History & Philosophy of Psychology

Emotions without Psychology

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Abstract

Psychological (or further, neurological, etc.) examination of emotional states in order to understand what they really stand for is not the most interesting way for a philosopher to take them into account from his/her specific point of view. This is not how the expressions denoting those states become valuable for us.

In ethics, i.e. the discipline which, among others, analyses what is said, thought or felt about something from an evaluative point of view (meta-ethics), or suggests what should be said, thought or felt about it (practical ethics), emotions may play various roles. I shall propose a project of the grammar of emotions, which aims at preserving a specific normativity of philosophical, or moral, discourse. This very notion of grammar must get a further analysis, since even if it has a double normative and descriptive dimension proper to its linguistic equivalent, it does not have (or should not have) systematic ambitions.

Introduction

We are frequently impressed by what is said by neurobiology, neuropsychology, etc., about the way our mind functions. We have the impression that finally we will be able to know the real nature of a whole range of notions playing important roles in our moral or simply social interactions. Nevertheless, there are some reasons to think that this *real nature* of morality is already known to most of us, since its realm is essentially public, and thus shared. Emotions, which are one of its main components, should then be understood as a surface socializing tool, even though they can be accompanied by somehow deeper and complicated feelings. Those latter feelings can receive an account from psychological sciences; I think that philosophy should not engage into a "psychology of the Abstract" and leave that field to other sciences and to literature.

Philosophy, or moral philosophy, does not proceed by giving accounts, but by providing the grammar of concepts; the notion of grammar became notorious in contemporary philosophy thanks to Ludwig Wittgenstein, who noticed that a "whole cloud of philosophy" might be "condensed into a drop of grammar" (2001, II, xi). I shall say something more about this very notion as it is relevant in out context, and finally propose what I would like to call "grammar of emotions". I would like to defend the idea that the kind of explanation that aims at exhaustiveness in a form of psychological explanation should be avoided in moral investigation, also in the domain of emotions. Faced then with unsatisfactory character of psychologisation of emotions in moral philosophy, I will try to see whether and how we can say something relevant and legitimate on this topic from the philosopher's point of view.

Emotions in Moral Philosophy

The emotions we are talking about are emotions that play a role in moral philosophy, which has a department called moral psychology. It is clear that moral psychology is also an interesting subject for psychologists and neurobiologists, but this is not something I would like to deal with. Psychologists have been able to get rid of essentialist tendencies: it seems to be widely acknowledged that emotions are far more complex than their names might suggest. This knowledge does not seem to be commonplace in philosophical moral psychology, which still wants to know what kind of attitudes are good and which ones are bad. The questions that are being asked in this field are: is partiality (and emotions linked to it) a virtue or a vice? Is it right or wrong to feel sympathy towards some people and not towards some other?

A person who is partly guilty of being at the origin of several confusions in this field is the godfather, so to speak, of analytic philosophy, Frantz Brentano. Given several difficulties he encountered in a standard theory of truth, he found himself forced to admit an analogy between correct and good judgements in an emotive framework:

> There is a very close connection between the correctness and incorrectness of emotions, on the one hand, and *goodness* and *badness* on the other. For to say of an object that it is *good*, Brentano suggests, is to say that it is *correct to love* that object, and to say of an object that it is *bad* is to say that it is *correct to hate* that object." (Chisholm 1966, 396)

This move was quite an interesting way of putting emotions into the realm of rationality, and even though genuine conceptual work on emotions was not done, one can see here a desirable step towards something that was going to be called, in 1963, the "space of reasons" (Sellars 1956). Nevertheless, it launched an interest in theories dealing with morality on one hand, and with moral psychology on the other. They were based on a common-sense psychology and they aimed at establishing moral correctness and incorrectness of emotions.

