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Studying Emotions

1.1. WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

Anthony Trollope comments about an unsavory character who looms large in his novel *The Prime Minister* (Chapter 58):

The abuse which was now publicly heaped on the name of Ferdinand Lopez hit the man very hard; but not so hard perhaps as his rejection by Lady Eustace. That was an episode in his life of which even he felt ashamed, and of which he was unable to shake the disgrace from his memory. He had no inner appreciation whatsoever of what was really good or what was really bad in a man's conduct. . . . In a sense he was what is called a gentleman. He knew how to speak, and how to look, how to use a knife and fork, how to dress himself, and how to walk. But he had not the faintest notion of the feelings of a gentleman. He had, however, a very keen conception of the evil of being generally ill spoken of.

Without directly mentioning any of Lopez's actions, Trollope here unmistakably sketches a man of momentous moral defects, just by indicating his patterns of emotional responsiveness – that he is more ashamed of being rejected by a classy female adventurer than of being the object of public moral opprobrium, but not at all ashamed of his shameful deeds. His lack of appreciation for good and bad action, suggests Trollope, is due to his emotional unresponsiveness to actions in moral terms (notice how Trollope mixes descriptions of Lopez's emotional dispositions with cognitive ascriptions like “no inner appreciation,” “not the faintest notion,” “a very keen conception”). The structure of his emotions explains why he does so much evil, why he has so little moral understanding, and why his life and the lives of those he touches closely are so miserable.

The involvement of emotions in what may be broadly termed the “moral” character of our lives is pervasive and deep. Because emotions are often impulses to act, their quality strongly affects the quality of what we do. Those who are prone to strong and inappropriate fear and anger tend to act and behave in a certain set of familiar ways, while compassion and the emotions

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of friendship incline people to actions of another kind. These two sorts of emotional tendencies, and many others, may coexist in a single person, thus making people complex and morally puzzling. But emotions are not just “causes” of actions; they may also determine the identity of our actions. The very “same” action of shoving a person into a ditch may be done from anger at the shoved person or fear for her life; in the first case the agent is *getting revenge* (let us say), and in the second he is *protecting against danger*. What I have said has already suggested that our character or personality is in large part a disposition to be affected in one set of ways or another: One who is regularly angered by trivial offenses to his private person but seldom or never by significant offenses against others or against the public good is a mean-spirited person. Someone who rejoices in the flourishing of family and friends, for their sake, has a nobler character than one who is unaffected by their weal, or who is affected by it, not for their sake but, say, for the sake of his own convenience. To be emotionally unsusceptible to another’s well- or ill-being for the other’s sake is to be incapable of friendship with that other, on at least one conception of friendship; the most important relationships of our lives are constituted, in large part, by our dispositions to react with specific emotions to the other and his vicissitudes. Besides these connections to action, character, and relationships, emotions are a kind of eye for value and the import of situations, a mode of spiritual perception that may be deep and wise, or shallow and foolish. Because of these and other types of importance, certain regular patterns of emotional response are characteristic of the flourishing, mature, and “happy” human life, while alternative patterns constitute ill-function and immaturity and tend to misery.

This volume and its projected companion aim to contribute to our understanding of moral personality conceived in a broad sense of “moral,” with a particular focus on the place of emotions and emotional formation in that personality. The conception of *moral* to which I refer includes not only our responses to duties and permissions, but also our happiness (which certainly does not imply always feeling good) – what kind of life, and in particular what formation of personality, and thus of relationships with others, constitutes human well-being all around. The work is divided into two parts. The present volume is on the nature of emotions and feelings and, in Chapter 4, begins to treat their connections to the moral life. The projected second volume begins with a general account of the relation of emotions to morality in my broad sense of the word, and then it offers accounts of a number of particular traits of the flourishing personality with special reference to the emotions and emotionlike states that exemplify or interact with them.

The project of understanding the good life in terms of the virtues, and the virtues in terms of their relationships to the emotions, is nothing new. Aristotle says that moral virtue is concerned with passions and actions, and in his accounts of particular virtues the passions often figure even more

prominently than the actions. The association of the virtues with the passions (many of which we would call emotions in modern English) recurs almost wherever the virtues are carefully reflected on in the history of philosophy. Thus Thomas Aquinas devotes Questions 22–48 of the first part of the second part of his *Summa Theologiae* to a study of the passions, preparatory to his general discussion of virtue in Questions 55–67 and his detailed discussions of the virtues and vices in the second part of the second part, Questions 1–170, many of which themselves involve discussions of passions such as hope, fear, despair, joy, love, hatred, and envy. Book II of David Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature* – “Of the Passions” – prepares the reader for Book III, in which he presents his ethics of virtue. Adam Smith’s ethics, as presented in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, is likewise an ethics of virtue that focuses strongly on the passions. In our own period, when John Rawls turns to address justice as a trait of persons (rather than a structural feature of institutions), he finds it necessary to speak not just of dispositions to act, but of moral sentiments such as anger and guilt.¹

