core, they can be based on good or bad reasons. And because emotions can be (un)justified they are, so to speak, part of the domain of reason. In the latter sense, however, the word “rational” is used in a normative or evaluative way (just like “moral” versus “*immoral*”). Different from Barrett’s interpretation, in a cognitive conception emotions are not reconciled with rationality in *this* sense of the word. On the contrary, the fact that emotions are rational in a descriptive sense is a precondition for the possibility of irrational emotions. Only because of the cognitive component can emotions be based on poor reasons—reasons which may be so poor that they have to be considered irrational.

Pains and itches lack a cognitive core. That is why the question of whether the stabbing pain in my calf or the tingling itch in my eye is warranted is absurd. Precisely because such bodily feelings are nonrational, they cannot be irrational. My feelings of guilt, on the other hand, have a clear cognitive component: normally, the realization of having done something that is morally wrong. Since for these cognitions reasons can be adduced, feelings of guilt are rational in the descriptive sense of the word. That explains why such an emotion can also be valued positively as

rational (in so far as my guilt feelings are justified or based on good reasons) or evaluated negatively as irrational (if my feelings of guilt are unfounded or make no sense at all) [1].

In short, Barrett mistakenly believes that cognitivists are reconciling emotion and rationality in the normative sense, resulting in his reproach that they ignore the importance of irrational emotions. The fact, however, is that the cognitive view only implies a conciliation of emotion and rationality in the descriptive sense. Such a reconciliation is a logical condition for the possibility of irrational emotions and as such also a prerequisite for placing these emotions at the centre of our existence.

It is possible to discern a second line of reasoning in Barrett's paper which could account for his (incorrect) view that irrational emotions are played down by cognitivists. Barrett defines the evaluative pair of concepts "rational-irrational" in terms of *coping*. He designates a frame of mind as rational in the normative sense if it is composed of cognitive attitudes that undergird or support constructive action and civilised discourse. In his view, emotions or emotional occurrences are all too often lapses from coping and in this respect irrational. We could call this characterisation of "rational-irrational" the *functional* conception. According to this conception, emotions are irrational if they are dysfunctional: that means, if they incite us to forms of behaviour that hamper or obstruct effective performance of a difficult task or appropriate participation in a demanding conversation.

Now the point at issue is that this definition of (ir)rationality is not the same as the conception that is at the centre of interest in the cognitive tradition. According to this conception, emotions have a cognitive core that can be based on reasons. Answering the question of whether or not an emotion is rational, in the evaluative meaning of that term, means examining the soundness of those reasons. If the cognitive component is justified the emotion is rational, whereas an irrational emotion has a cognitive core that is unjustified. This explanation of "rational-irrational" could be called the *reasons* conception [2].

It is important not to confuse the reasons conception of (ir)rational emotions with the functional conception. In his paper Barrett gives examples of emotions that he considers to be irrational, such as feelings of exasperation that are expressed in behaviour which impedes the completion of a long and painstaking task (p. 137) or feelings of anxiety that hamper effective participation in a rational discourse (p. 139). Starting from Barrett's conception, these feelings are indeed to be regarded as irrational because they are incentives to dysfunctional behaviour. However, according to the reasons conception of (ir)rationality such feelings can positively be rational, in the evaluative sense. Bad luck and setbacks when performing precision work can offer us good reasons for being irritated. Having feelings of anxiety in anticipation of bringing our deepest commitments under discussion is surely not irrational. Rather, it would be irrational *not* to conceive of such a prospect as threatening.

In short, Barrett's definition of "(ir)rationality" is essentially different from the conception that is highlighted by cognitivists. That difference in interpretation could be a second explanation for the fact that he wrongly believes that cognitivists consign irrational emotions to the margins of our existence. Indeed, if we depart from

Barrett's conception of (ir)rationality, reading publications of cognitivists will probably give the impression that irrational emotions are regarded as atypical or unimportant. From this, however, we cannot conclude that cognitivists trivialise irrational emotions as such, for if we start from the dominant *cognitivists'* conception of (ir)rationality, we shall find that irrational emotions are not at all considered peripheral experiences.

Some Implications for (Moral) Education

On the basis of the preceding analysis, we want to make three concluding remarks on education and (moral) emotions. First, it is important to make sure that the child develops into a person with rational emotions, in the normative sense that is highlighted by cognitivists. This task can only be an item on the educational agenda if the reasons conception of (ir)rationality has been taken as a starting-point. Within a purely functional conception such a task cannot be identified. Take, for example, the felt incapacity to cope with a demanding level of discourse, which is in Barrett's opinion an irrational emotion. Considered from a functional point of view, this evaluation is tenable because the feeling at issue incites to behaviour that can hamper the continuation of sophisticated conversation. What is lacking in Barrett's paper, however, is a different type of assessment: namely, an evaluation of the emotion in terms of the reasons conception. Then, too, such an emotion can be judged as irrational, especially if the felt incapacity is completely unwarranted and emanates from a serious lack of self-confidence. Another example of an emotional experience that is irrational in this particular sense is an unjustified feeling of guilt. Some people suffer from enduring feelings of being morally culpable without there being any justifying grounds for having such a state of mind. Should not we, as educators, try to prevent such emotions taking root in the inner life of the child?

Although Barrett does not mention it, a second educational task regarding emotions fits neatly into the functional view. To illustrate his conception, Barrett exclusively refers to emotions that are dysfunctional or counterproductive and, therefore, are considered to be irrational. Obviously, one can also point out emotions that are functional—that is emotions that *facilitate* constructive action or *support* civilised discourse. Think, for example, of the so-called rational passions, such as a love of truth, a contempt for lying, admiration of theoretical achievements and respect for considered arguments. These are emotions that, so to speak, undergird the life of reason, including rational discussions about moral questions. If we value such practices, fostering or cultivating these emotions should be our educational aim (cf. Steutel & Spiecker, 1997).

There is still another educational task concerning emotions: stimulating skills and habits of self-control. Barrett rejects this task as a remedy for emotions that are irrational from a functional viewpoint (p. 142). However, if these emotions can motivate to counterproductive behaviour, it is important that children acquire the equipment to control such affective tendencies. We have argued above that emotions can be dysfunctional and yet well-justified; that is, they have to be regarded as rational from the viewpoint of the reasons conception. Even if the first educational

task has been performed successfully, stimulating the powers of self-control is still not superfluous. Emotions that are based on good grounds and are rational feelings on that account, can conflict *per accidens* with important values. In order to realise these values in such situations, we need self-control.

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NOTES

- [1] Solomon explicitly refers to this distinction between rationality in the descriptive and the normative sense: "It is necessary to distinguish two senses of *rationality*: In the first sense, all emotions are rational; in the second, only some are" (Solomon, 1977, pp. 246–247).
- [2] The distinction between the functional and the reasons conception of rationality is broadly speaking the same as the distinction between what is sometimes called "strategic" and "cognitive" rationality (Armon-Jones, 1991, p. 133; cf. De Sousa, 1987, p. 169). According to Armon-Jones, strategic rationality refers to the utility of an emotion in view of its consequences for the goals and interests of the subject, whereas the cognitive rationality of an emotion is a function of the cognitions that enter into its explanation.

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