The Emotions

A philosophical introduction

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The Emotions

The emotions are at the center of our lives and, for better or worse, imbue them with much of their significance. The philosophical problems stirred up by the existence of the emotions, over which many great philosophers of the past have labored, revolve around attempts to understand what this significance amounts to. Are emotions feelings, thoughts, or experiences? If they are experiences, what are they experiences of? Are emotions rational? In what sense do emotions give meaning to what surrounds us? *The Emotions: A Philosophical Introduction* introduces and explores these questions in a clear and accessible way. The authors discuss the following key topics:

- the diversity and unity of the emotions;
- the relations between emotion, belief, and desire;
- the nature of values;
- the relations between emotions and perceptions;
- emotions viewed as evaluative attitudes;
- the link between emotions and evaluative knowledge;
- the nature of moods, sentiments, and character traits.

Including chapter summaries and guides to further reading, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Introduction* is an ideal starting point for any philosopher or student studying the emotions. It will also be of interest to those in related disciplines such as psychology and the social sciences.

Julien A. Deonna is Assistant Professor at the Department of Philosophy of the University of Geneva (Switzerland) and at the Swiss Centre for Research in the Affective Sciences. He works on theories of emotions and moral psychology. He is co-author of *In Defense of Shame* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

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"Quite simply the best introduction to the philosophy of the emotions on the market. The book is beautifully written, and would be ideal for an advanced undergraduate or graduate course on the emotions, but in fact all scholars working on this topic will have things to learn from it. I recommend it very highly."

–Tim Crane, University of Cambridge, UK

"Deonna's and Teroni's argumentation is subtle and muscular; their prose is engaging and accessible; and their novel account of the relation of emotions to value is particularly notable. Not only informative, but exciting to read."

–Ronald de Sousa, University of Toronto, Canada

"Exceptionally wide-ranging, yet tightly structured, sophisticated in discussion, yet succinctly and lucidly written. Accessible to newcomers and enlarging to those already engaged in philosophizing about the emotions."

–David Pugmire, University of Southampton, UK

"An eminently readable book, which will certainly prove indispensable for neophytes and specialists alike."

–Christine Tappolet, University of Montréal, Canada

"The positive account of emotions Deonna and Teroni provide is a viable contender, well worth taking seriously. I highly recommend the book."

–Bennett Helm, Franklin and Marshall College, USA

"This is an excellent volume. The work is original, important and timely, and will no doubt receive a wide audience."

–Michael Brady, University of Glasgow, UK

"This is a wonderful, engaging introduction to the philosophy of emotion. The book has a fast pace and a challenging style. Yet, its subject matter represents first-class scholarship."

–Nico H. Frijda, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Acknowledgements

This book is the intellectual offspring of a short introductory essay on the nature of emotions we wrote in French under the title *Qu'est-ce qu'une émotion?* published a few years ago with Vrin. While pleased with what we had achieved, we soon realized that numerous gaps had to be filled and that many of the topics considered and arguments pursued required further clarification and elaboration. The present essay, which we strangely thought would be a slightly revised translation of the original, is essentially a new book, despite the fact that it shares with its ancestor part of its basic structure, arguments, and general approach to the emotions. We express our gratitude to Vrin for having welcomed the present project.

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Preface

The present book is an introduction to the philosophy of the emotions and as such presents and assesses the major theories of what the emotions are, as well as the numerous issues that the significant and growing interest in them has brought to light in recent years. It would perhaps have been possible to provide this introductory overview of the theoretical landscape from a detached distance, but this is a route we have deliberately chosen not to follow. Instead, we have opted to lead the reader on a ground-level trek through the intellectual thickets of the current debates in the field, taking sides and staking out positions as we advance. This book is, as a result, a very opinionated introduction.

This is not the only reason why this introduction is distinctive and why it may claim to fill a gap in the flurry of recent publications on the emotions. First, it is throughout informed by many broader discussions and debates central to contemporary philosophy of mind and epistemology. The phenomenology and intentionality of the emotions, as well as epistemological issues surrounding them, are considered from the perspective of these debates as they are conducted in the current literature. Second, while the book works its way towards a satisfactory account of the emotions, it also tries to make up for the relative neglect that has attended the rest of our affective lives. Thus, we furnish accounts of emotional dispositions, moods, temperaments, character traits, and sentiments and examine their various roles in connection with the emotions. Third and finally, the much dissected connection between emotions and values or evaluative properties is subjected to a degree of scrutiny unusual for a textbook. This is not only because we think that clarifying this connection is essential for an understanding of the nature of emotions, but also because it informs crucial philosophical debates raised by their study, namely those surrounding the metaphysics of values and the nature of our evaluative knowledge. The shape and relevance of these debates for the general philosophy of the emotions is also something we have sought to convey.

