Alchemies of the Mind

Jon Elster has written a comprehensive, wide-ranging book on the emotions in which he considers a large variety of theoretical approaches.

Drawing on history, literature, philosophy, and psychology, Elster presents a full account of the role of the emotions in human behavior. While acknowledging the importance of neurophysiology and laboratory experiment for the study of emotions, Elster argues that the serious student of the emotions can learn more from the great thinkers and writers of the past, from Aristotle to Jane Austen. He attaches particular importance to the work of the French moralists, notably La Rochefoucauld, who demonstrated the way the need for esteem and self-esteem shapes human motivation. The book also maintains a running dialogue with economists and rational-choice theorists.

Combining methodological and theoretical arguments with empirical case studies and written with Elster’s customary verve and economy, this book will have a broad appeal to students and scholars in philosophy, psychology, economics, and political science, as well as literary studies, history, and sociology.

“Elster draws instructively on sources as varied as social psychology, history, game theory, neuroscience, fiction, and the philosophy of science. The book is exceptionally insightful, and it achieves a remarkable synthesis of divergent bodies of literature that perhaps no one else could have accomplished.”

Alfred Mele, Davidson College

“This book will undoubtedly find a wide readership, not only among the fans of Elster’s previous work, but among the growing number of specialists in various fields who have become captivated by the theory of emotion.”

Ronald de Sousa, University of Toronto

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Alchemies of the Mind
Rationality and the Emotions

JON ELSTER
For C. F.
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Preface and Acknowledgments

In this book I return to some of the themes I discussed in Sour Grapes (1983). An equivalent of sour grapes is “sweet lemons,” the transmutation of bitterness into sweetness, analogous to that of base metals into gold. The mental alchemies that I discussed in that earlier book, notably in the title chapter, had a limited range. In particular, they did not have any place for the emotions as fuel, raw material, and final product of these processes. The purpose of the present book is to say something about the role of the emotions in mental life and in the generation of behavior.

In Chapter I I propose an account of explanation in the social sciences that, although less ambitious than nomological explanation, goes beyond mere narrative or description, however “thick.” The central idea is that of a mechanism, a recurring and intelligible causal pattern. The emotional reactions, mental alchemies, and other forms of psychic causality that I discuss elsewhere in the book are instances of mechanisms in this sense.

In Chapter II I discuss some prescientific or, better, extrascientific sources for the study of the emotions. I first consider Aristotle, whose account of emotions in the Rhetoric remains utterly fresh and insightful. Next, I consider the treatment of emotions by the French moralists, from Montaigne to La Bruyère. Finally, I discuss what we can learn about the emotions from a handful of novelists and playwrights: Shakespeare, Racine, Mme de Lafayette, Jane Austen, Stendhal, and George Eliot.

In Chapter III I discuss a subset of the emotions in their social and historical context. I first consider shame, in its relation to social norms and to other “self-conscious emotions,” notably guilt. Next I consider envy and related emotions, and I conclude by discussing the emotions involved in the pursuit of honor. A running theme in this
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Chapter is the distinction between the social emotions that are based on comparison, such as envy, and those that are based on interaction, such as anger.

Chapters II and III serve two functions. On the one hand they discuss texts and behavioral patterns that I believe to be intrinsically interesting in their own right. On the other hand, they provide numerous examples of specific emotional reactions and mechanisms on which I draw in Chapter IV, in which I move closer to a general account of the emotions. Here, I first try to summarize current psychological views of the emotions. I then consider whether emotions enhance or undermine rational choice, and whether the emotions themselves can be assessed by standards of rationality.

In Chapter V, drawing on the discussion of the French moralists in Chapter II and on the discussion of irrational emotions in Chapter IV, I discuss the causes and reasons that make people hide their motivations from themselves and from others. On the one hand, there is the phenomenon of unconscious transmutation of one motive into another. On the other hand, there is the phenomenon of conscious misrepresentation of one’s motives in front of an audience. Whereas earlier chapters address themselves mainly to philosophers, psychologists, and historians, this chapter is more oriented toward economics, political science, and law. I believe in fact that the relevance of emotion ranges across all the social sciences, the humanities, and legal studies. I hope the book can help making that relevance better appreciated.

Nancy Cartwright, G. A. Cohen, Robyn Dawes, Dagfinn Föllesdal, Peter Hedström, George Loewenstein, Richard Posner, Nils Roll-Hansen, Bernt Stigum, and the late Amos Tversky commented on an earlier version of Chapter I. I also benefited from comments by the participants in a conference on mechanisms in Stockholm in June 1996, and from discussions with John Ferejohn, Bernard Manin, Pasquale Pasquino, Adam Przeworski, and Susan Stokes. Bernard Manin, Amélie Rorty, and Bernard Williams gave critical and constructive comments on my discussion of Aristotle in Chapter II. Chapter III relies heavily on two previous papers on envy and revenge, the first published in a Festschrift for Thomas Schelling edited by Richard Zeckhauser (1991), and the second in Ethics (1990). I thank William Miller for his helpful comments on my discussion of his work in an earlier draft. Chapter IV grew out of a course I taught at Columbia University in 1995. I am grateful to my students for their contributions, and to John Alcorn, Akeel Bilgrami, Russell Hardin, and Roger
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Petersen for taking the time to talk to us about their work. Earlier versions of Chapter V were presented at talks at the University of California at Irvine in February 1995, at a conference on ethics and economics in Oslo, December 1995, and at a conference on rationality and cognition at Georgetown Law Center in November 1996. I am grateful to John Ferejohn and Mike Seidman for their comments at the latter meeting, and to Siri Gullestad and Sissel Reichelt for comments on that chapter. I also want to acknowledge useful comments by Louis-André Gerard-Varet, A. Leroux, Pierre Livet, and Alain Wolfelsperger at a colloquium in Marseille in June 1997.

Atul Kohli read Chapters I and V of an earlier draft. Avner Ben-Ze’ev, David Cohen, Joseph Frank, David Laitin, Robert Merton, and Roger Petersen read the entire draft. I benefited greatly from their comments. I am particularly indebted to Robert Merton for urging me to write the Coda. Finally, I want to thank Aida Lialaby for her invariably friendly and competent assistance, my research assistant Joshua Rosenberg, as well as Cheryl Seleski and the marvelously efficient library staff at the Russell Sage Foundation, which provided me with a fellowship to finish this book.