A part of moral philosophy, specifically the part known as virtue ethics, took the direction remotely reminiscent of the one suggested by Brentano. It thus considers the role of emotions in our moral life first as they are supposedly fundamentally different from reason. If, in virtue ethics, emotions are considered as a legitimate part of us, it is so mainly because they are expressions of our assumed imperfection or non-rationality, and as such constitute an argument against principle-governed moral systems. These entities must thus be explained, evaluated and restricted (by our faculty of continence, i.e. self-restraint). And this is precisely the "moral-psychology" conception of emotions that I am trying to address in this paper: it is wrong as far as empirical data is concerned (for instance when it opposes emotions to reason; I shall get back to that point), but it is also irrelevant for moral philosophy.

If someone wants to say that given a emotion (say, contempt) is *sometimes* permitted, it is also because she thinks that there is a more or less universal principle – "contempt is bad" – that should be undermined *via* argumentation. It seems however that the problem is to be found somewhere else: moral education does not go through a dialectic (in the Hegelian sense) of moral principles, and thus nothing needs to be undermined. Learning about emotions is equivalent to acquiring a "second nature", a *Bildung*, in the Aristotelian and McDowellian sense. Wittgenstein asks once (1980,

§ 20) about where our concept of thought comes from, and where did we find the verb "to think" that we analyse (or any other psychological term of the kind; emotions seem to be in the game). The use we make of all these words is not clear, adds Wittgenstein, and then one should get rid of the illusion that there is an unambiguous account to be given here. Some terms became important to us in a quite indefinite way, and then we think that their importance is going to receive a proper light through a psychological investigation[1]. We think that psychological terms become more clear thanks to a deeper analysis, also because we feel that their passage from ordinary and vague language to the psychological one is analogous to the passage of ordinary medical terms to those of medical sciences. There are however some reasons to think that this analogy is misleading. Terms we qualify as "psychological" are, in the context that became interesting for us, vague and it can only be misleading to claim the contrary (cf. Rosat 2001).

Aristotle, in his work on moral philosophy and on emotions, did not adopt the psychological approach we have in mind here (i.e. taxonomical and evaluative), but rather a grammatical one. For instance in his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle focuses on social and public aspects, because normative ambitions can be exerted only in this domain, which is its home-place. Emotions are thus described in terms of kinds of actions they are supposed to produce: the emotion of friendship entails "friendly feelings" (book 2, part 4), which are defined as a set of actions aiming at a friend's contentment. Other emotions, like pity or indignation, give Aristotle a chance to sketch a web of social relationships that make pity possible. If any deeper explanation is to be done, it will rather deal with objects provoking emotions, and not with emotions themselves. We are taught how the world is and how our reactions may contribute to its form, and not how our mind functions.

A similar proposal is made by Adam Smith, who, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, talks about hatred and contempt (part 3, chap. 2) without trying to define them, at least this does not seem to be his main attempt. He mainly shows how these emotions create social bonds of different kinds. Thus, say, the contempt we "conceive" for someone puts ourselves into a position of not wanting, or even dreading, to be a subject of such an emotion from someone else. We thus reject, let's say morally, anything that might make us close to people we despise. This is not a psychological statement, but the one about how the word "contempt" is meaningful to us.

Emotions are constitutive of what we are; they help to recognize the relevancy of considered questions. They are not to be opposed to reason, because often they simply underline cognitive responses, making them more explicit. And even if they are sometimes indeed *irrational* (see Parrott 1995), this is just as unsurprising as the fact that what we say is sometimes false. Emotional responses are rational, since rationality is not a faculty of thought opposed to irrationality, but simply an expression quite synonymous with "thinking". Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, misleadingly qualifies emotions as entities that influence our judgements, as if *judgements* – the kind of judgements we deal with in ethics – could have been neutral.

Aristotle and Smith did not seem to give any essential psychological definition to emotions, did not treat them as a "natural kind". They seem precisely to avoid most of the accusations put forward by Paul E. Griffiths (1997, 2004), and there are, just as he wants them to be, both investigative and normative kinds. Just as in psychology,

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[1]. Our target here is not exactly the same as Wittgenstein's: he criticised a kind of psychology popular in his time.

according to Griffiths, emotions do not constitute a body of entities with distinctive and relevant features; in moral philosophy there is no place and no need for a definitive taxonomy of emotions.