This book is not a historical work, but I intend it as a contribution to this long discussion. I hope that it is in some ways a refinement of its predecessors. At any rate, it is dependent on them for direction and inspiration, as well as for the proposals that have fueled my thought, even when I disagree with them. As befits its historical location at the beginning of the 21st century, this book is more sensitive than its forebears to the possibility that neither emotions nor virtues are the same in every cultural setting, but instead vary to some extent with systems of custom, interest, and belief. While attempting to credit the diversity or potential diversity of human emotions and virtues, my discussions are also more resolutely particularistic. It seems to me that the way to study virtue is to study the virtues, and to do so rather in depth. “Virtue theory,” especially in our time but also earlier, has often been long on generalizing accounts and short on careful exploration of particular virtues. Particular virtues are treated as illustrations of general theory, rather than as a fund of insight out of which any generalizations that are possible may emerge.

Accordingly, much of the second volume will study particular virtues, with special emphasis on their dynamic and internal connections with emotions and emotion dispositions. I comment on more general theoretical questions because they seem naturally to arise out of the particular discussions of virtues. Thus the method is “empirical” in the broad sense that it follows Wittgenstein’s dictum, “Don’t think. Look!”, though lots of the looking in this sort of case is a kind of thinking – thinking about examples, as Wittgenstein’s also is. Similarly, in the present volume, Chapter 3 is devoted to an extensive detailing of particular emotion types as well as of

¹ *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), Sections 66–67 and 73–74.

emotionlike phenomena that are sometimes treated as emotions, such as surprise, amusement (at what is comical), and vanity.

1.2. THE SUPPOSED POVERTY OF CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

How shall we conduct an inquiry into the emotions that will serve well the study of the virtues? The methods of many disciplines have been used to study the emotions. Philosophers, from Aristotle² to the present, have used an approach that today would be called conceptual or philosophical analysis, one that I want to examine closely in this opening chapter because recently it has been under attack and I will argue that it is still the central approach for our purposes. But in the 19th and 20th centuries a number of other approaches have been developed. Emotions have been examined by the methods of evolutionary biology, experimental psychology, brain science, psychoanalysis and other clinical approaches, cultural anthropology, and cultural history and the history of ideas. In each case, one or another of a variety of theories forms a more or less definite background of the examination and shapes its results. For example, evolutionary biologists tend to think of emotions as behavioral response mechanisms that (at least in our evolutionary past, and in some cases also now) promote physical survival, while many anthropologists think of emotions as culturally determined patterns of experience and behavior that serve various social functions (though some anthropologists are psychoanalytic, and so stress less the determinations of culture). Brain scientists tell a rather different story about emotions, one in terms of brain circuitry and neurotransmitters, but typically lean on the evolutionary conception of emotion, while historians of the emotions may exploit psychoanalytic theory or perhaps a more cognitive-behavioral framework. In addition to these disciplines, fiction writing should be mentioned, though it is not theoretical or academic in the way the other disciplines are. Nevertheless, writers such as Jane Austen, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot are very astute observers of emotions in the context of the narrative flow of human life, and are especially important for our purposes since they so often depict the emotions as expressing traits of persons' character. Most of the other disciplines focus much less on emotions that differentiate persons of one moral formation from persons of another, and seldom are emotions set in as rich a narrative context as they are in literature. A possible exception is psychoanalysis.

Conceptual analysis is an approach to the investigation of emotions that takes major clues about them from the ways people talk about the emotions in the contexts of their life. As I understand the practice and as the word "clue" suggests, it is not a purely lexicographical or syntactical/semantic

² See Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, especially Book II, Chapters 1–11 (1377b15–1388b30).

