
Book Reviews

ROBERTS, ROBERT C. *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. 357. \$29.99 (paper).

In 1988, Roberts published an article entitled "What an Emotion Is: A Sketch." This book offers the full-size version of Roberts's account of emotions. This is already a lengthy book, and a second one about the relation of emotions to morality, and in particular about emotions and virtues, is announced as forthcoming. The present book is divided into four chapters of unequal length. The first one is mainly methodological; it argues in favor of conceptual analysis as crucial to the understanding of emotions and criticizes the claim that the states we usually count as emotions do not form a unified category. The second chapter presents and defends Roberts's theory of emotions as concern-based construals, while the third one, which is almost a book on its own given its 122 pages, consists in the study of a great many emotion types, ranging from the standard cases of fear, anger, guilt, or shame to more exotic and culturally rather parochial ones, such as agape, a form of love in which we think of someone as personifying Jesus Christ. The last chapter, which is comparatively very short, offers an account of emotional feelings.

A question that has become central recently is whether philosophy has anything to offer to the ongoing discussions about emotions. Emotions are studied by empirical sciences such biology, neurology, and psychology, among others. Is there anything a philosopher can add to these studies? Roberts claims that insofar as emotions are not merely physical mechanisms but are "experienced by human subjects, as structures of meaning and explanation in the course of social life, as entering into our actions and reasoning, as evaluated as to be proper or improper, praiseworthy, blameworthy, or morally indifferent, and as bearing on our happiness and maturity and relationships, ... then conceptual analysis may be the central approach to determining 'what an emotion really is'" (19). What Roberts takes conceptual analysis to be is actually very broad. The conceptual analysis of emotion can, but need not, include the investigation of linguistic usage. It also includes the study of the narrative contexts in which emotions occur, introspection, comparison between neighboring phenomena, such as jealousy and envy, and comparison of emotions with things that are related to what one investigates, such as action and judgments, as well as the use of examples and counterexamples. The claim, then, is that a certain aspect of emotions, namely, emotions as experienced by human beings, is best investigated by conceptual analysis, broadly conceived. Sciences can deal with other questions, such as the questions of what physiological mechanism underlies our emotional experiences or what evolutionary advantages are provided by shame or anger.

The problem with this picture is that at least some sciences appear to address just the same questions as philosophers do. Psychologists, for instance, have put forward suggestions as to what emotions are. One important family of theories claims that emotions are psychophysical reactions to appraisals, that is, to evaluations of what one's

relation to the environment implies for one's well-being (see Richard S. Lazarus, *Emotion and Adaptation* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991]). There is no reason to think that the aspect of emotions appraisal theorists and Roberts are interested in differs significantly. So, with respect to the question of the nature of emotion, even concerning what could be called the 'human' aspect, it would seem mistaken to think that conceptual analysis is the only source of information. Thus, even if one grants that conceptual analysis allows the formulation of an interesting hypothesis as to the nature of emotions, it seems best not to turn one's back on empirical results when investigating emotions. Unfortunately, Roberts does not discuss appraisal theories or any other of the theories of emotions based on empirical studies.

Roberts claims, contrary to what Paul Griffiths argues, that what we call 'emotions' constitutes a unified category. The best way to show this is to offer a convincing unified account of all the different states that are usually taken to be emotions. This is what we would have if one could show, for instance, that emotions are or necessarily involve evaluative or normative judgments. However, as shown by cases of animal emotions as well as cases of irrational emotions, such as when one feels fear while judging there is no threat, emotions are not evaluative or normative judgments. The suggestion Roberts makes is that, at least in paradigm cases, emotions are what he calls "concern-based construals." The concept of construal used by Roberts is technical. Construals are states with a complex content, in which we grasp one thing in terms of something else, where the latter can be a property. Seeing as, for instance, involves a construal: when you see the duck-rabbit figure as a rabbit, you construe it as a rabbit. But you can construe a dog as threatening or a remark as offensive. To construe is not just to interpret something as something else, however. Construals are said to have a certain phenomenology: they "have an immediacy reminiscent of sense perception. They are impressions, ways things appear to the subject: they are experiences and not just judgments or thoughts or beliefs" (75). This is at least so for conscious construals—Roberts claims that construals need not be states of consciousness. Neither do they need to be subject to voluntary control. Moreover, although we often assent to the construal of the emotion, there are cases in which we do not give our assent. This is so when we experience fear while judging that there is no threat. Finally, construals are often propositional, but they need not be so.

