

CHAPTER NINE

Mental Pictures, Imagination and Emotions

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Although cognitivism has lost some ground recently in the philosophical circles, it is still the favorite view of many scholars of the emotions.¹ According to cognitivism, emotions are not simply feelings or perceptions of physiological sensations. On the contrary, emotions, like other mental states, such as beliefs, mental pictures, desires, intentions etc., have a common characteristic: they are directed toward something or someone; they have, in other words, *intentional objects*.² The intentional object of the emotion enables us to identify the emotion as the kind of emotion it is and distinguish it from other emotions and mental states. For instance, if I characterize the object of my emotion as dangerous, then I will be able to identify the emotion as fear, or, if I think that the object of my emotion is unjust, I will be able to identify it as anger, and so on.

According to most cognitivists, emotions are essentially propositional attitudes such as evaluative beliefs, thoughts or judgments, although it is granted that they are often accompanied by feelings, physiological disturbances, etc.³ Consequently, making cognition as a necessary, and, sometimes sufficient condition of the emotion, cognitivists are able to account for the intentionality of the emotion. Cognitive states such as beliefs and judgments are essentially intentional. What is more, through the evaluative cognitions cognitivists are able to identify the emotion as the kind of emotion it is, as well as distinguish it from other emotions and mental states. For instance, what distinguishes envy from jealousy is that in the case of envy I believe or think that you have something that I want to have, whereas in the case of jealousy I believe that something or someone that should rightfully be favored and enjoyed by me is being favored and enjoyed by someone else.

Even though I agree with cognitivism's insight that emotions typically involve some type of evaluative intentional state, I shall argue that in some cases, less epistemically committed, non-propositional evaluative states such as

¹Among those who ascribe to some form of cognitivism are: Kenny (1963), Alston (1967), Taylor (1985), Lyons (1980), DeSousa (1987), Gordon (1987), Solomon (1993) and Nussbaum (2001).

²The intentionality of mental states was first captured by Franz Brentano, and then it was brought to the Analytic Tradition by Anthony Kenny. See Brentano (1973) and Kenny (1963).

³Cognitivists disagree about the role of feelings in the emotion. While some believe that they are inessential (Solomon, 1993; Nussbaum, 2001), others believe that they are necessary or constitutive components of emotion (Lyons, 1980; Taylor, 1985; Alston, 1967; Kenny, 1963).

mental pictures can do a better job in identifying the emotion, or, in providing its intentional object. In order to show this, I shall examine a case of irrational fear and a case of humiliation where the requisite identificatory beliefs are missing.¹

A Case of Irrational Fear

According to most cognitivists, to experience fear is to hold the evaluative belief, thought or judgment that the object of fear is dangerous. Such belief is supposed to provide the intentionality of fear, identify it as the kind of emotion it is, and thereby differentiate it from all other emotions and mental states. However, although this may be true in some cases of fear, often times one might be afraid without *believing, thinking or judging* that one is in danger. This is usually the case with irrational fears, where one's beliefs are at odds with one's emotion. For instance, we can imagine a situation where a perfectly rational person is afraid of a harmless spider, even though she knows that it is not dangerous. If this is the case, then one is at loss on what emotion one is feeling. For, according to most cognitivists, bodily "feelings" are inessential to emotions, and even if they do exist, they are not able to identify the emotion.² That is, a cognitivist cannot resort to the special, qualitative nature of feelings for the identification of emotion. Thus, given that in this particular case the identificatory belief of fear 'the spider is dangerous' is missing, cognitivism is unable to account for the intentionality of fear, and, as a result, it fails to identify the emotion.

A cognitivist might argue that even though the arachnophobic lacks the belief that this particular spider is dangerous, she might have other beliefs in the "region" of dangerousness of the spider. For instance, she might think that this spider resembles other truly dangerous spiders, that the present spider looks like a black widow, and black widows are dangerous spiders, etc. I do not deny that it is, of course, possible that the arachnophobic has such beliefs. However, these beliefs do not necessarily amount to the requisite belief that *this* particular spider is dangerous.