David Hume is right in claiming that morality is often "more properly felt than judged" (*Treatise*, book III, part II, sect. 2), but he is wrong in separating what is felt from reason, and from the tight relationship it has with the capacity to judge. The visceral morally flavoured reaction we might have towards something can be easily modified or annulled by some supplementary information about the situation we observe. On the other hand, something that does not raise our morally disposed eyebrows immediately, can become blameable once more data is presented. Indeed, Hume underlines that we do not infer the sense of virtue, but we experience it without looking for further causes, the sense of virtue *is* a deep feeling of satisfaction. Nevertheless, it seems that even though that might be perfectly the case and this description corresponds undeniably to some of our experiences, it cannot be generalised to all morality: some position-takings that we would call 'moral' are properly inferred from the information that is entirely indifferent to the judging person. Moreover, since a satisfaction accompanies a successful mathematical proof, it is then clear that to have a particular emotion as a reaction to something does not mean leaving the sphere of reason and entering into the irrational realm of the emotions; these two are not usually in contradiction.

It was suggested before that what can be said about emotions in philosophy is importantly analogous to what can be said about language. And having accepted that statement, it seems particularity interesting to quote here Dan Sperber (2006), who emphasises, and it is not difficult to find here the echo of Wittgenstein's ideas, that even though representations of linguistic type play "an essential role in human cognition and communication" (Wittgenstein would say: "paradigmatic role"), we should not assume "that all representations are of that type". Representation as it is interesting here is "whatever has meaning or content". Sperber gives to the notion of representation a non-technical – albeit crucial – role in his theory; this notion is not only more intuitive but also much less restrictive and thus handier. He denies then that it might presuppose an internal structure or even language-based articulation. Cognitive causal chains, both social and cultural, define, according to Sperber, our "interiority", which is in the first place supposed to be able to respond in an intelligible way to external stimuli. The phenomenon of cultural stability is to be explained, among others, in terms of preservation of those causal chains. They are preserved not by simple imitation, but by a crucial feature of *seeing the relevance* of the process that is observed. Once the agent understands why something has value, he makes efforts to reconstruct it. This understanding depends on what he observed around him in public, and not in the internal or psychological sphere.

Second Thoughts

Quite frequently, a surface-conception of language, emotions or ethics is opposed to a scientific and naturalistic explanation. Nevertheless, our postulate "without psychology" applies mainly to philosophers and to moral philosophers; properly scientific work on emotions is hugely informative to anyone. There has been a very revealing misunderstanding in those two approaches to emotions. The following remarks serve first to illustrate a classical evolutionary reading of feelings and emotions, and then show how it can be criticised from philosophical – "Wittgensteinian" – point of view.

Evolutionary studies and cognitive neurology propose a detailed analysis of the role that emotions play in our life as a species. For Antonio Damasio, basic emotions are disgust, fear, happiness, sadness or shame, which, as quasi-automatic reactions, evolve into more sophisticated versions. Some of them do not seem to be particularly interesting from either a communicational or moral point of view. According to Damasio, in the pair constituted by feelings and emotions, the former are not somehow prior and basic, and their true nature is not to be discovered by an appeal to their deeper aspects: "before any other thing, we have emotions and only then the feelings, because evolution promoted first of all emotions, and then feelings. Emotions are shaped out of simple reactions that favour survival of the organism" (Damasio, 2003, 34). Emotions function in the first place in an automatic way, and here again they recall the way we use some aspects of our language. Rules we could discern in emotion-reactions are just as embedded in conditions of their intelligibility, in their structure, as the rules of our language. This automatic knowledge that is constitutive for both domains is obviously not the only one we can have of them, and the way we live with them is in no way automatic. Emotions are much more sophisticated than they were a hundred thousands years ago. Just as our language evolved from some basic 'oinking', i.e. the noises our ancestors made in order to communicate, to Julian Barnes' writings, emotions evolved from automatic reactions to a more sophisticated form of building our relations with other people.

