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Erika Grimm

California State University, Fullerton

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On Perception and Autonomy Considered through the Phenomenological Understanding of Emotion Described by Kym Maclaren

Erika Grimm

California State University, Fullerton

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Abstract

Female philosopher Kym Maclaren, in her article, “Emotional Metamorphoses: The Role of Others in Becoming a Subject,” explores a phenomenological view on emotion as being-in-the-world as well as the ethical implications of understanding emotion in opposition to the moralistic view. In the first part of this paper, I provide an exegetical assessment of Maclaren’s thesis; in the second I introduce a critique of Maclaren’s argument and argue a claim of my own which explores perception and autonomy in the human body along with its implications in the context of Maclaren’s phenomenological account of emotion. I discuss the necessity of both emotion and reason in morality and argue that the traditional definition of autonomy is not plausible when considered through Maclaren’s phenomenological view of emotion. Finally, I work to creatively explore a new definition of autonomy that does cohere with this view.

In her article, “Emotional Metamorphoses: The Role of Others in Becoming a Subject,” Kym Maclaren explores a phenomenological view of emotion as being-in-the-world as well as the ethical implications of understanding emotion in opposition to the conventional moralistic view. She introduces three premises: that emotion is “the experience of a tension within reality which brings into question our place within reality;”¹ that expressions of emotion are displays of an individual’s attempts to make sense of her reality with the limited existential resources he possesses; and that others play an essential role in both the ruling out and lending of existential resources with which one can make sense of the world. Maclaren concludes that, “emotion is not opposed to reason, but is rather an essential element of our rational development toward

¹ Kym Maclaren, “Emotional Metamorphoses: The Role of Other in Becoming a Subject,” *Embodiment and Agency* eds. Sue Campbell, Meynell and Sherwin (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 42.

autonomous ways of being.”² She ultimately proposes that the moralistic attitude is fundamentally dismissive of other’s emotional struggles and may therefore prove harmful to the development of an individual as a subject. This discussion serves to persuade readers into considering a phenomenological view of emotion, particularly in the treatment of other’s expressions of emotion. In the first part of this essay, I provide an exegetical assessment of Maclaren’s thesis; in the second I introduce a critique of Maclaren’s argument and argue a claim of my own which explores perception and autonomy in the human body along with its implications in the context of Maclaren’s phenomenological account of emotion. I discuss the necessity of both emotion and reason in morality and argue that the traditional definition of autonomy is not plausible when considered through Maclaren’s phenomenological view of emotion.

I.

Maclaren introduces the phenomenological notion of emotion as “being in the world” by first exploring the Heideggerian term “*Befindlichkeit*.” She offers the translation of “how one finds oneself situated within the world.”³

This is in contrast to the Cartesian conception of the subject, where the notions of *knowing* and *judging* relate the subject to her world. In this view, the individual situates herself as separate from the world; the synthesis of her judgments of the world and understanding of herself lies in her subjective interpretation of the relationship between them. An individual is thought to come to this interpretation through internal reflection. The interpretation and classification of subject and object implies a dichotomy between the experiencer and the experienced; subsequently, the subject’s integration into her world is purely internal. The emotions she experiences, similarly, are purely internal. With regard to this view, emotions are products of reflection; the individual then projects these emotions upon her world.

Maclaren instead explores a phenomenological view of emotion, where the dichotomy between subject and object does not exist. This view acknowledges a complete integration of the subject within her world and therefore cannot claim that emotion stems purely from within the subject; neither is emotion found exclusively in itself in the world. Rather, emotion lies in the relationship between the internal representation and the external presentation of the world. External factors play the same role in the development of emotion as internal factors do. This relationship provides phenomenologists with an explanation of emotion that leaves the subject and her world inseparable. The concept of pre-reflective thought further supports the understanding of the singularity of subject and world. Maclaren acknowledges a “radical reflection,”

² Maclaren, 26.

³ Maclaren, 29.

through which an individual perceives or interprets her own consciousness and reality as it exists pre-reflectively. Maclaren, in explaining this pre-reflective being, makes the claim that “pre-reflectively, [individuals] are not subjects *thinking* about a world beyond us, *judging* its meaning or essential being, and *actively* choosing how to act; [they] are, rather, beings perceptually caught up in, and *moved by*, an immediately meaningful world.”⁴