But if there is no evaluative belief that would identify the irrational fear of the spider, then perhaps evaluative beliefs (or other propositional attitudes) are not as omnipresent in emotions as most cognitivists think. Consequently, cognitivism is unable to account for the intentionality of irrational emotions,

¹Although my argument will eventually show that all cognitivist accounts that claim that emotions require evaluative propositions are deficient, for the sake of clarity and simplicity, I will suppose in my examples that the intentional propositional states necessary for the emotion are beliefs and judgments.

²Robert Solomon, in his seminal work *The Passions* (1993) has likened the role of feelings and their supposed omnipresence in emotions as the fleas 'plaguing' a dog. They are always there, but they do not form the essence of the dog! (See Solomon, p. 73.) Given that the scope of this essay is not an overall critique of all the different forms of cognitivism, I will not discuss this here. For a comprehensive critique of cognitivism please see Deigh (1994), Griffiths (1997) and Goldie (2000.)

and as a result, it cannot identify nor distinguish such emotions. How we are to understand the intentionality of irrational emotions will emerge towards the end of this essay. Now let us turn to a case of humiliation that would also show that cognitivism is insufficient in explaining some emotions.

A Case of Humiliation

Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that there is an essential belief or propositional thought involved in humiliation, namely, the belief that my situation is degrading or my status has been degraded (either in my own eyes or in the eyes of others). It can still be shown that there are cases of humiliation in which such belief is absent. Consider such a case as it is presented in James Joyce's short story 'The Dead'.¹ The protagonist, Gabriel, after spending his evening at a party given by his aunts, is now with Gretta, his wife, who is telling him about a certain boy in the gasworks who died for her sake. Gabriel, in an effort to stop her, is making ironic comments, but Gretta does not even notice his irony:

Gabriel felt humiliated by the failure of his irony and by the evocation of this figure from the dead, a boy in the gasworks. While he had been full of memories of their secret life together, full of tenderness and joy and desire, she had been comparing him in her mind with another. A shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him. He saw himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a penny-boy for his aunts, a nervous, well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealizing on his own clownish lusts, the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror (p. 216).²

What is the identificatory belief in Gabriel's humiliation? One may be tempted to say that the identificatory belief is that his status has been degraded. But Joyce nowhere tells us that Gabriel holds such belief or thought. Alternatively, one might think that the requisite belief is that he is a ludicrous figure, or that he is acting as a penny-boy for his aunts, etc. But, these beliefs, *if* indeed Gabriel does hold them, are not *entailed* by Gabriel's humiliation. One could feel humiliated without having such beliefs.

Yet, an objector could plausibly claim that in so many words, the aforementioned beliefs, (i.e. that he is a ludicrous figure, that he is acting as a penny boy for his aunts, etc.) *if* they were Gabriel's beliefs, could add up to the belief that Gabriel is degraded, and thereby they could constitute his humiliation. That may be true. I do not deny that there could be cases of humiliation where a person's beliefs that he is a ludicrous figure, idealizing on his own clownish lusts, etc., could add up to the belief that one is degraded. But this is not how Joyce depicts Gabriel. What Joyce writes is: '*He saw himself as a ludicrous figure, ... a nervous, well-meaning sentimentalist, orating*

¹Although the same story is used in G. Taylor's *Pride, Shame and Guilt*, my discussion here is concentrated on an entirely different aspect of the story.

²Joyce, J., *Dubliners*, New York: The Viking Press, 1961.

to the vulgarians...the pitiable fatuous fellow he had *caught a glimpse of in the mirror* [my italics]. It is important to notice that Joyce does not tell us that Gabriel *believes* that he is a fatuous fellow, acting as a penny boy for his aunts, etc. If so, then it is possible for Gabriel to *believe* that he is a wonderful person that everyone likes and admires, but *picture, or see himself as* a ludicrous figure and fatuous fellow who acts as a penny boy for his aunts, etc. That is, it is perfectly compatible with Joyce's description that, all things considered, Gabriel's stable belief is that he is a *kind* person helping his aunts, valiantly trying to enlighten the people he is lecturing to, and that, so far from being ludicrous, he is, in his own way, improving the lot of the people around him. But if this is the case, then although Gabriel does feel humiliated, he does not *believe* that he is degraded (either in his own eyes, or the eyes of others.) Accordingly, feeling humiliated does not require the belief that one is degraded. If the Queen of Great Britain and Commonwealth slips and falls down, she could well feel humiliated without at all believing that she is degraded.

