

# Moral emotions

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## **Abstract**

Moral emotions have been badly neglected by philosophical ethics. In my view to the detriment of this discipline because they are not only important for the moral evaluation of persons but also for value theory and thus also for a theory of morally right actions. This paper outlines my account of moral emotions. Emotions such as regret or shame are sometimes but not always moral emotions. I will determine when they (and other emotions) are moral emotions. In (I) I will deal with the views of some other authors and in (II) and (III) I will explain my own account.

Moral emotions have been badly neglected by philosophical ethics.<sup>1</sup> In my view, this has been to the detriment of this discipline because they are not only relevant for the moral evaluation of persons (we judge a person *ceteris paribus* more negatively when she is pleased about someone's harm than when she feels sorry for him),<sup>2</sup> they are also important for value theory and thus for the theory of morally right actions (to promote the happiness of others is, according to most normative ethical theories, at least *prima facie* right). However, in this paper I deal only with one problem of this broad field of research. I will neither be concerned with the issue of the essence of emotions,<sup>3</sup> nor will I attempt to define some specific moral emotions (for example, moral guilt);<sup>4</sup> and I will also not deal with the problem of how differ-

<sup>1</sup> This neglect has also been criticised e.g. by Oakley 1992, Stocker and Hegeman 1996 and Williams 1978.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Adams 1988 and Stocker and Hegeman (1996, 152-60).

<sup>3</sup> This issue has been investigated e.g. by Broad 1971, Greenspan 1993, Oakley 1992 and Warnock 1957.

<sup>4</sup> There are investigations about this e.g. from Bollnow 1962, Mees 1991 and Neblett 1981.

ent moral emotions can be distinguished from each other.<sup>5</sup> The aim of this paper is rather to answer the question: when are emotions *moral*? It is obvious that emotions such as regret or shame are not always moral emotions.<sup>6</sup> We can regret that we traveled to a certain country because it did not meet our expectations and we can be ashamed because we failed an examination. Regret and shame are sometimes moral emotions, but not always. In this article, I outline my account of moral emotions and will explain when regret and shame (and other emotions) can correctly be said to be moral emotions. This means, however, that I am not concerned with the question when emotions are morally *good* or *bad*, but with the logically prior problem when they belong to the realm of morality. To this end, I will (I) deal with the views of some other authors and in sections (II) and (III) I will explain my own view of what makes something a *moral* emotion.

## I

(1) When philosophers deal with the problem of moral emotions, they sometimes present only a list of such feelings, including especially guilt, shame, regret and indignation, and seem to think that these emotions are necessarily *moral* emotions. However, there are at least two reasons why this approach is inadequate. The first is that these feelings *can* be moral, but they are not always so. This is obvious for most alleged examples, but it is also true for *guilt*, which could most likely be claimed to be a genuine moral feeling. It is easy to see why even guilt is not necessarily a moral emotion. It is well known from psychiatry that guilt feelings are often a symptom of depression and in this context, they need not be of moral nature, but are often not more than a psychopathic symptom. This reasoning can be generalized: If an emotion is only sometimes of a moral nature, a further qualification is needed to determine when it has this quality and when not. As I will argue, my account provides this qualification. A second reason is that every list of emotions is inadequate because it contains either *too many* or *too few* items. Too many, if the items are claimed to be always of a moral nature because even the most plausible candidates for such feelings are sometimes *not* moral emotions (as just shown). Too few, if

<sup>5</sup> See to this e.g. Oakley 1992, Rawls 1993 or Taylor 1988.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. also Lewis 1993, Rawls (1993, 479-86), Schopenhauer (1977, 231) or Tugendhat (1993, 58-9).

the items on this list are claimed to be moral emotions only under certain circumstances. As I will show, *every* emotion can be moral if it has the right genesis. Anger, for example, hardly ever appears on such a list of allegedly moral emotions. But it *can* be a moral feeling, for example, if I am angry with myself for having offended someone. It seems therefore obvious that the attempt to provide a list that contains all moral emotions, and they only, is doomed to fail.