Before we present the structure of the book, let us make a few remarks regarding our use of notes and references. The knowledgeable reader will be struck by the scarcity of the former. We have indeed kept notes to a minimum in order to avoid distractions from the main threads of the arguments

we discuss. While we have put what we perceive as the principal references in the main body of the text, we have been rather conservative in doing so, again with the aim of maximizing the readability of a text that can, due to the complexity of the material, at times be challenging. The drawbacks of these choices are, we hope, made up for in the 'Questions and further readings' sections at the end of each chapter. In those sections, we furnish the resources to pursue in greater depth the main themes and lines of inquiry in the broader literature.

We shall now briefly present how our discussion is structured. We start by emphasizing three fundamental features of the emotions: it feels a certain way to have an emotion, emotions are about something, and we assess emotions from a variety of different perspectives. The issues raised by these features of the emotions – their phenomenology, their intentionality, and their epistemological significance – constitute the core material on which this book is built. Introducing these three features is the principal purpose of Chapter 1, which in this way provides a first insight into the nature of emotions and allows us to contrast them with other types of psychological phenomena, in particular other types of affective phenomena.

Chapter 2 introduces a series of distinctions commonly drawn within the class of emotions. There are for instance positive and negative emotions, conscious and unconscious emotions, reflexive and non-reflexive emotions. We turn our attention to the significance of these distinctions, and offer a closely argued critique of a recent and important brand of skepticism regarding the very unity of the class of emotions, a skepticism fostered by another of these distinctions – that between basic and nonbasic emotions.

In Chapter 3, we investigate the first group of theories about what the emotions are, theories that claim emotions are reducible to admixtures of beliefs and desires. While presenting some of the classical reasons for which these various theories have been found wanting, we also show, through a deeper understanding of the nature of desires, why, ultimately, the fact that emotions motivate us in all sorts of ways does not support the idea that they should be understood in terms of desires.

Theories of the emotions that do not appeal to desires have generally approached them through their connections with values. The remainder of the book assesses theories of the emotions that conceive of them as specific forms of evaluation. Chapter 4 looks at the connection between evaluative properties and emotional responses and, more centrally, the metaphysical nature of evaluative properties. We thus review different positions on the nature of these properties, from the strongest forms of subjectivism to various forms of objectivism. We conclude that there are good reasons to think that these properties are independent of our emotional responses.

In Chapter 5, we focus on theories according to which emotions are evaluative judgments. We discuss numerous ways in which one might try to salvage this classical and intellectualist portrayal of the emotions. One strategy involves complementing the intellectual judgment with a further layer of

feelings (add-on theories). Another regards emotions as inchoate feelings given form by intellectual fiat (reversed add-on or constructionist theories). All these theories, we argue, fail to account for the distinctive role of phenomenology within the emotions.

By contrast, perceptual theories of the emotions can reasonably claim to be giving the phenomenological aspect of emotions its due weight, in viewing them as perceptual experiences of evaluative properties. Chapter 6 investigates the credentials of this presently very influential family of approaches to the emotions. In reviewing various and more or less elaborate forms of the perceptual theory, which lay more or less emphasis on the role of bodily feelings in emotion, we suggest that all of them face serious worries. While this discussion helps us bring into sharper focus the basic constraints a satisfactory theory of the emotions has to meet – regarding their phenomenology, their intentionality and their epistemological role – the perceptual analogy is, we conclude, more misleading than enlightening.

On the basis of the various difficulties attending the theories we find in the contemporary philosophical literature on the emotions, Chapter 7 lays out a novel account, one which we claim satisfies the basic constraints that our discussion of the preceding chapters has helped uncover. The otherwise mysterious connection between emotions and evaluative properties, we suggest, is brought to the surface by leveraging a distinction between attitudes and their content. Unlike all the other theories that lay emphasis on this connection, we argue that evaluative properties do not figure in the content of the emotions. Instead, this connection is grounded in the attitudinal component specific to each emotion type. We develop this approach by appealing to the idea that emotions are felt stances towards objects, and explain how it accounts for the intimate link between the distinctive intentionality and phenomenology of the emotions.