But if Gabriel, as described by Joyce, does not believe that he is degraded, how is he able to identify his emotion as humiliation? The clue lies in Joyce's use of '*he saw himself as* a ludicrous figure, acting as a penny boy for his aunts', etc. To follow up this clue, I will borrow some ideas from Francis W. Dauer's essay 'Between Belief and Fantasy: A Study of the Imagination' and suggest that what brings about Gabriel's humiliation is his *picturing or seeing* himself in a certain way.¹ Such 'picturing' or 'seeing' is closer to imagination than to belief.

Imagination vs. Belief: Dauer's View

According to Dauer, there are instances of imagination, which use pictures instead of concepts as their medium. For example, there is a use of *seeing* or *picturing as* where the proposition 'I see or picture X as being Y' can be true, while the viewer *knows* X is not Y (Dauer, p. 266). This seems to be the case with a lot of attitudes towards ourselves and others. We do say things such as 'she still sees him as the young man she met at the prom, while she knows that he is her middle-aged husband', or 'he still sees himself as the best player, when he knows otherwise'. Does this mean that the wife and the player have two contradictory beliefs? Of course not. Generally, we do not accuse people who say such things of cognitive deficiency. The reason seems to be that we take such cases to be closer to imagination than to belief and cognition. At the same time, these are not cases of free imagination, because we use the same sense of 'seeing as' or 'picturing as' when we say things such as 'though I know otherwise, I cannot picture him as being a cook', or, 'though I know she has broken a lot of hearts, I cannot see her as a heart breaker'. That is, there must be

¹Dauer, F., 'Between Belief and Fantasy: A Study of the Imagination' in *Pursuit of Reason: Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Cohen, Guyer, and Putnam, Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 1993.

something that enables or prevents a person to see or picture someone or something to be in a certain way. Dauer calls cases of *seeing* or *picturing as* 'imagination that lies *between* belief and fantasy':

Because criteria and constraints are present we may call this form of imagination, imagination that lies *between* belief and fantasy. It is like *free* imagination because it can coexist with belief and knowledge to the contrary, yet it is like belief, because there are external constraints and the criteria for imagining approximate the criteria for believing (Dauer, p. 268).

This type of imagination has two important features:

- a) *External constraints.* There must be something external to the picture or imagining that makes the picturing possible, i.e. it might be the belief that the husband still has a youthful liveliness, which generates the picturing. Or, alternatively, I must believe that there is something in her that prevents me from seeing or picturing her as a heartbreaker. Perhaps I believe that she is not attractive or that she lacks self-esteem. However, the constraints can be somewhat nebulous. In fact, this is one of the reasons why the phenomenon of *seeing as*, or *picturing as* cannot be seen as a matter of belief. The constraints that generate the picturing do not have to be objectively true. Although a loving wife might interpret her husband's lively behavior as youthful, someone else might see it as a behavior of a silly old man. Similarly, although the hefty stature of the heartbreaker prevents me from seeing her as a heartbreaker, someone else might see it as the very reason for being a heartbreaker.
- b) *Criteria that approximate those of believing X to be Y.* If the criterion for believing X to be Y is exhibiting the relevant behavior and the feelings stemming from such belief, then a similar criterion could be placed for *seeing or picturing X as Y*. For instance, if someone says that he believes that the Chair is the best Chair the department ever had, we expect him to behave accordingly, i.e. to get upset when people are making jokes at the expense of the Chair, or to agree with some of Chair's policies, etc. If, however, his behavior and feelings show otherwise, (i.e. he never votes for the Chair's policies, or when others talk about the Chair's 'virtues' he gets angry with them, etc.), unless an explanation is given, we will be reluctant to accept his avowals that he really believes that the Chair is the best Chair the department ever had. This is also the case with *picturing* or *seeing as*. If someone pictures himself to be the best player, while he knows that he is not, he is expected not to get annoyed or angry when he doesn't get the Best Player of the Year Award, or when

others do not include his name among the best players. However, such person is still expected to show some signs that he sees himself as the best player. For instance, he might feel pride and joy when little boys come and tell him that they believe he is the best player, or he might give advice to young players with the air of a person who is the best player, etc.