(2) Some authors seem to think that emotions can be determined through a specific *felt quality*, that is, that they can be distinguished from non-moral emotions by a special feeling.<sup>7</sup> But this approach can hardly be successful either. If a person attends a dinner and feels ashamed because he is inadequately dressed or used the wrong knife for the fish, then it will hardly be possible to distinguish his feeling *qua* feeling from the shame he may feel when he recognizes that he has become a burden to others. The former feeling of shame is clearly not a moral emotion; the latter, however, is one (provided it has the right cause). I will explain in the next section what I mean by ‘right cause’. At the moment then, it should be clear that an emotion such as shame can be a moral feeling or a non-moral one and that it is not (or at least not always) possible to distinguish between these two possibilities on the basis of the felt quality. This shows that it is not a reliable method to characterize moral emotions in this way.

(3) Other philosophers try to define moral emotions as reactions to evaluative states of others. According to this view, moral guilt, for instance, is the emotion we have when we have offended someone and (moral) joy may be the reaction to the (putative) happiness of another person.<sup>8</sup> This conception is similar to my account. It is, however, incomplete because it does not sufficiently determine *how* moral emotions must be based on evaluative states of others. It is obvious that an emotion can be a reaction to such states without being a moral emotion. For example, if I feel regret because I caused distress to someone, it is possible that I have this feeling only for the further reason that my causing his/her distress may have bad repercussions on me. In this case, the distress of the other person is only instrumentally

<sup>7</sup> It seems to me that Neblett 1981 and Stevenson (1944; 1963) have defended such a view.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Hoffman (1984, 289; 1994, 211), Mees (1991, 131) or Spiecker 1994 who, however, distinguishes two kinds of moral emotions, the ‘rule-emotions’ and the ‘altruistic emotions,’ and defends the view under discussion only for the altruistic emotions.

relevant for me, but not *as such* (intrinsically). That is, if I regret what I have done because I fear revenge, my feeling is not a moral emotion. It becomes moral only if the suffering of the other person is for me relevant *as such*. My regret is a moral emotion if it is based on the caused evil as such, but not if this evil counts for me only instrumentally. In other words, that an emotion of mine is a reaction to evaluative states of others is only a *necessary* condition for its morality; that this origin is also a *sufficient* condition requires that these evaluative states are for me relevant *as such* (as I will explain in section II).

(4) To my knowledge, however, most philosophers conceptualize moral emotions as reactions to moral judgments. According to this view, an emotion is *moral* if we have it because we believe that we have done something morally wrong or if we have not done what we believe we should have done. Similarly, when we have an emotion because we think others have done something which we (or they) regard as morally wrong or believe that they have not done what we (or they) regard as morally right. For instance, the guilt I feel is a *moral* emotion if I believe that I have done something morally wrong and I have this emotion because I believe this.<sup>9</sup>

But there are at least two arguments against this account: (1) There are moral emotions which have nothing to do with my actions or with the actions of any other person. If I learn that the child of an acquaintance has died and I *therefore* feel pity for him, my feeling can surely be called a moral emotion. But I do not have it because I (or others) have done something which I regard as morally right or wrong. His child's death came as a terrible blow to him and *this* is the reason why I feel pity for him. This means that this conception cannot provide *necessary* conditions for moral emotions because there are such emotions which are not caused in accordance with this view.

(2) The second argument shows that thinking that something right or wrong has been done is also not a *sufficient* condition for moral emotions. Let us consider some different cases: (a) A person can feel guilt because she has done what she thinks to be morally wrong. Nevertheless, her emotion need not be moral because it can be caused by her attitude towards the *terms* 'morally wrong', 'duty', 'commandment', etc. Psychological research shows that as a result of a certain

<sup>9</sup> Conceptions of this kind, which differ considerably in detail, have been defended by Broad (1985, 118-9); Hare (1992, 76); Izard (1991, 361); Montada (1993, 262-66); Rawls (1993, 523), and Tugendhat (1986, 35; 1993, 20).

