

Emotions, Actions, and Self-Esteem

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An assumption behind Solomon's suggestive essay goes like this: Something is *descriptively rational* for a person only if it is appropriate to evaluate it in the course of evaluating the rationality of the person. Thus, *a* is descriptively rational for Jones only if it is either true or false (and not somehow misguided to say) that *a*'s happening contributes to Jones's rationality-quotient. Actions performed by Jones and Jones's judgments contribute to his rationality, or lack of it, whereas Jones's seeing turnips where there are turnips to be seen and Jones's having grown to a height of less than twenty feet do not. What is descriptively rational for Jones is what Jones can bring about and can refrain from bringing about. What is not descriptively rational for Jones are the things that just happen to him. Things that one does may be labeled "rational" or "irrational"; these predicates do not apply to what simply befalls one. Something is descriptively rational if it is *voluntary* and *purposive* in the way that actions are. (This way, whatever it is, does not involve always having a volition or specific purpose in mind precedent to the performance of an action.) Something is descriptively rational if it is the sort of thing one *chooses* in any of the various ways one chooses one's actions. What is descriptively rational may be *evaluatively rational* or *irrational*. Something is evaluatively rational if it serves as a relatively efficient means to some specified and aimed at end. Thus, it is evaluatively rational for Jones to work out daily if he wishes to keep his weight down, but evaluatively irrational of him to eat eight doughnuts daily in the service of remaining trim, even though both courses of action are descriptively rational. Judgments may be counted evaluatively rational or irrational on analogous grounds. The assumption under discussion, then, may be summed up, perhaps not too misleadingly—

- (1) It is doings that are rational or irrational.

The point of doings is to change the world somehow; through action we bring things about or prevent their happening. If emotions are doings, then they too aim at transforming the world, and their rationality will be evaluated in terms of how well they bring off the trans-

formations at which they are aimed. The world includes everything that there is except me, me, and how I understand what there is to understand. Solomon calls this last component of ontology, my "surreality." Emotions by and large are aimed at transforming my surreality; they are aimed at changing how I understand me and the rest of the world. Often, I am "driven" to seek such a change because I need some change, and I cannot change what is "outside." Trying to change my surreality under such circumstances is often a "desperation move" and like all such gambles, it is likely to fail. Perhaps, suggests Solomon, this high failure rate is one reason the emotions strike us as irrational and dangerous. ("What would you expect," says Solomon, "from men in difficult straits?") In any case, the rationality of given emotional experiences would be evaluated in terms of their specified aims. Something general could be said only if all (or many) emotions were means to the same end. Solomon believes that all emotions are means to a single end, and he suggests that they all aim at the enhancement of the self-esteem of the emotion-haver.

I do not have much to say about emotion and self-esteem. The claim strikes me as implausible on its face. Why, for example, should we believe that when I feel *gratitude* I am trying to improve my self-image? Solomon might say, "Well, feeling gratitude does give you an opportunity to see yourself as passively receiving gifts from another—like the Christ-child." But even if one does have this sort of view of oneself in gratitude, is that the reason why one in fact feels grateful? And do we always have this view of ourselves? I am not sure how the person who sees himself as having received irresistible grace will be able thereby to improve his self-image, and yet he might feel grateful. Finally, I suspect that when Solomon works out this thesis in detail, he will have many of the same problems which beset the philosophical defenses of psychological egoism. But this is only a suspicion.

I would like to concentrate elsewhere. Central to Solomon's case is

(2) Emotions are doings.

If (2) can be established, then (2) and (1) together, soundly entail

(3) Emotions are descriptively rational.

It is (2) I shall worry about. I do not think that Solomon has established it, and the arguments I suspect he has in mind need exploring. Along the way I shall indicate some reasons for thinking (2) doubtful. At the end, I will try to sketch one point about the relation between (3), on the one hand, assuming its truth, and our using our emotions to enhance our self-esteem, on the other. The point is that the two are inconsistent.

Solomon, I think, has at least three arguments in mind for (2).

Argument, the first

(4) Emotions are a type of judgment.

(5) Judgments are descriptively rational because they are doings.

So, (2).

