

Emotions - Paul Harkin

Since at least the time of Homer, the emotions have had pretty bad press. *The Iliad* opens with an account of 'the rage of Achilles', whose anger and wounded pride have such devastating consequences. Slightly later, the Greek tragedians offered their audiences characters such as *Medea*, a woman apparently so much in the grip of her spiteful jealousy that she is prepared to sacrifice her own children to ensure her revenge.

Plato also took a fairly dim view of the emotions, regarding them as agents of tyranny which enslave the true and rational part of our nature. And it is to Plato that we originally owe the idea that reason and emotion are distinct and opposed faculties or aspects of the human psyche. The Stoics who followed him claimed not merely that the passions are disruptive and uncontrollable forces, but that they involve false attributions of value to things (and people) in the world. Such attributions, in the form of love of family and friends, for instance, make us vulnerable, since we care what happens to them. When, thanks to the Stoics' own brand of therapy, we rid ourselves of these false conceptions, we can remain clear-eyed and unperturbed - 'Stoical', as we would say - in the face of our fate, and theirs.

Later, Hume, Kant and then Freud, each in his own way confirmed the gulf between reason and passion, and the events of our own century testify to the terrible potential of hatred in its different forms. We are, as a result, well primed to share the dim view of the emotions which has been our cultural inheritance. It is the view of Bertrand Russell, in his *History of Western Philosophy*;

'...most of the strongest passions are destructive-hate and resentment and jealousy, remorse and despair, outraged pride and the fury of the unjustly oppressed...'

While it is, of course, undeniable that emotions can be unruly and that they can and have had dreadful consequences, the good news is that many philosophers and psychologists have for some time been urging us not to infer from these facts any sweeping negative conclusions about the emotions. Better news still is that - contrary to appearances - we do not in fact hold such negative views ourselves. Our own thinking about the emotions is more ambiguous, perhaps even contradictory. We sometimes speak as if we endorse Plato's view, but in other respects our sympathies are quite different.

Literature offers some pertinent examples. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck's moral education - or at least the moral precepts he has been brought up to believe - tell him to turn in the runaway slave Jim. His emotions, however, will not allow him to follow the dictates of principle, and betray his new friend. Readers of the episode, as Twain intended, are on the side of Huck's emotions. Huck himself remains unsure.

We should not take this, however, as confirmation of a conflict between brute emotion on the one hand and reasoned precept on the other. The assumption that these are distinct and opposed forces is mistaken from the start. More generally, we do not think emotions are merely sources of potential danger; danger which can only be averted when harnessed to the constraining influence of reason. If we did, why would we think it a defect - as we surely do - to *lack* or be incapable of certain emotions? Camus' anti-hero Mersault, for example, (in *L'Étranger*) is notable, above all, for his emotional alienation, his inability to *feel*. Contrary to the Stoics, who wanted us to get rid of our emotions, we, in many respects, are anxious to feel *more* of them.

Underlying the wholly negative view of the emotions we can discern three basic claims:

First, emotion and reason are distinct and opposed parts of the *psyche*. What is emotional is irrational, and conversely, what is rational is not emotional. This is the account offered by Plato (in the *Republic*) in the form of his 'tri-partite' conception of the soul.

Secondly, it follows from this that there is no question of emotions being *appropriate* or inappropriate. We can contrast this with the case of beliefs, where we assume that questions of appropriateness *do* apply (for instance; are beliefs in an immanent Apocalypse appropriate to the available facts?)

Thirdly, if the previous two points are right, they imply a picture of the *sort* of thing an emotion is. Divorced from thought and reason, it must be something of the character of a sensation or *feeling* - akin to the appetites, perhaps, and the feeling of hunger.

So here we have an account of what an emotion *is* (a sort of *sensation*) and of the *value* it has (i.e. not much, given what it *is*). In case anyone should think these views are of strictly historical interest, I offer the following (not unrepresentative) quotations from the editor of *Living Marxism*, writing recently on the subject of the media's handling of the death of Princess Diana:

'An atmosphere which puts feelings first is hardly conducive to any cool assessment of what has actually happened, never mind a critical discussion of the hows and whys behind the events. [...] Public debate was debased by an editorial elevation of feelings over facts and the insistence that the heart should rule the head'.

Here we find the same suspicion of the emotions, the same carving-up of the psyche into warring factions that we find in Plato. Lying behind Hume's view that emotion has mistakenly been allowed free rein in this particular instance - with disastrous results - is the

more general suggestion that that could not *but* have been the outcome. It is *reason* that brings understanding, not emotion. The example of Huckleberry Finn should, however, already give us grounds for discontent with this easy formula.