Damasio's conception of emotions, unsurprisingly, did not provoke an unanimously positive reaction. Peter Hacker and Maxwell Bennett in particular accuse him of making conceptual confusions when he suggests that emotion "is a somatic change caused by a thought". Emotion, they say without any doubt inspired by Wittgenstein, is thus not a thought that causes anything, but the object encountered.

Hacker and Bennett argue that since emotions belong to everyday language, it is simply wrong to suggest that "learning the meaning of emotion words, and hence learning how to use them, would be a matter of learning the names of complexes of bodily changes with specific causes" (2003, p. 213). This is, I think, what might be called the "Wittgensteinian fallacy", since different forms of this view are very popular in literature: Since something belongs above all to ordinary language, one is not able to say anything interesting about it unless one says it in the framework of ordinary knowledge. Thus all scientific accounts either of "ordinary objects" or of what ordinarily happens to us are irrelevant, some Wittgensteinians would say. Nothing is thus to be said about the rainbow since unweaving it, as Newton did, does not tell us about how the rainbow is important to us by corresponding to our life-experience of rainbow, and nothing can be said of the neuronal basis of what are called emotions, since we risk leaving the language game we are in.

Our efforts to stay on the surface of emotions while dealing with them might be understood as going in the same direction as Bennett's and Hacker's work. It is however not the case. We believe that there is a legitimate (and huge) place for evolutionary explanations of what we call emotions, also in morals. These explanations should puzzle philosophers (if they are not puzzled already). Looking on the social surface of the things does not prevent us from knowing their natural history and biological functions. We are aware of these evolutionary and neural functions of emotions; this awareness changes our data, just as developing knowledge of the plurality of systems of values and beliefs constituted a challenge for moral philosophy. Nevertheless, moral philosophy should be able to give a different kind of account of emotions, and instead of trying to provide both explanation and moral permission for some of them, it should take seriously the idea that emotions are a

social tool being a form of language. The character of this account is still unclear at this point. It is nevertheless certain that its relevancy must be specific to the needs of the moral philosophy of language.

Philosophical Understanding of Grammar

Since, as I am trying to show, there is something to say about emotions from a philosophical point of view that concentrates on the role they play in our life, and this role is basically exerted in the social field, we need to take seriously this role and make it a legitimate subject, that is to say not a mere consequence of evolution and the capacity to adapt. We have said that simple evaluation of emotions, which results in saying that some of them are permitted, and some are not in certain contexts, no matter how fine our descriptions, is not the step that should be taken in the first place. Since they are not "natural kinds", we will never be able to identify a bunch of properties of everyone of them: they are differently motivated and of various relevancies in different contexts. This is one of the reasons why it is not quite right to say that emotions are either to be avoided or to be promoted, as if there was something that we should avoid or should be attracted to. This is also why I think that the role of a philosopher is to provide a grammatical investigation, or even a grammar, of the subject he deals with. Obviously, I am not the first one to argue in favour of this point; still, I am worried by the fact that the notion of grammar here was not made clear. I shall then develop it here.

There were some attempts to show or at least to suggest that an ultimate appeal to grammar as explanation makes of grammar a metaphysically privileged institution. When we say "this problem is due to a grammatical confusion" (and some of us do it quite often), we commit ourselves metaphysically, and, why not, ontologically. This argument was already raised in some criticisms of the last paragraph of Hume's *Inquiry* and last sections of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*: you pretend that no metaphysic is either needed or engaged in what is to be said, whereas your statements are deeply metaphysical – you just change one fundamental transcendence to another. Although this question deserves a further explanation, I shall adopt it here without specific argument the idea that grammatical commitment is a methodological one, and does not involve any foundationalist ambitions.

