

Book review

The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration, by Peter Goldie. 2000. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000, 265 pp., £12.99

The story of how the class of mental states that we generally refer to as ‘the emotions’ have figured in the investigations of philosophy can be told in several ways. One way of recounting that story invites us to look at the philosophical history of the emotions in terms of the relation that they have, over the course of many centuries, been described to enjoy with reason, or rationality itself. Told from this angle, the story of the emotions is one of how these mental states have appeared in philosophical examinations principally in virtue of their influence on our ability to reason and be rational. Thus, the Stoics held that philosophy, conceived as an exercise in rational deliberation, should aim to overcome the detrimental effects of the emotions. For David Hume, in turn, reason was powerless to motivate moral behaviour; our passions or moral sentiments alone being capable of motivating us to right and wrong actions. More recently, the moral theories influenced by the ascendance of logical positivism gave rise to an ‘emotivism’ in value theory, which dismissed moral and aesthetic statements as meaningless or unable to be scrutinised by traditional rational decision-procedures in virtue of being ‘mere’ expressions of emotion. All in all, the most notable feature of this line of inquiry is probably that the focus is on the power that the emotions can have over our rational thought-processes, and vice-versa. In other words, one could say that the philosophical inquiry into the relation between the emotions and rationality seems, along these lines of argumentation, to have centred around the question of who, to use J. L. Austen’s expression, ‘wears the trousers’ – the emotions or reason? And perhaps somewhat in the spirit of Hume’s famous account of reason as the ‘slave’ of the passions, the philosophical debate has had a propensity to consider the emo-

tions as tending to be the more hostile part of this 'master-slave' metaphor.

An alternative way of thinking about the emotions in relation to rationality, developed more recently, finds its starting-point in the question 'What is an emotion?' rather than in the examination of the dominance of one *relata* over the other. And indeed, the last three decades' upswing for the emotions as a philosophically fashionable concern owes much of its importance to this approach which focuses on the cognitive base of the emotions, and which is to a degree sceptical of the idea that reason alone is the source of knowledge and understanding and that the emotions simply motivate. This is not to say that the idea that reason and emotion are not to be conceived of as always at loggerheads (a conception sometimes referred to as 'the myth of the passions' or 'Descartes' error') but, rather, as complementary is entirely original. As far back as Aristotle, we find that the division between rationality and the emotions is not invariably as heavily underscored as in many other, more antagonistically flavoured, accounts. What is distinctive about more recent approaches, however, is not merely an insistence on the need for a revisionary view of the relation between the emotions and reason as an inherently hostile one, but an emphasis on the possibility of combining the affective and the cognitive aspects of emotions themselves. There are, roughly, three main schools of thought within this approach. First, there is the account, endorsed mainly by empirical psychologists, which is based on William James' idea that emotions are feelings, and, as such, are not under our rational control. Second, there is the view developed principally by Robert Solomon and Martha Nussbaum, that emotions are judgements (albeit not misguided ones like the Stoics and Spinoza would have us believe). Third, there is the theory, which has received much attention from the philosophical community lately, that the emotions are 'complex'. According to this line of argument, what is needed is to retain a theory of the emotions that allows them to be rationally assessed, yet doesn't ignore the fact that they also involve feelings. One of the main contributors to this approach is without a doubt Peter Goldie.

In *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration*, Goldie's over-arching aim is 'to deepen our everyday commonsense discourse about the phenomena' of the psychology of emotional states, where the phenomena include not only the emotions themselves, but also consciousness, traits of character, feelings, moods, interpretations of action out of emotion, expressions of

emotion, and imagination. Emotions are, according to this school of thought, ‘complex, episodic, dynamic, and structured’ (p. 5). They are complex in that they tend to involve several distinct kinds of elements, such as perceptions, thoughts, feelings, bodily changes, and dispositions (including those to behave in a certain way). Emotions are episodic and dynamic ‘in that, over time, the elements can come and go, wax and wane, depending on all sorts of factors’. And finally, emotions are structured in virtue of constituting ‘part of a narrative’ (pp. 12-13).

In the process of developing the ‘complex theory’, *The Emotions* raises – and ably discusses – five general themes. Firstly, the notion of the personal perspective, which, for Goldie, is a point of view that can be reported upon both first- and third-personally, and is to be distinguished from the impersonal stance taken by the empirical sciences (which allows for no perspective or point of view as such). Goldie’s ambition here is to show that even though the way in which we think and talk about the emotions is inevitably from the personal point of view, this features renders them neither unintelligible to other subjects of experience, nor subjective in any sense that precludes their assessment in terms of rationality.

The second theme explored throughout the book is the normativity of reasons, since it ‘is from the personal point of view that reasons, as such, come into sight, both when we are ourselves thinking, feeling, and acting, and when we are trying to understand, explain, and predict others’ thoughts, feelings and actions’ (p. 2). In Chapter 6, this idea is discussed more specifically in relation to character traits and the dispositions to have certain moods.

Thirdly, we are invited to consider how the notions of intelligibility, appropriateness and proportionality (alongside rationality) have an important role to play in the understanding and explaining of what we think, do, and feel in emotional experience. Indeed, according to Goldie – and here we find one of the central claims of the book – ‘[m]uch philosophical work on the emotions tends to over-intellectualize emotional thought, feeling, and action, seeking to force them into the mould of a rationalizing explanation when often the best one can hope for is an explanation which makes them intelligible. So far as appropriateness and proportionality are concerned, these notions have ethical dimensions which go beyond mere questions of rationality, and which allow for considerable cultural variation through the education of the emotions.’ (p.