upbringing (with punishment for deeds that were called morally wrong and reward for behavior that was called morally right), persons can acquire emotional reactions to the *words* ‘morally wrong’, ‘duty’, and so on.<sup>10</sup> It is, however, clear that emotions which are based on such psychological processes of conditioning are not *moral* emotions. (b) Even if a person’s emotion is caused by the putative fact that she has done something morally right or wrong, it need not be a *moral* emotion. This can be seen if we consider an ethical egoist who regards an action as morally right only if it promotes his own interests better than any of its alternatives. If this person feels regret because she thinks she has done something morally wrong (meaning that she did not promote her interests best), hardly anyone will regard her feeling as a *moral* emotion. (c) But we can even assume that a person means by ‘morally wrong’ that an action is not in accordance with one of the well-known moral principles, for instance, the Categorical Imperative, the Golden Rule, or the Utilitarian Principle. Suppose that a person is a utilitarian and feels regret because she believes that one of her actions did not maximize happiness. In this case, whether or not her feeling is a moral emotion depends on *why* this putative fact counts for her. If it is only important for her because she believes that maximizing happiness is the best strategy to earn eternal bliss, her emotion is again not a moral emotion. This reasoning can be generalized: Our emotions can be based on any moral principle; if this principle does not count for the right reason, they are nevertheless not *moral* emotions. Be it noted that both arguments against the account that moral emotions are reactions to moral judgments are independent of each other and that each one is sufficient for a refutation of this view.

As already indicated several times, on my account it is the *origin* of an emotion which makes it moral or non-moral. In the next two sections, I will explain this view.

## II

Whether or not an emotion is moral depends on its *genesis*. By ‘genesis’ I mean the factors that cause an emotion. Our feelings are often (but not always) caused by cognitive factors, for instance, our beliefs.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Eagly and Chaiken 1993.

If I believe that a friend of mine suffers from a serious disease, this belief, together with traits of my character, may cause the feeling of pity and they are thus the genesis of this emotion. The following definition of ‘moral emotion’ together with its explanation will make this point clearer.

An emotion of *S* is moral if and only if it (or at least one of its components) is based on an attitude of a being not identical with *S* which is for *S* relevant *as such*.

Unfortunately, as there is no space for a full explanation of this definition,<sup>11</sup> some remarks and an example must suffice to elucidate what I mean.

‘Attitude’ is in ethics a technical term which means in essence being *for or against* something. If we are *for* peace, we have a positive attitude towards it and if we are *against* wars, we have a negative attitude towards them.<sup>12</sup> Since I have argued elsewhere that having an attitude towards something is the same as evaluating it,<sup>13</sup> we can also say that emotions are moral only if they are based on (putative) evaluations of others. Attitudes (or evaluations) of others are *relevant* for a person if she is capable of being affected (e.g. emotionally or conatively) by her belief that they have these attitudes. That attitudes (or evaluations) are *relevant as such* means that they are relevant independently of all conditions of these attitudes and all effects which they (that is, their satisfaction or frustration) could have. That an emotion of a person is *based on* an attitude of another being means that her belief that this being has an attitude is the (explaining) reason why the person has this emotion.

Let us consider an example to illustrate this account. In the following passage, Adam Smith describes the feeling of a mother who is worried about her sick child.

<sup>11</sup> I give a more elaborate account in Spielthener (2003, 165-86).

<sup>12</sup> There are, however, many different kinds of being for or against something. Stevenson 1944 mentions e.g. purposes, aspirations, wants, preferences, desires, interests, approving, favour, ideals and aims – together with their contraries. Clarke (1985, 43) lists desire, wish, hope and being interested in something, and Nowell-Smith (1957, 99) gives also a list of attitudes. Besides the examples listed here, we could add, for example, recommendation, attraction, admiration and esteem, together with their respective contraries.

<sup>13</sup> See Spielthener (2003, 9-19).

