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Emotions & Judgments

A critique of Solomon

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ABSTRACT

The idea that we are passive victims of our emotions, that they are wild and uncontrollable things which just happen to (or "in") us is very common. Robert Solomon thinks that this idea stems from a faulty philosophical analysis: the analysis that emotions are a kind of "feeling" or physiological happening. On this analysis, "feelings" and occurrences are externally caused; as such they are non-rational and involuntary, the types of things that we cannot be held responsible for. In his seminal article "Emotions and Choice," Solomon opposes this view. He wants to show that we can be held accountable for our emotions, even praised or blamed for having them. To achieve this end, he shows that emotions are rational events, and hence are importantly conceptual events. Taken to its logical conclusion, Solomon proposes that emotions are judgments. That explains, in a way in which the traditional view can't explain, why emotions are subject to rational control and conscious manipulation, and therefore why we can rightly be held accountable for them.

In this thesis I agree with Solomon that the intentionality of emotions cannot be accounted for by a "Components" model. What I don't agree with is that emotions are inferior judgments. If emotions really are a species of judgment (and I see no reason why the reverse might not be true, that judgments are a kind of emotion), then Solomon has given no adequate reason for his implicit view that emotions are inferior judgments. When we look more closely at Solomon's view of judgments, we see that he wobbles between a non-componential and a componential analysis. Since it is his thesis that emotions are importantly non-componential, and that emotions are judgments, this wobbliness jeopardises Solomon's entire philosophical project.

After examining the second half of "Emotions and Choice", I conclude that Solomon's strongest reason for thinking emotions are inferior judgments

really has nothing to do with the nature of judgments at all. It is because ⁱⁱⁱ he is covertly, and maybe unwittingly, holding a view of emotions as self-deceptions.

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INTRODUCTION

"Struck by jealousy", "driven by anger", "plagued by remorse", "paralysed by fear", "felled by shame", like "the prick of Cupid's arrow", are all symptomatic metaphors betraying a faulty philosophical analysis."¹

A prevailing view of emotions is that they are wild and uncontrollable, and that their occurrence is unintentional and involuntary. In everyday discourse, we speak of being "swept away" by emotions. We talk of those who let their emotions "get the best of them", of times when we are "under the influence" of our emotion. When we speak in these terms, we are expressing a view of the emotions as being **beyond** rationality.

This is possibly a legacy of the Freudian view of emotions which made them out to be overwhelmingly potent, non-rational forces which lurked below or beyond the rational mind. As such, emotions were not thought to readily submit either to rational analysis or to conscious manipulation. In opposition to such powerful forces, man's conscious ego, his rational self, was seen as a frail and fragile opponent.

This picture of emotions as "happening to (or "in") us" has consequences for our understanding of accountability and individual responsibility. Although we are generally required to attempt to control emotional expression (to "get a

¹ p251 "Emotions and Choice," Robert Soloman, 1980 in "Explaining Emotions" by Amelie Rorty

grip" on ourselves or "stop feeling sorry" for ourselves), our emotions are² traditionally conceptualized as resisting our attempts to do so. If emotions are "occurrences" which we but helplessly observe, then rational analysis and conscious manipulation of them is severely challenged. And so is our responsibility for them, for we cannot be held accountable for things which merely happen to us. This is the view that Robert Soloman is objecting to in his article "Emotions and Choice".

A second reason Soloman has for writing "Emotions and Choice" is a reaction against the now classic account of the intentionality of emotions suggested by Anthony Kenny in his **Action, Emotion and Will**. Kenny proposes that emotions are a species of "feelings," and then is forced to face the problem of how such feelings can be "about" the things emotions are so obviously about. (In contradistinction from other feelings which are only occurrences, Kenny wants to construct a story of "aboutness," by assuming that emotions are a sort of a compound involving a "cognitive" component tacked on to a "feeling" component.) Unwittingly, then Kenny has thereby affirmed the traditional split between cognition and emotion. And this split between reason and emotion is what Soloman vehemently opposes.

In attacking Kenny's analysis of intentional feelings, Soloman attacks the notion that "feelings" and physiology could be "components" in an intentional relation. In the first place, Soloman tries to show how "feelings" are the wrong sorts of items to be "about" anything. In the second place, he tries to show that an intentional relation i.e. a conceptual relation, **cannot** involve two separate or separable components. Instead the intentional act and the intentional object must be "essentially correlated." Importantly, this improved account of "intentional" as involving the "essential correlation" of emotion and object, means that emotions must partake in conceptual relations in a way that mere occurrences, feelings or facts do not.

