

EMOTION, DESIRE, AND MORALITY

While temperance may not be widely appreciated, emotion is a topic of vast appeal and importance in the moral life. Emphasis on the analysis of emotion in this chapter will lie in the areas of psychology and morality.

K. T. Strongman, whose *Psychology of Emotion* is in its fourth edition, categorizes emotion theories from the psychological perspective in seven different areas. Strongman examines over one hundred fifty theories, categorizing them according to phenomenological, behavioral, physiological, cognitive, developmental, social, and clinical emphases. Beyond these seven, he creates a separate categories for “ambitious” theories.¹ Strongman, arguing for certain essential elements, writes that any theory must pay attention to “matters physiological, behavioral, cognitive and experiential.”² Such breadth in a theory of emotion is not always present. Many theorists focus more narrowly on particular aspects of emotion. Some give theoretical accounts only of particular emotions, such as anger.³ Psychologists who study emotion have more recently focused their attention on the role of cognition in accounts of emotion.⁴ Within the context of cognitive theories of emotion, I am most interested to show the relation between physiological and psychological aspects of the experience of emotion.

I

COGNITIVE THEORIES OF EMOTION

The effort to include emotion as essential to morality must include a theory of emotion that moves beyond the notion that humans are merely sufferers of emotion. We do not, contrary to popular parlance, “fall” into love. Rather, we feel and think our way into it moment by moment. Cognitive elements of emotion theory must counter the notion, from the James-Lange theory,⁵ that humans are entirely passive in the face of emotion. We are not mindless lumps of flesh that upon an adrenaline rush become maniacal with rage and seek out the closest being upon which we can “vent” our anger.

There are a number of contemporary theorists of the psychology of emotion who deserve mention and some analysis in the effort to identify the more recent emphasis on “cognitive” theories. I begin with Robert Solomon.

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Robert Solomon

Humans are not simply dumb in response to emotion. Since the nineteen sixties the so-called “dumb” view of emotion has come under fire.⁶ Robert Solomon’s criticism of emotion as passivity takes the opposite extreme position. Solomon does not want to deny the force of external action under which a person might suffer. On the contrary, for Solomon, the passions are “the defining structures of our existence.”⁷ He contends that there is no distinction whatsoever between reason and passion. The scenario of reason and passion as “parts” of the human person is a falsehood in his view. There are says Solomon “no two “faculties”; there is no distinction.” He goes on: “There is only the reason of the passions, more or less articulate, more or less perspicacious. There is, in short, only rationality.”⁸

Solomon favors the turn toward a cognitive theory of emotion. He thinks that theories which include elements of appraisal and cognition have anticipated his own theory of emotion as “evaluative judgments.”⁹ In his theory, emotions are not the result of a complex of physiological and psychological processes. Emotions are not “responses to those evaluative judgments, but rather they are those judgments.”¹⁰ Solomon reverses the idea of emotion as a cause and effect of physiological change and psychological adjustment. This old view is a “strategic confusion” which serves as a “vehicle of irresponsibility.” “It is the emotion that causes the feeling, our judgment that spurs the adrenal glands into actions, not the secretions that cause the emotion.”¹¹

Solomon’s efforts are laudable, but he goes too far. In the collapse of all distinctions between reason and emotion, we lose too much. There is good cause to continue conceptual distinctions between reason and emotion. Of course it must be realized that there is no such dualism in the lived experience. The immediate experience of emotion does not wait for philosophical analysis in which these distinctions are noted and compartmentalized. Nonetheless, when we analyze what happens in the human experience of emotion, these conceptual distinctions must be maintained.

Patricia Greenspan

Patricia Greenspan would agree that Solomon’s enthusiasm carries him too far. Consensus exists that there is a passive element in the overall experience of emotion. Most theorists agree that there is a cognitive element essential to emotion, but to equate emotion with judgment is not reflective of reality. As Greenspan notes, “judgmentalism...does not do justice to the diversity of emotional phenomena.”¹²

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Emotions may be quite similar to judgments in many ways. Greenspan's account of emotion entails a "compound of two elements,"¹³ the first being an affective state, and the second an evaluative proposition. But an evaluative proposition is not a judgment, in part because it allows for an ambivalence that judgments do not. Of particular importance to Greenspan's argument against judgmentalism is the occurrence of ambivalent emotions. Unlike judgments, evaluative propositions allow for the continued presence of ambivalence. While her view allows for the presence of contrary emotions, the possibility of holding two contrary judgments is considered "downright unreasonable."¹⁴ She argues that there are situations in which holding contrary emotions is appropriate. Furthermore, in cases of conflict it may "sometimes be a mistake" to treat emotions as judgments and seek to resolve the ambivalence.¹⁵ Emotions, in Greenspan's view serve as a motivational force in morality and as such they may be "rationally required."¹⁶ In retaining the affective element of emotion, so often ignored or rejected in morality, her argument "should serve to counter a long-standing philosophical tendency to dismiss the affective aspect of emotion—and with it, I would say, emotion—as at most a link in some causal chain that leads from belief to action."¹⁷

The affective element in emotion is especially important for her view of how emotion provides motivation in the moral life, which places her in Hume's camp. This is over against Kant's notion that emotion should not have such a normative role in determining proper moral action. To the extent that these "camps" are not completely artificial characterizations of these two philosopher's works, I too would lean toward Hume's emphasis on emotion as an essential if not primary motivating force in our moral deliberations.