The work proposed by the most influential philosophers working on grammar, Rudolf Carnap and Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz, was defined as a research of method for verifying the syntactic connection of expressions, *i. e.* the conditions under which an expression is meaningful. It goes through the determination of syntactic categories of language and it shows how to analyse the structure of a phrase in order to see whether it is, or is not, meaningful. If we wanted to follow this direction, we would have to admit that the grammar of emotions is a set of rules for well formed exchanges of emotional information (cf. Sloman 1982). This formal way is however not the one we would like to take, given our interest in moral philosophy.

Many authors indicate that grammar in Wittgenstein's sense deals with the way the language is used, but often little is said about the nature of this deal. Wittgenstein himself says that "[g]rammar does not tell us how language must be constructed in order to fulfil its purpose, in order to have such-and-such an effect on human beings. It only describes and in no way explains the use of signs" (2001, § 496). This gives us some hints about his conception, and it is valuable in that it underlines the secondary role of grammatical investigation: grammar-talk is possible, because there is already an understanding.

Natural language has its rules of sense, and this is what we would like to call its grammar. It codifies the existing practices, but is also able to contribute to language-learning. This contribution should not be understood as merely giving rules but providing relevant examples of use. Grammar books, both for native speakers and for foreigners, contain examples dealing with salient and/or problematic features of grammar. Learning here goes through, so to speak, "living the adventure" of a linguistic riddle. We must understand a sentence in a given context and take it seriously in order to solve the puzzle. This enables us to become aware of what makes this sentence problematic and, if our memory cooperates, we get a mastery of a given part of the language. We understand that if we fail to make some tiny distinctions explicit, we might be misunderstood (think of endings of words, conjugation, etc).

Philosophical grammar somehow works closely to grammars of our natural languages. It does not deal with basic problems of understanding sentences, but tries to make us sensitive to distinctions that should be made in understanding what language *does*. This grammar is more complex, since it engages our life, which is a framework for language and which is also defined by it. It does not deal with formal correctness, but with success in communication. Still, this success would be impossible if there were no more or less clear shared patterns for language users. It must be underlined that grammar does not want to propose a complete account of what might happen in language, in the same way that explanations of the rules of chess do not exhaust all possible moves.

The grammar of emotions should then be sketched upon those two latter versions, the one of natural language and the one of philosophy. To learn how emotions function however engages even more features than all that we have just mentioned. Some authors (Cora Diamond, Martha Nussbaum or Stanley Cavell) advocate that this grammar is presented in movies and novels of fiction. I think though that none of these authors explicitly used the term "grammar" in this context. Having then some mastery of the concept of emotion, we can improve our understanding of its grammar by participation or observation of emotion-involving events around us, and by gradually forming our general awareness.

One might want to say that it is an illusion to think that a philosopher is able to offer anything that would be something more than just an expression of his own positions, and, since his discourse is necessarily normative, moral authority is then something that justifies what he says. Well, it seems that a philosopher, with a synoptic view of the ways we use our language, has developed a skill I shall want to qualify as grammar-competence. There is no need to insist on the role the philosophy of language played in the last century. But is it not the case that language as it was studied by mainly English-speaking, but also Austrian and Polish philosophers, is something much more abstract and thus easy to make objective than thoughts about emotions, which are necessarily deeper and much more complex than uttered phrases? Should a philosopher, in the face of psychologists, "feel as if [he] had to repair a torn spider's web with [his] fingers" (Wittgenstein, 2001, § 106)?

Case Study: Contempt

In order to illustrate what I am trying to say about the difference between the grammatical and psychological treatment of emotions I would like to say something about one of them. I am inspired here by the example chosen by Maximilian de Gaynesford, who offers a beautiful account of contempt, one of the least studied emotions. He thinks that moral psychology failed to say anything really interesting

about it, and it seems to be treated "with the aversion and distaste characteristic of the attitude itself" (2006, § 3). What kind of interest might moral psychology accord to contempt? De Gaynesford starts by asking:

> What *is* contempt: an act, or an episode, an attitude or an agitation? Is it an emotion, a character trait, or a judgement? How does it differ from derision, ridicule, scorn, or loathing? Must it involve disdain, hauteur or pride? Is it possible without insolence, conceit or superiority? How does it differ from disrespect, disregard, disgust or indifference? Can one be truly averse to what one holds in contempt; can one mock, despise or disparage what causes aversion? (de Gaynesford 2006, § 2)