What are the pangs of a mother, when she hears the moanings of her infant, that, during the agony of disease, cannot express what it feels? In her idea of what it suffers, she joins, to its real helplessness, her own consciousness of that helplessness, and her own terrors for the unknown consequences of its disorder; and out of all these, forms, for her own sorrow, the most complete image of misery and distress. The infant, however, feels only the uneasiness of the present instant, which can never be great. With regard to the future, it is perfectly secure, and in its thoughtlessness and want of foresight, possesses an antidote against fear and anxiety, the great tormentors of the human breast, from which reason and philosophy will in vain attempt to defend it, when it grows up to a man. (1966, p. 8)

The emotion of this mother is partly caused by the belief that her child suffers (the feared consequences are a further reason which we can ignore here). It is this genesis which makes her sorrow a moral emotion. If the child's putative suffering had for her not counted *as such*, her feeling would not have been a moral emotion. This would, for example, have been the case if the child's suffering counted for the mother only because it meant high costs for its treatment. Thus, what makes an emotion *moral* is not its object, a certain felt quality, or the belief that someone has done something morally right or wrong; it is the *genesis* of this emotion, namely its being based on an attitude (of another being) which is relevant as such. This origin distinguishes it from all other feelings and renders it a *moral* emotion.

A consequence of this origin is that moral emotions imply cognitive processes, since we have them only if we believe something about the evaluations (i.e. attitudes) of others or if other cognitive processes are involved. I do, of course, not claim that all emotions depend on cognitive processes.<sup>14</sup> However, the view that some emotions do have such an origin is not only defended by philosophers and psychologists,<sup>15</sup> it can also be made plausible by simple examples taken from everyday life. If an apparently blind beggar asks me for some money, I may feel pity for him if I believe that he is really blind. But this feeling

<sup>14</sup>That this is not the case has been shown by Izard's investigation of the disgust newborn babies can feel (see Izard, 1991, pp. 10 and 45). Also Greenspan (1993, 17-22) emphasises that not all feelings involve judgements.

<sup>15</sup>Confer, for instance, Hoffman (1994; 2000, 36-62), Lewis 1993, Oakley 1992, Smith 1966 and Stocker and Hegeman (1996, 26).

can easily change into anger if I become convinced that he has only feigned his blindness.<sup>16</sup>

### III

Most of our emotions are compounds. If I hear good news, my joy may be mixed with worry whether it is really true and the pity people feel for others is sometimes combined with contempt. In order to understand the moral nature of emotions better, it is useful to analyze them into their elements and distinguish different kinds of compound moral emotions.

Compound emotions are made up of elementary emotions. I call an emotion *elementary* if it does not consist of a mixture of different emotions. That such elementary emotions exist has also been defended by psychologists. According to C. Izard, anger, disgust, contempt, and fear belong to this category.<sup>17</sup> An elementary emotion of *S* is *moral* if and only if it is based on a putative attitude (of another being) which is for *S* relevant as such. Let us assume that *A* despises *B* because he believes that he does not meet his obligation to pay maintenance for his illegitimate child. *A*'s contempt is a *moral* emotion if he believes, for example, that the child's mother will get into trouble because of *B*'s negligence and if this putative fact is *in itself* the (explaining) reason for his contempt. In this case, *A*'s contempt is based on an attitude of another person (namely the mother's attitude towards her plight) which is for *S* relevant *as such*.

<sup>16</sup> Since moral emotions depend on cognitive processes, they can be rationally criticized. They can be judged as more or less reasonable. This view may seem strange especially for philosophers since many of them believe that all feelings are *arational* or even *irrational*. But already the above example from A. Smith indicates that the feelings of the mother were not really reasonable, among other things because she did not (or not enough) take into consideration the perspective of her child. She believed something about her child which was only badly justified. Because of this weak justification also her feelings, which were based on this belief, were less reasonable than they could have been. I will, however, not expand on this issue here because it is not essential for our present question when emotions are moral.

<sup>17</sup> See Izard (1991, 48-50).

Often, however, our emotions are a mixture of different feelings.<sup>18</sup> I call such compound emotions *ambivalent* if they include positive as well as negative feelings. Love-hate relationships are only one example of this kind of emotion. Ambivalent is also the mixture of joy and envy someone may feel if he learns about the success of a friend. If an emotion consists only of negative or only of positive components, I call it *equivalent*. Since emotions can be determined by reasons of different kinds, compound feelings can be categorized as *homogeneous* (if all their components are of the same kind) and *heterogeneous*.<sup>19</sup> Because of the logical independence of these two distinctions, we get the following four kinds of compound emotions. (For lack of space, I deal here only with compounds made up of two elementary emotions. My exposition can, however, easily be generalized to include more complicated emotions.)