Ronald de Sousa

Ronald de Sousa seeks a similar understanding of emotion that blends elements of physiological desire and psychological cognition. Citing theories which identify emotion with judgments as "extremism," de Sousa seeks to include both sides of the spectrum of thought on the emotions.¹⁸ His account of emotion resists the temptation to equate or assimilate emotion with something else, such as judgments, beliefs, or desires. In de Sousa's theory, as in others of the cognitive type, there is a keen recognition of the complexity of the relationship between affect and cognition. Much of the current debate centers around whether affect precedes cognition or cognition precedes affect. Despite the difficulty of analyzing this process, it can be said that affect focuses on physiological elements of emotion while cognition focuses on the psychological. Cognitive theories typically include what are known as "appraisal" systems as part of the attempt to portray the relationship between

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affect and cognition. Depending on the theory, appraisal systems working as a psychological event are essential to the experience of emotion.

Strongman, commenting on S. Schachter's theory, notes the complexities of the relationship between affect and cognition:

In any emotion there is a diffuse sympathetic discharge; this becomes named and identified through the situation in which it occurs and through the individual's perceptions of this situation. In other words, the cognition guides the arousal. In the usual, everyday, circumstances, Schachter believes that cognition and arousal are highly interrelated, one leading the other, and vice versa.¹⁹

Although notions of the appraisal mechanism and how it fits into an overall theory of emotion vary with particular thinkers, appraisal is nonetheless essential to cognitive theories of emotion. Again, Strongman notes that "cognitive theories of emotion are concerned with the nature and detailed functioning of the process of appraisal." Furthermore, "most of them," says Strongman, "assume not only that appraisal exists but that it is integral to emotion."²⁰

In de Sousa's theory, appraisal systems are called "paradigm scenarios." These scenarios underlie our experience of emotion in such a way as to allow for the positing of emotions as "rational." De Sousa argues that if we can call an inference or argument a rational one when it ends in truth or at least the likelihood of truth, then a similar proposition can be made of emotions which have a certain "end state." The "success" of an inference or argument is the "property of the end state." The success of the end state of beliefs is called "truth." For "wants," success is the resultant "desirability or goodness" of the wants. For actions, success is "generally called just that: success." His efforts to extend the notion of rationality to emotions must also be shown to have this quality of success. Successful emotions will be ones that are "appropriate."

Reaching back to Plato, de Sousa says, is "not so different" in that he thinks we, like Plato, might refer to appropriate emotions as "truth." However, seeking to avoid too controversial a view, he settles on appropriateness as the gauge of success in experiencing emotion. Thus, "an emotion is appropriate, if and only if the evoking object or situation warrants the emotion."²¹

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Emotions take on qualities of appropriateness as a result of, or perhaps during, the interplay between affect and cognition. As in other cognitive theories the appraisal system lies at the core of de Sousa's theory of emotion.²²

Paul Ekman

Paul Ekman's cognitive theory of emotion contains an appraisal mechanism that provides a specific context in which to see how the virtues relate to the experience of emotion from a modern psychological account. If temperance is to have specific relevance to the experience of certain emotions, understanding the appraisal system will help identify where virtue interacts in the experience of emotion. Ekman calls his theory a "neurocultural account of emotion."²³

In Ekman's theory an "affect program" directs the cognitive response to certain aspects of emotion. These affect programs, one of which he calls the "fear" program, are set in motion via an "appraisal system." The cognitive response systems he proposes are not "constant through life," they change with "growth, disease, injury, and the like."²⁴

Through experience, with sufficient time and learning, habits become established for how to cope with each emotion. I do not believe that such coping behaviors are part of the given affect program. These habitual ways of coping may become so well learned that they operate automatically and quickly in conjunction with specific emotions....Memories, images, expectations associated with one or another emotion are, like coping, not given but acquired, and can similarly become habitual, automatically involved when the affect program is set off.²⁵

In conjunction with, or perhaps as a part of, the affect program, "a number of other things happen in addition to the responses immediately governed by the program." One of these "other things" Ekman believes to occur at this point is habitual behavior directed at managing emotion.²⁶

Prior to the work of the affect program, the "appraiser mechanism...selectively attends to those stimuli (external or internal) which are the occasion for activating the affect program." The speed with which appraisal is conducted may at times be more rapid than we are mentally aware of. The "automatic" appraisal mechanism not only sets off the affect program, it may also "initiate the processes that evoke the memories, images, expectations, coping behaviors, and display rules relevant to the emotion."²⁷

Passionate Deliberation

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