Argument, the second

(6) Emotions are legitimately criticizable.

(7) Only doings are criticizable.

So, (2).

Argument, the third

(8) If a person has certain beliefs and wants, then there are emotions which it is unintelligible for him to have.

(9) Only doings are intelligible or unintelligible.

So, (2).

Discussion of the First Argument. The controversial premise here is (4). Solomon has argued for that premise elsewhere, and I shall not review his arguments here. What he has certainly shown is that an agent's having some emotion is logically connected to his having made some judgment. For example, Solomon thinks that I can be angry only if I believe that I have been wronged. Now, I agree with the general point, but I think that the narrower point is wrong: surely I can be angered by believing that I have been damaged, although not wronged. I am inclined to think that I am angered whenever I believe *that things are not going my way*. The general point linking emotions and judgments logically remains intact. This truth, however, does not show that emotions are identical to judgments, which is what Solomon believes, or that judgments are part of emotions, which is what he has to believe. Might it not be that having an emotion entails having made some judgment and that be the end of the matter? Why must the judgmental character of a judgment which must accompany the having of a certain emotion accrue to the having of the emotion itself? I see no clear answers to these questions and for that reason I allege that Solomon's arguments for (4) are not yet persuasive. Notice that even if a judgment and an emotion always go together, it does not follow that the two are the same, or that one is part of the other, or even that the two are of the same ontological kind. Thus, I am inclined to think that being angry and judging *that things are not going my way* are invariably correlated and perhaps for conceptual reasons. But it does not follow that being angry just is that judgment, or part of it, or any judgment at all. Why would one believe such a thing? I suspect that one could have been persuaded by the following:

Argument, another

(10) Emotions are feelings, or they are judgments.

(11) Emotions are not feelings.

So, (4).

I do not think one should be persuaded by this argument. I see no reason to believe (10). Emotions are very complicated, even complicated ontologically: sometimes “anger” names a feeling, sometimes it names a disposition, sometimes it names a tone of consciousness, and—yes—maybe it even sometimes names a judgment. Perhaps *emotion* is not a univocal category for analyzing consciousness. I can see no reason why it has to be.

Discussion of the Second Argument. (6) is the crucial premise of this argument, and it surely is true that we sometimes say that our emotions, like anger, are justified or unjustified. (Curiously, I have heard anger called “stupid,” but never “brilliant.”) Does the fact of such discourse prove (6)? I do not think so. First, a fair fraction of such discourse is really directed to the expression of the anger (or other relevant emotion) and not the having of the emotion itself. “It was stupid of you to have gotten mad over that” is really often a point about the overt actions the *you* performed and not about *you’s* anger. If the *you* had gotten angry and had “kept it inside,” then chances are the “It was stupid” remark would never have been made, never have been thought, and wouldn’t even be true. Surely getting angry and flying off the handle are closely related, perhaps even criterially close. Because of this fact, it is often convenient to criticize one, the movement, by metonymistically criticizing the other, the spring. Now, I cannot prove that criticism of one is always criticism of the other. I can say that I have never heard anyone criticize another’s anger (or any other emotion) where there was no overt, disapproved-of action. And, I have frequently heard people say that they were really criticizing the external behavior when they spoke of the emotion. These facts cast some doubt on any inference from common critical practice to the conceptual nature of having emotions. They do not, of course, prove that emotions are not susceptible to criticism.

As I said, I cannot prove this, but I might (and this is the second point) be able to sketch an alternative account of why it is that people think that their emotions (like anger) are sometimes unjustifiable. When I get angry at someone, I often have fantasies in which I damage them. I do not know anyone who doesn’t. These fantasies are pretty nearly inevitable once I get angry. In these fantasies I perform actions in which people suffer. I tend to feel guilty for these fantasied actions,

and when I am feeling very powerful, I sometimes fear that my fantasies will magically have an impact on the object of my anger. I also do not like the fact that I want to do these things to another person, even if only in fantasy. All of this stems directly and is locked together with my getting angry. And yet my fantasy constructions appear to be voluntary; after all, it is a fully conscious I who concocts them, narrates them, and even tinkers around with their plots. But if the fantasies are voluntary, and they are locked together with the emotions, then surely the emotions must be voluntary as well. If the fantasies are unjustifiable, then so must be the emotions. I do not think the fantasies are voluntary, although the content of them (within certain limits) is, as is how we feel about them; and furthermore, the inevitability-linkage between the emotion and the fantasy is not of the sort that will make the emotion voluntary if the fantasy is.