The question is whether construals form a unified category. Consider two extreme cases: agape and fear of heights. When experiencing agape toward someone you construe the person as wonderful because she personifies Jesus Christ and is loved by him, and you wish that her true interest be promoted (294). What happens, then, is that you have a complex and culturally dependent thought. Fear of heights, by contrast, does not involve a propositional thought. As Roberts notes, the experience of this emotion precedes and seems to be largely independent of the concept of danger (117). In this regard, fear of heights is like the emotion of nonhuman animals. However, Roberts insists that even fear of heights and animal emotions constitute construals. What seems to happen when we experience fear of heights is that we perceive the higher-order property of being a threat. The question is why we should say that this is a construal and not simply a perception. And even if in some sense of the word one can say that this is a construal, it seems deeply different from what happens when we entertain the agape thought. The states that count as

construals are so diverse that one wonders what they have in common. What Roberts seems to claim, actually, is simply that emotions are mental states that range from nonpropositional perceptions to highly complex thoughts.

Now, Roberts could reply that emotions are not mere construals: they involve concerns. To be afraid of heights, for instance, it is not sufficient to see them as a danger. We need also to have a concern for what is threatened; that is, we need to have a concern for ourselves. So, concerns might be the unifying factor. But what, exactly, are concerns? Roberts does not give a definition of concerns. In any case, concerns can be quite varied. Roberts takes 'interest', 'enthusiasm', 'desire', 'wish', 'attachment', and 'caring' to be words for concerns (146). What is common to all these states? Roberts argues that concerns are not emotions. One plausible alternative is that concerns are dispositions to experience emotions. This seems to be Roberts's view, for he writes, "Grief is not just a construal of something as irrevocably lost: the something lost must be of great importance to the griever. For this reason, concerns, cares, desires, loves, interests, attachments, and enthusiasms are dispositions to emotions" (79). When we care for someone, for instance, we feel happy when this person fares well, sad when she fails to fare well, afraid when she is in danger, and so forth. The problem, however, is that if this is what concerns amount to, it will be uninformative to define emotions as concern-based construals. It would amount to the claim that emotions are construals which are based on dispositions to experience emotions. For the account to work, concerns have to be more than just dispositions to undergo emotions. One possibility is to claim that concerns are conative states. However, desires in general will not do: we might have a desire to see the rabbit in the duck-rabbit figure, but that will not necessarily make the experience of seeing the rabbit in the duck-rabbit figure an emotion. And it is not clear that to restrict the content of the desires will work. Suppose I have the desire to be safe in the sense that I am disposed to avoid threats. Do I necessarily feel fear if I construe the precipice as a threat? It would seem that my construal might be just as nonemotional as the belief that the precipice is a threat. What gives plausibility to Roberts's account is the proximity of concerns to emotions. But it is this very proximity that makes it difficult to define emotions in terms of concerns.

The shortcomings of Roberts's general account of emotions do not diminish the value of the fine-grained and often insightful analysis of a huge variety of emotion types surveyed in the third chapter. More than fifty types of emotion are discussed. For each one, Roberts proposes what he calls a defining proposition. This is not a proposition that one needs to have in mind when experiencing the emotion, but it expresses what is common to the different propositions subjects typically have in mind (110). Many claims Roberts makes are interesting. For instance, he argues that the feeling of guilt is focused on one's status as blameworthy and as a bad person, whereas it is often and somewhat arbitrarily claimed that the thought which usually comes with guilt is that one has done something wrong.

In the last chapter, Roberts gives an account of emotional feelings, something which he takes to be distinct from emotions: not only can we have emotions we do not feel but, at least in one sense of the term 'feel', we can feel emotions we do not have. What happens

in such cases is that the emotional feeling amounts to mistakenly perceiving oneself as having the emotion, something which Roberts claims to consist of a conscious construal of oneself as having that emotion. The problem is that although one can easily construe oneself as angry when one is not, it is far from clear that one can feel angry without really being angry. In this respect, emotions appear to be like pain: it is sufficient to feel pain to be in pain. What happens in the cases described by Roberts is that one mistakenly thinks one feels angry, given the sensations one undergoes. In any case, it is difficult to believe Roberts when he claims that false feelings can be helpful in moral development. It is certainly true that children enlarge their emotional repertoire by imitating their parents' reactions, but, in order to do this, it is not clear that they first need to mistakenly construe themselves as undergoing these emotions. Indeed, it would seem that construing themselves as having an emotion of indignation, for instance, comes only after they have acquired the capacity to experience indignation.

On the whole, given the weakness of the claim that emotions are concern-based construals, it would seem better not to use this book as an introduction to the philosophy of emotions. However, it should be of interest to the specialists in the field.

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