3) Closely related to this idea is the one, examined primarily in Chapter 2, that emotional responses can be educated; that there is a conceptual tie between recognition and emotions.

The fourth recurring theme concentrates upon the place that should be ceded to feelings in the emotions. Emotions, for Goldie, are intentional in the sense of being about something specific. Thus, for example, jealousy (discussed at considerable depth in Chapter 8) or anger is always directed towards someone or something in particular. However, it is often claimed, he points out, that the intentionality of the emotions can be fully accounted for without any mention of feelings. And here lies another of Goldie's central targets, namely the so-called 'add-on view' (discussed mainly in Chapter 3). In order to find the adequate place for feelings in emotional experience, the notion of *feeling towards* is introduced, and described as an 'essentially intentional psychological phenomenon with a special sort of emotionally laden content' which essentially involves feeling and as such, is to be contrasted with bodily feelings. In this way, Goldie argues, one can retain 'what is right about the traditional view that intentionality is essential to emotion' but still bring in 'feeling in the right place, as an ineliminable part of the intentionality of emotional experience, as directed towards the world from a point of view, not merely as an afterthought.' (p. 4)

Finally, the fifth theme is the notion of narrative as something that helps us to make sense of our life. According to Goldie, our lives have a narrative structure, which is to say that 'they comprise an unfolding, structured sequence of actions, events, thoughts and feelings, related from the individual's point of view' (p. 4). Narratives help us render intelligible the various elements of emotional experience (thought, feeling, bodily change, expression, and so forth) by enabling us to see them as parts of a structured episode. Thus, '[a] true narrative, as I understand it, is not simply an interpretive framework, placed, so to speak, over a person's life; it is, rather, what that life is.' (p. 5)

Whilst *The Emotions* has already shown itself to be a modern classic in its field, it is, nevertheless, crucial to consider the theory it sets out to develop as part of a continuous project. Since its publication in 2000, Goldie has indeed persevered with his research in this area, digging deeper into many of these concerns, notably by expanding the remit of his investigation. One such relatively novel territory is the domain of moral and aesthetic value, as is evident from more recent publications

such as, for example, his ‘Narrative and Perspective: Values and Appropriate Emotions’ in *Philosophy and the Emotions*, Hatzimoysis, A. (ed.), 2003; ‘Emotion, Reason and Virtue’ in *Emotion, Evolution and Rationality*, Cruse, P. & Evans, D. (eds.), 2003; and ‘Narrative, Emotion and Perspective’ in *Imagination, Philosophy and the Arts*, Kieran, M. & McIver Lopes, D. (eds.), 2003. As is clear from their titles, these works study the way in which some of the over-riding themes of *The Emotions* play a decisive – yet hitherto largely unexplored – role in, amongst other things, moral and aesthetic understanding and knowledge, and the shaping of our evaluative sensibilities.

Another area Goldie has continued to explore since the publication of his first book on the emotions covers the topics discussed in Chapter 6 about character and the role of narrative structures in understanding personality. So, in works such as ‘Emotion, Personality and Simulation’ in *Understanding Emotions: Mind and Morals*, Goldie (ed.), 2002; *On Personality*, 2004; and ‘One’s Remembered Past: Narrative Thinking, Emotion, and the External Perspective’ in *Philosophical Papers* (2003), he furthers his inquiry into the nature and possible roles of narrative. (He even stretches out into the realm of medicine – see his forthcoming article in *Narrative Research in Health and Illness* (2004) – by exploring the role of narrative in psychiatric treatments.) Narratives, Goldie argues, can not only enable us to discern some forms of regularity or causal pattern amidst the myriad of courses of action we undertake and thought-processes we engage with on a daily basis, but also, and perhaps more importantly, tell us something about the kind of person that we are, and, in some cases, strive to be. Thinking of parts of our life (or indeed our life as a whole) in terms of a narrative structure, can, in other words, serve as an indispensable tool in understanding our emotional experiences, our reasoning practices, and the way in which the two do, or do not, coincide. By viewing the sequence of events that constitutes our life in terms of a story, so to speak, we increase our grasp of the way in which internal and external perspectives onto our lives and personalities can form an explanatory whole.

From these more recent publications, it is obvious that although the main themes of *The Emotions* remain at the forefront of his interests, some aspects of Goldie’s general approach have given way to different priorities. Most notably perhaps, we now hear much less about the place of social culture and evolution in the development of our emotional abilities, which previously occupied a considerable part of his concern (see Chap-

ter 4), in favour of a more evaluative slant to the debate. Also, Goldie has restricted the sense, partly inspired by Alistair MacIntyre, in which he takes our lives to be narratives. Rather than defending the claim that our lives *are* narratives, he currently defends the less strong claim that we can tell narratives about our lives. To use his words in the aforementioned *On Personality*, ‘the narratives that we weave about our lives can profoundly affect how we respond to our past, and how we lead our lives in the future’ (p. 117).

The recommendation that *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* is best read in conjunction with the impressive amount of work that Goldie has produced on the subject during the years that have elapsed since its publication should only serve to emphasise the philosophical importance of the approach it promotes. Thus, whilst completely capable of standing independently as a considerable academic achievement in its own right, the book is a rich source of ideas that can currently only with some difficulty be considered as restricted to the boundaries of the book itself. Assisted in his investigative task by a careful and concise style, Goldie presents the main tenets of his ‘complex theory’ of the emotions with remarkable clarity and conviction. If it is not already, this theory will most certainly very soon be viewed as capturing one of the most philosophically profound stories there are to be told about the emotions.

Elisabeth Schellekens
Dept. of Philosophy
King’s College London
Strand, London WC2R 2LS
elisabeth.schellekens@kcl.ac.uk