The three last chapters of the book are structured around the epistemological issues raised by the emotions and aim to assess their role in the acquisition of evaluative knowledge. Chapter 8 investigates the conditions that have to be met in order for an emotion to be justified. Justified emotions, we argue, do not depend on any antecedent cognition of evaluative properties: they can be justified by non-evaluative states such as perceptions, memories, or factual beliefs. Consequently they need not be mere reactions to prior evaluative knowledge or belief and can thus play a fundamental role in our access to the evaluative domain. Although we conduct our discussion from within the framework of our own theory of the emotions, the conclusions we reach are largely independent of it.

Chapter 9 focuses on the roles that affective and/or motivational states such as moods, sentiments, character traits, and desires play in regard to the emotions. We provide detailed descriptions of these states, examine the fundamental roles they play in causing and influencing emotions and contrast these roles with another we might think they play, i.e. that of providing reasons for emotional episodes. We present and criticize some important arguments for

the latter view – and conclude that they do not contribute positively to the justification of emotions.

The final chapter looks at the importance of emotions in regard to evaluative knowledge. More specifically, it investigates whether there exists a safe epistemological route going from the emotions to the evaluative judgments they tend to elicit and how this route compares with others ending in the same judgments but bypassing the emotions altogether. We conclude with an account of why the emotional route has a very special significance in the acquisition of evaluative knowledge.

Contents

1 Homing in on the emotions

The philosophy of emotions seeks to develop a systematic theory of the phenomena we refer to by terms such as 'fear', 'envy', 'anger', 'sadness', 'joy', 'embarrassment', 'shame', 'jealousy', 'remorse', 'boredom', 'nostalgia', 'pride', 'regret', 'admiration', 'compassion', 'disgust', 'amusement', 'indignation', 'hope', which fall under the generic label of 'emotions'. We know it when we are undergoing emotions, often we know which emotion we have, and we know how to ascribe them to others and why we ascribe them. Still, the fact that this intuitive knowledge is easily available should not make us think that emotions are simple phenomena. Let us start, then, by introducing what are often thought to be the central features of the emotions, features we shall illustrate by considering how the emotions contrast with other affective phenomena and, more generally, other psychological states. Doing so will not only furnish some preliminary insights into the nature of emotions, but will also put us in a position to briefly present some of the main issues with which we shall be concerned in this book. The first of these core features concerns the role of feelings in the emotions (their phenomenology), the second the fact that emotions are directed towards objects (their intentionality), and the third the sorts of standards to which the emotions are answerable (their epistemology).

Phenomenology

Consider the following everyday expressions: we say we are 'in the grip of panic', 'struck by fear', 'overcome with joy', 'oppressed by shame', 'overwhelmed by sorrow'. These locutions suggest that emotions are reactions we passively undergo. The term 'passion', which used to refer to what are now known as emotions, testifies to that fact. So are the many participial adjectives designating emotions (e.g., 'horrified', 'astonished', 'troubled', 'vexed'). In the emotions, we seem to be acted on, and this typically manifests itself to us through bodily agitations or disturbances – a feature to which the very term 'emotion' alludes. The crucial point for present purposes, however, is that these bodily disturbances are felt. This is why the term 'feeling' is never far away when there is talk of the emotions.

What are these bodily disturbances or agitations that we are said to be feeling during emotional episodes? Emotions are generally held to involve

bodily sensations or feelings. Anger, for example, may lend itself to a description in terms of a configuration of sensations caused *inter alia* by the following elements: an accelerating heart rate, quickened breathing, an increased blood pressure, a rush of adrenaline. Such descriptions will also refer to the sorts of kinesthetic sensations and muscular feedback characteristic of the particular emotion that is experienced – compare for instance the muscular relaxation in relief with the muscular tension typical of anger. To the kinds of sensations just described, we may also add the sensations of pleasure and displeasure often referred to as hedonic qualities or tones. There are after all emotions that feel good, like joy or admiration, and others that do not, like fear or sadness.