The medium for this state of imagination is mental pictures instead of propositions. Pictures have different logical features from propositions. Three of the distinct logical features of pictures are the following:

- a. They are representational.
- b. There are objects and people depicted in the picture.
- c. Some pictures can portray actual objects and people, and the portrayed objects and people may or may not portray the actual persons *aptly* (Dauer, p. 271).

According to this reading, *to see or picture X as being Y* is to see the picture that depicts Y as an *apt* portrait of X. Pictures are the right medium for this kind of imagination, because while a proposition is simply true or false of a person (a concept either subsumes or doesn't subsume a person) a picture can portray a person with varying degrees of aptness. 'Being a young man' is simply false of the middle-aged husband, but a 'picture of a young man' can still portray the husband aptly; perhaps it is because of the husband's lively behavior. The judgment by which we judge Y to be an apt portrait of X, is essentially an aesthetic judgment; accordingly, if one sees Y as an apt portrait of X and another does not, this does not mean that one is right and the other wrong. Hence, mental pictures cannot be reduced to propositions and beliefs because they lack the truth or falsity dimension that is ontologically connected to propositions and beliefs. Further, whether a picture is an apt portrait of someone or something is a purely aesthetic matter. One either sees or does not see a certain portrait as apt. There are no objective criteria by which one can judge or persuade another that a certain picture is an apt portrait of someone or something. Aptness is something one sees for oneself. One cannot take someone else's word for it, as one might in order to believe a proposition. And even if there is a good and bad taste in aesthetic judgments, one cannot be said to have made a mistake if one takes a picture to portray something or someone aptly. Yet, one can be said to be mistaken if one forms a false belief about something or someone.

Humiliation and Imagination

Now let us return to Gabriel's case and see how this type of imagination explains his humiliation. It is true that Gabriel has various beliefs regarding

that evening. However, we need not ascribe to him the beliefs that he is a ludicrous, pitiable, fatuous fellow, idealizing on his own clownish lusts, etc. He certainly has, for instance, the beliefs that he is helping his aunts for the party he thought uninteresting, that he was talking to an uncultured audience, that his wife, a woman that he very much loves, was not listening to him when he was talking to her about their secret life together, etc. These beliefs function as *external* constraints in order for Gabriel to *see* or *picture* himself as a ludicrous figure, fatuous fellow, orating to the vulgarians, etc. Taking such a pictures to be apt portraits of himself brings about Gabriel's humiliation.

To illustrate the point, let us modify a bit Gabriel's case. Suppose that Gabriel *knows* that the propositions 'I am a ludicrous, fatuous fellow', etc. are false. Yet, he takes them to apply to him at that moment. But if the propositions are false, how could they apply to him? Obviously, they must apply to him in some way other than truth. The only alternative, it seems, is that Gabriel sees the picture of a ludicrous figure, fatuous fellow, etc., as an *apt* portrait of himself at that particular instant. And, given that aptness lacks the truth or falsity dimension, it is perfectly understandable that while Gabriel thinks that the propositions "I am a ludicrous, fatuous fellow" are false, as he does not think that they truly apply to him, he sees the mental picture of a ludicrous, fatuous fellow as an apt portrait of him.

Now, the question is how picturing oneself as a ludicrous figure, or fatuous fellow, etc. amounts to humiliation. Well, it seems that by picturing himself as a fatuous fellow and the like, Gabriel also pictures himself as having been degraded, because he finds the portrayed person in the picture to have been degraded. This, in turn, brings about Gabriel's humiliation. Therefore, although Gabriel does not have the relevant identificatory belief that his situation is degrading, by picturing himself in a 'degrading light' he is able to identify his emotion as humiliation.