To account for the fact that emotions are intentional in this new improved sense, Soloman rejects Kenny's claim that emotions are a species of feelings

and insists that emotions are a species of judgments. He is capitalising on³ the fact that if emotions and their objects are "essentially correlated" then we necessarily have some input into those objects. They are not externally caused objects. In a very real sense, we create them. This makes Soloman think that emotions can be rational in the same way in which judgments can be rational. He is thinking that we make judgments, and that this provides an exact parallel for our making our emotions.

Unfortunately, Soloman has classed emotions as an inferior kind of judgment. Although he does not actually come out and say as much, his view of emotions is made very plain through his use of disparaging descriptions for emotions. They are as "myopic," "blind," "hasty," "rash" and the like. In addition to his argument for emotions being rational, in the sense of being non-occurrences, Soloman wants at the same time, to affirm the picture of emotions as irrational, i.e. as being "counter-productive and embarrassing to us, detours away from our aspirations and obstacles blocking our ambitions"². He is unaware that this picture of emotions as inferior judgments, must be underscored by a "components" picture of judgments. This fact jeopardises his whole attempt to advance on Kenny. Kenny, after all, had a "components" picture of emotions, and this, according to Soloman was supposed to be his Big Mistake.

The above is an account mostly of the first half of "Emotions and Choice." In the second half of Soloman's article, something very different is happening. We begin to see what is driving this picture of emotions as inferior judgments. It is his picture of emotions as "irrational. " Emotions are supposed to be typically irrational, because they are "ready candidates for self-deception." Emotions are "devious," in the sense that they hide our true, self-serving, motivations. By his examples and his theory, it now seems that Soloman agrees with Freud after all, that the true wellspring of human motivations is a seething caldron of irrational, bestial impulses, and that such

² p 264 " Emotions and Choice" (1980)

motivations often operate "deviously", i.e. outside of conscious control.⁴ Soloman agrees with Freud about these "irrational motivations," only he disagrees with Freud that such motivations are non-rational (in the sense of being caused occurrences). They are really rational, according to Soloman, in the sense of being "ours" (our cognitions, our creations).

Two consequences of this view of emotions as rational, are important to Soloman. Firstly, it allows him to think that it always makes sense, at least (as it does not for headaches, heart attacks, and hormones) to praise or blame a person for having the emotion itself. Secondly, it makes him think that emotions are accessible to our other judgments (not inaccessible to our opinions, as occurrences are). This fact can be explained by emotions themselves being judgments. Emotions, then are subject to rational control and conscious manipulation and this means that we can be held responsible for them.

Philosophically speaking, the identification of emotions as "rational" (as opposed to non-rational) is very significant. But even more important, Soloman thinks that holding this "correct" philosophical analysis will make a difference as to how we behave around our emotions, in our daily practice. Realizing philosophically that emotions are ours (our cognitions) will mean, realizing practically, that we are all the while choosing our emotions. This realization is supposed to be a self-confirming hypothesis: it will **make** emotions our choices.

In Chapter 6, I try to show how heavily Soloman is influenced by a picture of emotions as being typically irrational, devious, malicious, or uncivilized. At this point, Soloman's similarities to Freud are far more apparent than his dissimilarities. Soloman has a different explanation to Freud, for why such (unacceptable) emotions "dissolve" on contact with the conscious mind. Freud's explanation for this phenomenon was a causal one: what occurred when previously unconscious material emerged into consciousness is a kind of "catharsis of repressed emotional air bubbles". Soloman's explanation is

that emotions are "defused" by bringing them to conscious awareness because they are conceptual items and must partake in conceptual relations (such as the "pragmatic paradoxes" that have long been celebrated regarding judgments in general.) This mechanism aside, however, Soloman presents a remarkably similar picture to the Freudian one, in the sense that he has tagged emotions as unavailable to consciousness (at least he has tagged the "real" purpose of the emotion as unavailable). Indeed, not only are they unavailable to consciousness, but they are deliberately i.e.(maliciously) unavailable to consciousness, and it is supposed to be a characteristic of them that they are so unavailable! This makes me wonder whether Soloman, in adopting a story of emotions as self-deceptions, hasn't created more of a Freudian monster than he has destroyed. I would like to have explored this idea further, however, all that I was able to do in Chapter 6 was demonstrate how deeply influential this picture of the self-deception of emotions was on Soloman.

As a psychotherapist, I think Soloman's view of emotions as self-deceptive is a very strange one. It is an extremely negative view of emotions and I think that his recommendations for how we are to regard our emotions are unworkable, even destructive. Certainly to take the attitude that it always makes sense to ask "what is motivating that emotion?" would be therapeutic suicide, when what that question really means is "what kind of deviousness is operating here?" I hope very briefly in chapter 9 to indicate why I think this is wrong and present my own view of emotions as rich and valuable sources of self-disclosure.