It is true that some emotions are purposive. Someone who leads a fairly pedestrian life, for example, might feel substantial anxiety, and he might feel this anxiety in order to feel as if he were in dangerous circumstances in order that his life might seem to him more interesting and exciting. But this fact does not prove that all emotions are purposive, or voluntary, or like adopted strategems. Some emotions may, rather, come upon us, as an overload comes on a machine, and short us out, like the machine.

Finally, it is not true that all criticisms of emotions imply that emotions are doings. If it is pointed out to me that my being angry at so and so is unprofitable, I might acknowledge the truth of this claim and try to rid myself of the undesirable emotion, or the disposition to have it. Neither the justice of the observation nor my manipulating my feeling-life implies that my having the emotion is a doing. It may be unprofitable for me to be in pain, but it does not follow that my pain is a doing. Further, bringing it about that some emotion of mine subsides may imply that I perform some action or cultivate some sensibility, but it does not imply that the eliminable emotion is itself an action.

Discussion of the Third Argument. Here the problematic premise is (9). We certainly do say that we understand how someone could feel a given way; we rule out accounts of the lives of our friends on the grounds that this person just couldn't feel that way; and we sometimes evaluate fictional characters as convincing or unconvincing on the grounds of what is said about how their emotional lives. But how do we get to (9)? Suppose something were intelligible to me only if I could place it in a rational context, that is, a context in which a rational agent embraces the something, given already a background of his be-

liefs, wants, and so on. Thus, an action would be intelligible to me only if I could “see” a rational agent performing it against the background of his antecedent beliefs and wants. And a belief is intelligible for me only if I can “see” a rational agent asserting it against the background of his antecedent beliefs and wants. But some emotions are intelligible for an agent in a circumstance, and some are not. Perhaps for an emotion in someone to be intelligible to me, I must be able to “see” that person embrace that emotion, given a certain background. This argument as it stands will not do, for there is another sense of “intelligible,” namely *logical possibility*, in the broad, conceptual, sense. For the having of an emotion to be unintelligible, sometimes all that is required is logical impossibility.

(9) might also be supported this way:

Argument, yet another (almost valid)

(12) Something is descriptively intelligible only if it has a logic.

(13) Something has a logic only if it has a propositional structure.

(14) Something has a propositional structure only if it has a judgment as a part.

(15) But, (5).

So, (9).

Isn't (14) suspect, though? Propositional structures, whatever they are, are not anything like doings and, hence, not like judgments. And (13)! Is it really so obviously true? Clearly it is very nearly a Dogma of Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition. Still, (12)–(15) is an intriguing argument; deeply underlying it, I suspect, is some theory connecting logics (and what have logics), on the one hand, with propositions, inferences, and truth on the other. (Indeed, how else could emotions and judgments be *logically* connected? one might ask.)

In conclusion, I would like to raise one last issue. Suppose Solomon is right that emotions are descriptively rational, that they are means to the end of enhancing our self-esteem, and that my purpose in having this or that emotion is that enhancement. He is right, and I choose my emotions as (usually, last-ditch) means for improving or maintaining my self-image. Could my having this or that emotion *ever* be evaluatively rational, given the reason they are all descriptively rational? Surely, if I choose my emotion, then at some level of intuitive, pre-reflective awareness, I know that I have chosen my emotion, and I know why I have chosen it. But if I know why I have chosen it, then I know that I have chosen just this emotion as a method of augmenting my self-respect. But given what I know, how could I really increase my esteem of myself? Surely, I esteem myself for approbrious performances

and omissions in reality, not surreality. Indeed, if I know that I am substituting transformations of surreality for transformations of reality, will not my self-esteem decline rather than rise? If so, then must we not always evaluate emotions negatively? Must not they all be disruptive, stupid, counter-productive, and ridiculous?