But one might ask, why can we not say that Gabriel just exhibits a case of free imagination, and so, he is imagining the proposition 'I am a ludicrous, pitiable fellow' to be true? For, if he does imagine such proposition as being true, then we can explain his humiliation by saying that he also imagines that being a fatuous, ludicrous figure, is degrading, and consequently, feels humiliation. This might be feasible in some cases.¹ However, this is not what happens in Gabriel's case. According to Joyce, Gabriel is not daydreaming, nor is he fantasizing. The events of that evening led him to picture himself as a ludicrous fellow, etc. Had those events not happened, he would not have pictured himself in that way. That is, there are external conditions and constraints that led Gabriel to picture himself as a ludicrous and fatuous fellow.

Yet, again, one might object, if I allow beliefs to play the role of external constraints, do I not also agree with the cognitivist who believes that cognitive propositional states such as beliefs are necessary for the emotion? To say that

¹Greenspan (1988) and Stocker (1987) have also suggested that emotions can arise simply by imagining certain propositions to be true. Although I agree with their insights, I also think that the main medium of imagination is mental pictures, and not propositions or concepts, for, while concepts and propositions could be true or false, pictures could merely be apt or inapt.

beliefs are necessary for emotions is a triviality. Surely emotions require beliefs. However, what is problematic with this type of cognitivism is not the claim that beliefs or judgments are necessary for emotions, but that in each emotion there is a particular evaluative belief (or proposition), which is essential to the emotion and identifies it as the kind of emotion it is. Also, we have to remember that although Gabriel's beliefs function as conditions and external constraints for his humiliation, these conditions are not decisive; for, one can meet the conditions, have all those beliefs, and still not picture oneself in such a way, and, therefore, not feel humiliated. That is, the beliefs that lead Gabriel to his picturing, and consequently to his humiliation, are just vehicles for his emotion, and as such, they do not play any essential role in his humiliation.

Irrational Fear and Imagination

We are now equipped to explain the case of the irrational fear of the spider. As we recall, our arachnophobic lacks the evaluative belief 'this spider is dangerous' that would identify and explain her fear. I would like to suggest that in such case, although the person *believes* that the spider is harmless, she *pictures* or *sees it as* something genuinely dangerous, a black widow perhaps, and seeing this picture as an *apt* portrait of the present harmless spider, brings about her fear. Furthermore, the arachnophobic's beliefs that are in the 'region' of dangerousness, i.e. 'spiders are ugly and disgusting creatures', 'to be bitten by them is unpleasant', 'this spider resembles a "black widow"' and "'black widows" are dangerous spiders', function as external constraints and conditions for *picturing* or *seeing* the present spider *as* a dangerous "black widow." If the arachnophobic had none of these (or relevant) beliefs, she would not have seen the picture of the dangerous spider as an apt portrait of the present spider.¹ Thus, even if there is no belief to identify the irrational fear of the spider and account for the intentionality of the emotion, there is a mental picture that is able to do a better job in both areas.

Conclusion

Our discussion has shown that evaluative propositional states are not necessary for the identification and the intentionality of emotions. Sometimes imagination with its medium of mental pictures is better equipped to explain and identify a person's emotion.² If this is the case, then the cognitivist view is

¹Again, we have to remember that while some beliefs must act as external constraints, the *particular* beliefs, which act as the external constraints, are not required.

²If my account regarding mental pictures is correct, then it also shows the inadequacy of the so-called weak cognitivist view according to which emotions may not require such strong epistemological states as beliefs, but they certainly require some type of propositional thought, and hence concepts. Although I am sympathetic to such accounts because they recognize the

mistaken in claiming that emotions entail propositional attitudes, and, consequently, an analysis of emotions solely in terms of concepts and cognitions is unsatisfactory.

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inadequacies of straightforward cognitivist theories, I disagree with their insistence on the use of propositions and concepts in emotions. As we have seen, sometimes concepts are not necessary for an emotional experience.