Those questions are certainly interesting as such. It is however hard to see how they can contribute to the study of ethics. I do not think that de Gaynesford is trying here to look for some definitive distinctions and apply them within a moral theory. In his paper, he gives a number of examples from fiction, where contempt is shown in different contexts and with different meanings. He certainly opposes some preconceived ideas, as the one that contempt is intrinsically condemnable. But he does not propose a positive contribution (this is not a critical remark, quite the contrary) to moral psychology. He gives a wide account of what contempt might be and criticises simplified conceptions that this discipline might have adopted. My reading of his initial regret that moral psychology failed to say anything interesting about contempt is not: "well, it is only now that we are aware of what it really is", but "its moralising labels prevented it from seeing the complexity of this issue, or of these issues". And here, the philosopher's role is perfectly fulfilled: he elucidated and made disappear a pseudo-problem ("is contempt good or bad?").

This then is what a grammatical consideration of contempt looks like. In the case of emotions, we should get rid of the natural tendency in moral philosophy to condemn or to praise some of them. We should just describe carefully some relevant and/or problematic instantiations, and this description should make obvious what is being done by a given emotion. The description possesses its own normativity; it reveals the conditions of success. As it was suggested, literature is a great source of this kind of grammatical example. Zbigniew Herbert, in his *Envoy of Mr Cogito* (1983), gives a perfect illustration of the use of contempt: scorn (in this translation) is presented as a public action, a response that should be given to revolting attitudes and actions. It is not about how one should feel, but how one should manifest one's attitude, what one should do in order to be a part of community Herbert would appreciate.

> and let your helpless Anger be like the sea
> whenever you hear the voice of the insulted and beaten
>
> let your sister Scorn not leave you
> for the informers executioners cowards - they will win

What this grammar aims at is not a formation of someone who expresses his emotions correctly (although that might be one of the possible consequences of it, in case studies, etc.). The thing that is to be learnt here is the ability to ask relevant questions, to recognize the limits of analysis, to get to see that the fact that we do not have all the information means that we lack some of it. The grammar of emotions,

unlike the grammar of Sanskrit, would not give the basic and relatively exhaustive information about it: the code of emotions is our mother language and its bases are learned in context, i.e. in particular situations.

Grammatical investigation is not an investigation of the meaning of terms designing emotions (which tends in this particular case towards psychology) but in their practical aspect of success in communication. And since emotions can often themselves be moral judgements (to say that they are *expressions* of moral judgments introduces already a mediation, whereas sometimes there is nothing between *emotion* and *judgement*, even though there can be something in addition), we can either describe it (cf. Wittgenstein 2001, § 109) or, if we are authoritative enough, tell whether they are right or wrong. The authority that would be required for such a prescription is a past ideal, I am afraid (my worry should not be understood as a regret). We are thus left with a description, and its particular normativity known from grammar. One of the consequences of those statements is a difficulty of conceiving the very possibility, let alone legitimacy, of moral psychology. In this sense, the grammar of emotions as entities that go beyond language must deal not only with semantic and pragmatics, but also with praxiology (cf. Vernant 1997 & forthcoming).

Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to say that there is a way of proposing a "surface treatment" of the problem of emotions in moral philosophy, without engaging in uninformed psychology but also without excluding a naturalistic account of this socio-biological phenomenon. The main points of my paper, namely the analysis of the notion of grammar in the philosophy of language and the application of this notion to understand emotions as a form of language, are to be understood within the naturalistic framework. What I am trying to oppose are taxonomical ambitions of several moral philosophers when they do psychology; nevertheless, all I can positively propose is a criticism of it and some general remarks about the framework of what emotions mean to us as far as moral philosophy is concerned. Indeed, I do not think that there is genuine theoretical work to do here; still, it does not mean that our grammatical investigation is over, since this work certainly contains points to discuss and plain errors.

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