One of the commendable developments in more recent philosophical writings on the emotions is that there has recently been a consensus that each of these three claims is false. To see why, we need to begin with the issue of what an emotion *is*. The temptation to think of emotion as a feeling and hence akin to a sensation, is a strong one. After all, emotions differ from thoughts, above all in how they *feel*. When you're angry, you *feel* a particular sort of way. It might seem natural, therefore, to conclude that emotions are feelings. However, for some years now, philosophers have argued against this line of thought. There are at least three considerations which can be offered against it.

In the first place, what *are* the feelings that are involved? Take anger; there are feelings corresponding to various physiological changes; increased heartbeat, blood rushing to the larger muscles, the release of adrenaline, and so on. In addition, there is much that is unfelt: neuron firings and complex patterns of electrochemical and neurotransmitter activity. The difficulty is that if we consider the felt changes, it is clear that none of them is distinctive or *definitive* of anger. Many of them are shared with fear and other emotions.

In addition, experimental evidence also seems to support the suspicion that we could not easily identify our emotional states if this were the only basis for such judgements.

The second point is this: if feelings *were* the basis of our identification of our emotional states, our judgements would be *inferences*; we would *infer* the identity of the state we were in *from* the feelings. But while there may be some instances where this is the case, it is not the typical route to such knowledge; we seem to know 'from the inside' and not by inference. Confronted with a large lion, for example, I do not need to observe the sensation of adrenaline release, note my quickened pulse, feel the shaking in my legs and *conclude* from these that I am afraid. I know that *without* reference to these things. There must, therefore, be more to emotions than feelings.

The third point is that when we actually look at what is distinctive about different emotions, it seems clear that what distinguishes them is the *thoughts* that they comprise. Take fear: to fear something is to believe that it is *threatening* or *dangerous*. Or pride: to be proud is to think something is of value or deserving praise and to believe it is related to you in an appropriate way. Having these beliefs is what *makes* your emotion fear or pride. This is not to say that an emotion *just is* a set of beliefs (though the Stoics did think something like that). Most philosophers and psychologists would now say that thoughts and beliefs *identify* and in part constitute emotions, but that other factors such as feelings, dispositions, pain and pleasure and so on, are also necessary. This view of the emotions - *Cognitivism*, as it is known - therefore claims that beliefs are *necessary* but not *sufficient* for emotions. Having the beliefs alone isn't enough.

But even this much is a significant advance on Plato, Hume and the rest. For if my emotion (fear, say) is based on the *belief* that the object of my fear is dangerous and threatening, then, since that belief can be rational or irrational (appropriate or inappropriate to the facts) so the emotion *itself* can also be appropriate or inappropriate. If we accept this, all three of the claims above must be false. Since emotions are based on beliefs, they are not merely sensations, they can be appropriate, and furthermore it is a mistake to characterise the 'rational' and the 'emotional' as mutually exclusive, to think of them as distinct capacities, because they are in fact, intertwined.

Many psychologists and neurologists concur. Antonio Damasio, for instance, argues that neurological research reveals that patients whose emotional capacities are impaired as a result of brain lesions are also impaired across a range of *cognitive* capacities, such as the ability to prioritise, to deliberate, evaluate and make decisions. At the level of the brain too, it seems, emotion and reason are inseparable.

Although this new consensus on 'cognitive' theories of the emotions is welcome, there remains much disagreement and many unanswered questions. Some philosophers have wondered how the emotions of animals and young children fit the theory, since we hesitate in attributing *beliefs* to them. Others have recently rejected the cognitivist approach altogether and attempted to put *feelings* back at the centre of emotions.

And then there is the issue of emotional education. Psychologists and writers such as Daniel Goleman (in his best-seller, *Emotional Intelligence*) are interested in how the emotions are *educated*. This is an issue that also preoccupied Aristotle, one of the few early philosophers to have endorsed the cognitive view. But if, as cognitivists claim, beliefs are not *sufficient* for emotion, what *else* has to be changed in order to educate someone's emotions? It is one thing to get someone to *believe* that spiders aren't dangerous, but another to get them not to be frightened by spiders. Some therapies, however, achieve high levels of success in treating such recalcitrant emotions. But does such change amount to *education*? Education involves a transformation of understanding. Cognitivism seems, however, to concede that this will not be enough. How, then, can there *be* real education of the emotions? This issue is of abiding general importance as well as being relevant to all putative 'philosophical therapies', from Stoicism to the present day.

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