(a) If a friend of mine can fulfill his longstanding wish of mountaineering in the Himalayas, I can be glad about it, but at the same time, I can also be worried that he might have an accident. The emotion of joy is a positive feeling, my worry a negative. Thus, my compound emotion is *ambivalent*. Since the origin of both its components is, *ex hypothesi*, the well-being of someone else, my emotion is *homogeneous*. It is therefore *homogeneous-ambivalent*. Emotions of this kind are *moral*, if all their elementary components are moral (in the explained sense).

(b) I could, however, also be angry with my friend (e.g. because he is going to spend his money for dangerous adventures instead of caring for his family), but nevertheless be worried about his well-being. This compound emotion would be *homogeneous* (because both its elementary feelings are based on evaluative states of someone else) and *equivalent* (because they are both negative). The feeling would thus be *homogeneous-equivalent*. Also emotions of this kind are *moral* only if all their components are moral.

(c) A thief may enjoy the things he has stolen but may at the same time feel guilty because he knows that he has hurt their owner. Joy and guilt are emotions of different valence. Thus, the emotion whose components they are is *ambivalent*. Since the thief's joy is caused by his

<sup>18</sup> Cf., for example, Broad (1971; 1985) and Harris 1993 who use in this connection the term 'mixed emotions'; see also Izard (1991, 45-8).

<sup>19</sup> Concerning the distinctions between ambivalent versus equivalent and heterogeneous versus homogeneous emotions, compare also Broad 1952.

self-interest, it is a non-moral emotion. His guilt feeling, however, is based on the attitudes of the owner. Therefore, the emotion is *heterogeneous-ambivalent*. Emotions of this kind are *moral* if they contain at least one elementary moral emotion.

It might be thought that such emotions are only moral if the component which is based on the attitudes of others *dominates* the self-regarding feeling; that is (in our example) if the thief's guilt feeling is stronger than his joy. But this would mean to confuse evaluation with classification. As has been said, I am dealing here only with the question of when an emotion belongs to the realm of morality. To be classified as *moral* in this sense, it is sufficient that a compound emotion contains at least one moral component (which must, as has been explained, be based on attitudes of others that are relevant as such). It is, however, not necessary that this moral component be stronger than the self-regarding element. The thief's emotion may be morally *bad* if his joy is stronger than his guilt. But also morally bad emotions belong to the realm of moral emotions. This means, even if the thief's joy is stronger than his guilt, he has a *moral* emotion, albeit one that is probably morally blameworthy.

(d) Let us assume that the thief has been arrested. He can then regret his deed because he has now to bear the imposed sanctions. But he can at the same time also regret it because he has disgraced his family. In this case his regret is partly based on his own interests but partly also on the interests of others. His regret is therefore a *heterogeneous* emotion. Since both components of this compound are negatively evaluated, it is *equivalent*. The thief's regret is therefore a *heterogeneous-equivalent* emotion. Also such emotions are *moral* if they contain at least one elementary moral emotion. In our example, the thief's regret is thus moral if it is at least partly influenced by thoughts about the consequences for his family (which must for him be relevant as such).

One implication of my account of moral emotions is that *any* feeling can be moral if it has the right genesis. But this seems to be contra-intuitive. Let us assume a person *A*, who appreciates the music of Béla Bartók, learns that also *B* loves the music of this Hungarian composer and that *B* rises in *A*'s esteem for this reason. *A*'s esteem is based on an attitude of *B* (his love of Bartók's music) and according to my definition, it seems therefore to be a moral emotion. But if we esteem someone for his knowledge of art, we obviously do not have a *moral* emotion. The solution to this problem (and also some similar

problems) is the *as-such* clause of the proposed definition. In the case at issue, it is not the belief that *B* loves Bartók's music *as such* which causes *A*'s esteem; it does so only together with other cognitive, conative, or affective factors. In the given example, *A*'s esteem is not based on an attitude of *B as such*, but on the fact that *B* loves a kind of music which is also appreciated by *A*. This means that *A*'s esteem is based on the congruence of their attitudes towards Bartók's music but not on an attitude of *B* which is for him relevant *as such*. To avoid misunderstandings of my account of moral emotions, it is therefore important to interpret the given definition with care.

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