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approach. It is not as though we could expect to find out what emotions are by looking up “emotion” and/or words like “anger” and “nostalgia” in the dictionary, nor could we expect to “analyze” such concepts merely by summarizing the various conditions under which the most proficient speakers of English ascribe emotion or anger to themselves and others. Such information about how the best speakers of English use the emotion words is an important part of conceptual analysis, but the analyst is very much in the business of *interpreting* these facts of usage. For one thing, even the best English speakers use vocabulary loosely and shiftingly, so conceptual analysis will involve normative decisions about what is the right and central usage. But beyond this, the conceptual analyst typically offers some general schema by which he or she proposes to make sense of the “data” of linguistic usage. (Consider the various schemata that have been offered by such philosophers as Robert Solomon,³ Patricia Greenspan,⁴ and Robert Gordon.⁵) Furthermore, as a person who not only speaks about emotions, but also experiences them and experiences their connections with actions, perceptions, desires, sensations, and the like, the analyst is also very concerned to make sense of his or her experience and the experiences of other human beings. Thus as I conceive conceptual analysis, it is particularly based on collection of and reflection about examples from everyday human life, many of which can be understood only in the light of a fairly rich narrative background. This preoccupation represents an overlap with literary and psychoanalytic examinations of emotion and a rather strong contrast with biological and neuroscientific examinations. The conceptual analyst, as I understand his *métier*, will look for formulations regarding emotion and particular emotion types, and will be particularly interested in potential counterexamples, also from everyday life, to his formulations.

Conceptual analysis has been criticized as an inadequate approach to the emotions along two different lines by Amélie O. Rorty and Paul E. Griffiths. The two lines of criticism have in common the suggestion that the conceptual scheme provided by our ordinary language about the emotions is a deeply misleading, and perhaps even internally incoherent, indicator of the nature of emotions. Thus any analysis that takes that scheme at face value and as a point of departure is doomed to deep error. Each of these authors promotes an alternative approach. Rorty proposes that we study the history of the philosophies of the emotions because in her view those variegated philosophies have *constituted* the incoherent or apparently incoherent concept of emotion that analysts try vainly to make sense of. Griffiths thinks that the best scientific accounts of the phenomena that we call “emotions” – essentially, accounts from evolutionary biology and its

³ *The Passions* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976).

⁴ *Emotions and Reasons* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

⁵ *The Structure of Emotions* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

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auxiliary experimental psychology – show that “emotions” form such a qualitatively diverse set of phenomena that the concept *emotion* and the concepts of particular types of emotion are useless for the purpose of genuine knowledge. I shall examine the arguments and proposals of Rorty and Griffiths, bringing into my critique of Griffiths some observations about the best recent work on the neuroscience of emotions. I shall then end this Introduction with a sketch of a kind of conceptual analysis that avoids the legitimate criticisms that have been leveled against conceptual analysis of the emotions as it was practiced in the 20th century.

1.3. DECONSTRUCTING *EMOTION* VIA THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

Amélie Rorty begins her paper, “Aristotle on the Metaphysical Status of *Pathé*,”⁶ by commenting on the deplorable state of present-day philosophical theorizing about the passions and emotions. The discussions are “arbitrary and factitious” and “puzzlingly pulled in what appear to be opposing directions” (p. 521); these “persistent and unresolvable contemporary polemical debates carry an air of a chimaeral construction” (p. 545). The reason for this apparent impasse is that the concept under discussion itself contains these “opposing directions”; the discussions only reflect tensions internal to the concept:

We sometimes hold people responsible for their emotions and the actions they perform from them. Yet normal behavior is often explained and excused by the person ‘suffering’ an emotional condition. We treat emotions as interruptions or deflections of normal behavior, and yet also consider a person pathological if he fails to act or react from a standard range of emotions. Sometimes emotions are classified as a species of evaluative judgments whose analysis will be given in an adequate theory of cognition. But sometimes the cognitive or intentional character of an emotion is treated as dependent on, and ultimately explained by, a physical condition (p. 521).

We can easily think of a few more “opposing directions” that the concept of emotion can pull us in: Some emotions bond people together, others sunder them; some emotions are recognizable via facial expressions, others are not; some emotions disappear as soon as contrary information is heard and believed, others persist in the face of such information; some emotions have an identifiable propositional content, others have none; some emotions (like shame) are intrinsically reflexive or self-referring, others (like joy) are not; some emotions are based in the most excellent, others in the most cock-eyed reasoning, while still others are based in no reasoning at all; some emotions are disruptive episodes, relatively unintegrated

⁶ *Review of Metaphysics* 38 (1984): 521–546.

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into the characteristic concerns and purposes and intentional actions of a person's life, while others are continuous with those leading concerns and express them; some emotions involve discernible bodily arousal, others do not; some emotions are conscious states, others are not; some emotions are pleasurable, others are painful, and perhaps still others are neither the one nor the other; some emotion types are pancultural, others are culture-specific or culture-determined; some emotions are intentional, brought on by the subject for some purpose of her own, while others are not intentional; some emotions are motivations, while others are not. Rorty points out that these "opposing" divisions within the concept of emotion do not tend to be marked by our lexicalized emotion categories ("anger," "nostalgia," "solicitude," "joy"). For example, there might be instances of anger that fall on each of the sides of most of these divisions. Perhaps this fact helps to hide from us the rampant disorder internal to the concept of emotion.