More generally, and independently of any specification of how their felt character should be described, the emotions are said to have a phenomenology: there is a 'what-it-is-like'-ness to the experience of any emotion. This seems to be what we are referring to when we talk generally of 'the feeling of anger' or 'the feeling of shame'. Now, while it is easy to approach the phenomenology of the emotions through its dimension of bodily disturbance, it goes without saying that felt agitations of the body do not seem to be particularly salient in the phenomenology of many emotions – think for instance of regret or contentment. Similarly, the idea that all emotions are intrinsically either pleasant or unpleasant is less than straightforward. While many think that anger is unpleasant and that hope is pleasant, this is far from obvious. To complicate matters further, the phenomenology of the emotions might lend itself to very different descriptions depending on whether the subject's attention is focused on what he feels or is directed elsewhere, for instance on the situation that triggers his emotion.

An important task we shall take up in this book then concerns the role and nature of feelings, especially bodily and hedonic feelings, within emotions. The fact that phenomenology is a central feature of the emotions is reflected in the fact that just knowing that someone is angry, afraid or ashamed is already to be in possession of a substantial amount of psychological information about him, and this is so even when one does not know what he is angry about, afraid or ashamed of (e.g., Roberts 2003: 146). Yet, can we identify the emotions with some aspect of their felt character, be it bodily sensations or hedonic tones? These issues, and more generally the question as to how we should conceive of the phenomenology of the emotions and its roles, will be the center of our discussions in Chapters 6 and 7. As we shall see, while there have been many attempts to identify emotions with phenomenological features; these attempts seem to rule out the possibility of unfelt emotions and run the risk of placing too much emphasis on the qualities of the emotional experience itself at the expense of what these experiences are experiences of. Indeed, while it is true that the emotions are affective phenomena that seem to be partly characterized by what it is like to have them, another of their central features consists in the fact that they are directed towards various aspects of the world. It is to this central feature of the emotions that we now turn.

Intentionality

We said that emotions are reactions. This raises the question as to what they are reactions to. A good starting point is to consider the way we speak of the emotions. A cursory overview of our linguistic practices in this area brings to light the fact that emotions seem to be always about something. One can always ask, for instance, *what* Bernard is angry about (e.g., 'he is angry at Arthur because he insulted him'), *what* he is afraid of (e.g., 'a stock-market crash'), *who* he is jealous of (e.g., 'Max, who is dating Mary'). This is part of what philosophers have in mind when they call emotions *intentional* phenomena. This is simply a term of art for saying that the emotions are about something, and should not be understood as suggesting that they are states we deliberately or intentionally enter into. Rather, as we have seen, the opposite seems to be the case. It is worth observing that claiming that emotions have intentional objects in the sense just defined is not, or not merely, to claim that they have causes or triggers. While the object of an emotion is also often its cause, it does not have to be. The object of Bernard's jealousy is Max, but its cause is, say, Mary's praise of Max's humor. Note as well that to say that emotions always have objects is not to say that these objects are the focus of attention for the duration of the emotion – John is worried about his exam, but his attention is presently focused on checking whether his bike is locked – nor even that the subject is always clear about what these objects are, as we shall see in our discussion of the various senses in which emotions can be said to be unconscious in Chapter 2.

The language of emotions also reveals that they can have different sorts of objects. This is reflected in the fact that emotion-related verbs can take a variety of grammatical complements. Take the following examples: 'Bernard fears that his life is in danger', 'Mary hopes that the economy will improve', 'Alison regrets that Jacob did not come to the party'. In these three cases, the emotion-related verb is followed by a propositional complement. However, there are also cases such as 'Bernard fears the lion', 'Mary admires Max', and 'Jeffrey despises sexists', where the verb takes a nominal complement. Although most emotion verbs can take either nominal or propositional complements, there are some notable exceptions: 'admire' standardly requires a direct object, and 'hope' a that-clause. It is often easy to transform a construction involving a propositional complement into one with a nominal complement ('Bernard fears for his life', 'Mary hopes for an improvement in the economy'), but transformations in the other direction are often not possible. For example, sentences of the form 'Mary admires the fact that Max is/did F' are not only grammatically infelicitous, but it is not clear that Mary's admiration for Max could be captured in terms of a single proposition, or even a collection of propositions.

These features of the language of emotions reflect the rich variety of the emotions' intentional objects. In some cases, the emotions are or even have to be attitudes towards specific states of affairs, e.g., regret. In other cases, they