Rorty's thesis that the seeming unresolvability of the debates about the nature of emotions somehow stems from the extraordinary variety and oppositions among the phenomena that we call emotions seems plausible to me, if we add the further premise that the debating theorists base their positions on hasty generalizations from their favored ranges of cases. For example, one kind of theorist fixes on cases of emotion that have highly definite conceptual content, that respond flexibly to changes of information and reasoning, and that are highly integrated into the individual's conscious purposes and explicit worldview. Another kind of theorist fixes on cases of emotion that respond poorly or not at all to information and reasoning, have a strong component of bodily arousal, and have close analogues in beasts and babies. Both theorists then ignore the "opposite" kinds of cases as long as they can, or they authorize their theories by finding clever ways to explain away the counterexamples or assimilate them to their own paradigm, or they just deny that those are "really" emotions. Without the hasty generalizations, followed by digging in of theoretical heels, we would presumably get descriptively richer, less theoretical, monolithic or reductive accounts, ones that would be less controversial because the generalizations would be spare and cautious, always keeping a welcoming lookout for the instructive counterexample. Among people who practiced this more descriptive philosophy of emotion, there would presumably be far less of the unyielding disagreement that Rorty deplures. In making this proposal I am supposing that the concept of emotion is not internally incoherent, and that its apparent incoherence comes from the hasty generalizations of theorists.

But this is not Rorty's proposed resolution of the difficulty. Although she does not go quite so far as to say that the concept itself is incoherent, she does blame the concept at least as much as its analysts. She thinks that our current concept of an emotion is a contraption whose ill-assorted parts are accretions traceable to diverse periods of the history of philosophy in which very divergent agendas shaped the claims that were made about the emotions. If

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we lack a clear view of that history, we are doomed to a conceptual muddle, because we take the concept of emotion at “face value”; that is, we treat it as though it is a single, coherent concept.

The history of discussions of the passions does not form a smooth continuous history, which expands or narrows the class of *pathe* by following a single line of thought. Sometimes the transformations (say from Aristotelian *pathe* to Stoic *passiones*) arise from moral preoccupations concerning voluntary control; sometimes the transformations (say from Renaissance *amoro* to Hobbesian passions and desires) are impelled by metaphysical and scientific preoccupations; sometimes the transformations (say from Hobbesian passions and desires to Humean and Rousseauian sentiments) have a political direction. If nothing else, this should show that *pathe*, *passiones*, affects, emotions, and sentiments do not form a natural class. Additions to that class were made on quite distinctive grounds. Before we can evaluate the competing claims of current polemical debates, before we can understand the force of their various claims, we must first trace the philosophic preoccupations in which they originated (p. 545).

Again, it is not entirely clear whether Rorty is claiming that, for example, the Stoics merely noticed and emphasized that some emotions are subject to voluntary control and had a theory about it and built further theory on it, perhaps overgeneralizing from it, or whether the Stoics *invented* voluntary control of emotions and then passed that trait of emotions (or at least of the concept of emotion) on to us. If the former is so, then it might be *interesting* to know what the Stoics said about voluntary control, but it would not be *necessary* for a contemporary conceptual analyst, as Rorty seems to suggest it is. The analyst would be looking at an emotion like anger and noticing the same feature that the Stoics exploited, namely that people can often control their anger if they have a modicum of understanding of their emotion and make some effort. Since the conceptual analyst would be doing essentially the same kind of thing the Stoic was doing, the analyst would be under no necessity to advert to what the earlier theorist had said.

If the present-day theorist really needs to know the Stoic discussion, the latter must be somehow constitutive of the very subject matter of the present discussion. In that case when Rorty says, “Before we can evaluate the competing claims of current polemical debates, . . . we must first trace the philosophic preoccupations in which they originated,” she must be saying that the “opposing” features that set the parameters of our debate actually *originated* in the earlier philosophical discussions. For example, if we can’t appreciate the notion that emotions are subject to voluntary control without knowing the Stoic contribution to the subject, then the fact that emotions are subject to voluntary control is not just *noticed* by the Stoics but *created* by them. Even this would not be enough, strictly speaking, to make acquaintance with historical Stoicism a necessary condition for understanding current debates because the voluntariness of emotions might take on a life of its

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own after having been socially constructed in terms of Stoic theory. On this interpretation, Rorty's claim that we cannot understand emotions without history of philosophy implies that this history not only created such features of emotions as their voluntariness, reliance on judgments, power to deflect normal behavior, grounding in physiological conditions, and so on, but created these features in such a way that they are *internally tied to the originating theories*.

What kind of understanding of the concept of emotion would emerge from a study of the history of the philosophy of emotion, on the second interpretation of Rorty's thesis? Since by hypothesis our concept of emotion is socially constructed in such a way as to make conceptual-analytical accounts of it chimaeral, the result of the historical studies that Rorty envisages would be our understanding of an incoherent "concept" *as incoherent*. If we wrote the history of the concept of emotion, we would understand *emotion* to be a philosophically constructed chimaera (my dictionary says a chimera is "an imaginary monster compounded of incongruous parts"). We would see that the concept of emotion has no real referent, but only this constructed, chimaeral one. This history would explode a myth, exposing a *purported* concept for the monstrous contraption that it is.

We might wonder why, on this interpretation, the unmasking of the "concept" of emotion could not proceed ahistorically, just by showing the internal contradictions in the concept. Perhaps the idea is that this procedure would never decisively show the concept to be incoherent since a conservative could always fall back on the hope of a future account that will show the concept's coherence. The genealogy of *emotion* might be thought capable of laying this hope finally to rest, by showing once and for all where the contradictory strands in the "concept" came from.

It is not clear to me that Rorty endorses the rather implausible view that I have just sketched. Perhaps she thinks that the influence of philosophical theories on our concept of emotion is of some looser variety, and that phrases like "must first trace the philosophical preoccupations" and "necessary to trace the history" should be taken more weakly than I have done. She does make one remark that seems to make the history of philosophy less crucial:

Officially we are preoccupied with determining whether emotions can be evaluated for their rationality; or whether they are voluntary; or whether they can be "reduced" to cognitions; or whether they are interruptions of behavior that is normally purposeful. But in fact we know better: when we are really thinking, rather than making pronouncements, we know that we evaluate the appropriateness of emotions by criteria that are much richer than those of logical consistency: we are interested in determining whether they are inadequate or excessive, crude or subtle; whether they are harmoniously balanced with one another; whether we admire the character traits they reveal and the motives that usually accompany them. And when we are careful, we usually also distinguish passions, emotions, affects, sentiments (pp. 521–522).

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While I would not describe in just Rorty's terms the kind of conceptual analysis I commend, I agree with the direction of her thought in this quotation. She is saying, in effect, that if we stop crudely theorizing and look carefully at the human emotions and our modes of describing and evaluating them, if we stop thinking in terms of simplistic questions about emotions and *look* to see how they actually and richly function in the course of our lives, then the seeming incoherence in the concept of emotion begins to disappear and we see not incoherence and in principle irresolvable debates, but subtle and rich variety linked by family resemblances. So perhaps Rorty is admitting that we may not strictly *need* the history of philosophy after all, but just a more astute and careful and "empirical" and less theoretically hidebound application of philosophical analysis. But because philosophers have historically picked up on some features of emotions to the exclusion of others, the history of philosophy might help in our analysis by alerting us to features that need accommodating and abstractions we need to avoid. On this interpretation, which we might call the "history of philosophy as aid to conceptual analysis" view, Rorty would not be saying that the concept of emotion is an imaginary monster, nor that the history of philosophy is strictly necessary to its analysis. The history of the philosophy of emotions is *a useful but non-necessary adjunct* to philosophical analysis (along with several other adjunct disciplines), in heading off theoretical dead-ends, raising interesting questions, and making interesting proposals.

My purpose is not to adjudicate the interpretation of Rorty's provocative paper, but to defend a kind of conceptual analysis of the emotions. Since the second interpretation allows for conceptual analysis with a recommendation of aid from the history of philosophy, I have no quarrel with it. And I am interested in the first interpretation, not because I ascribe it with confidence to Rorty, but because it is a challenge to my project.

Let us try out an argument, which we might call the realist common sense objection, against the historically constructed chimaera theory (HCCT). As a proposal for examination why not say the following:

Proposal:

We can explain the "opposing" features of emotions much more straightforwardly. We needn't posit that the history of philosophy has created these features, because we can observe them in our everyday experience. For example, we can explain why people have thought that emotions are strongly connected with judgments by noting that people, in any historical period, including our own, can be roused to anger or fear or nostalgia by narratives, and that their anger or fear can often be dispelled instantaneously by telling them something. We needn't resort to the history of philosophy to explain why people think emotions are grounded in physical conditions such as fatigue or the influence of drugs; appeal to their experience is enough. We do not need the history of philosophy to explain why people are sometimes held responsible for their emotions and sometimes exonerated because of them. Nor do we need it to show us why people think that both normal