Maclaren discusses the concept of bodily intentionality and explains the significance of pre-reflective perception and action. She begins with an explanation of the Cartesian concept of mind-body dualism, in which the body is a mechanical vehicle controlled by a separate, ruling consciousness. Phenomenologists, she explains, understand the mind and body existing rather as one entity that is caught up in and actively coherent with the reality that surrounds it. Phenomenologists not only oppose a distinction between the mind and the body, but also between the subject and her world. Maclaren introduces the term bodily intentionality as pre-reflective “engagement with and thoughts about the world,”⁵ claiming that this bodily intentionality is “evident in the precision and attunement of our habitual responsiveness to the world.”⁶ She draws on an example of an experienced typist to illustrate bodily intentionality. In this example, she explains that in typing a paper, the experienced typist is not concerned with the organization of the letters on her keyboard, but rather with the meaning behind the words she is creating. Maclaren describes that, while the experienced typist may be able to type up words without concern for letter placement on her keyboard, she is unable to place every letter in its proper place on the keyboard if later prompted. Maclaren concludes that this example illustrates that her hands know better than her own mind, calling to attention a kind of “knowledge in the hands” that is present without conscious acknowledgement. Maclaren argues that these apparent reflexes do not, however, imply mechanical, conditioned responses; if the experienced typist is given a smaller keyboard, where the letters are separated by very different distances than to what the typist is accustomed, the typist “very quickly finds [her] way around it [and] needs not take the time to *recondition* all the movements”⁷ necessary to type. Maclaren claims that this subsequent example proves that “the human body is not a machine guided by the mind or constituted by reflexes, but an active sensitivity *oriented toward* the potential for meaning in its world, and *moved* to bring this meaning out.”⁸ In other words, the mind-body dualism cannot possibly explain the phenomenon of the accuracy in which the subject can navigate her world. Rather than a body, a subject possesses an “active sensitivity” with which she may seamlessly communicate with her worldly surroundings.

⁴ Maclaren, 27.

⁵ Maclaren, 29.

⁶ Maclaren, 30.

⁷⁻⁸ Maclaren, 30.

These surroundings, in Maclaren's following point, include other subjects as well. This orientation of the subject toward meaning in her world allows for the perception of other perceiving subjects and, as a result, the possibility of the confirmation of a shared reality. Should an individual have to judge or infer what another subject was perceiving, she would almost never be sure if she were a part of a shared reality with those she encountered, unless she were provided with linguistic confirmation of her inference. Maclaren explains that, "in seeing the other's seeing, however, our inherence in a shared reality is immediately confirmed."⁹

Consequently, others play a significant role in the introduction of emotional tensions in an individual's world. It is in the exploration of this concept that Maclaren arrives at her first premise: that emotion is the experience of tension within reality which brings into question our place within reality. External factors cause this tension; the subject experiences these factors pre-reflectively. Maclaren considers an example in which a young girl is with her uncle in a social setting when her uncle tells a racist joke.¹⁰ The girl is comfortable in her situation and has been enjoying herself at a family gathering until her uncle begins to make racist remarks. The girl has a friend who is of the race that is targeted by her uncle's joke. The girl is uncertain of her next move; should she laugh at her uncle's joke or interrupt to defend her friend? An existential crisis then develops which calls into question the girl's place within her reality: is she her uncle's niece, or her friend's friend? The girl is now subject to conflicting perceptions of herself within her reality; her emotion is dependent not only on her already developed feelings regarding her uncle, friend, and the joke, but also on her definition of herself. Her actions are a product of the coherence of her self-perception; this product is denied when her place within reality is called into question. The significance of this example lies in the fact that the expression of emotion (whether to laugh or become upset) is dependent on the relationship between her own self-perception and the situation in which she finds herself; it is neither purely internal nor purely external.

This analysis quickly leads Maclaren to her next premise: that expressions of emotion are displays of an individual's attempts at making sense of her reality with the limited existential resources she possesses. Maclaren explores the moralistic standpoint, which understands expressions of emotion as "irrational," implying that the subject expressing emotion is aware of a more rational understanding of her situation and is indulging in emotion simply for the sake of doing so. Maclaren references the studies on child jealousy conducted by Françoise Dolto-Marette. Maclaren explores the example of a child named Gricha, who is jealous of the attention his baby sister receives. Upon recognizing that parental attention has been split with the introduction of a new sibling, he immediately regresses to a baby-like state: he cannot seem to control his excretions and retards in his potential for linguistic expression. Maclaren argues that, rather than an

⁹ Maclaren, 32.

¹⁰ Maclaren, 33.

irrational outburst of baby-like emotion, Gricha is experiencing an existential crisis in which he feels hopelessly out of place in his reality. Having previously been the baby, he attempts to regress to that familiar state in order to reassert his previous role in reality.

Maclaren transitions to an exploration of her final premise: that others play a significant role in the ruling out and lending of existential resources with which an individual may make sense of her place within reality. Maclaren writes that the moralistic understanding cannot account for the fact that a “child, when offered a better way of assuming [a] situation, happily takes this up, and is momentarily liberated from his jealousy.”¹¹ She describes how Gricha’s nanny tells Gricha that his little sister is proud to have such a strong big brother, providing Gricha with the necessary existential resources for making sense of his world. He becomes an older brother by referencing the only older brother he knows—his own!

His older brother, however, is unhappy with Gricha’s newfound habits, and demands that Gricha stop copying him. Gricha is thrown once again into an existential crisis and no longer feels he has a place within his reality. However, he is provided with a new set of resources when he experiences his older brother acting as a middle child when they go out to play with other children. This experience provides him with the resources that allow him to understand his new place in the family as the middle child. Gricha is no longer the youngest, nor can he be the oldest. Gricha hereby sacrifices his “lived logic”: he previously defined himself according to a logic of absolutes, and now defines himself by a logic of relativity. He is younger relative to his oldest brother and older relative to his youngest brother. He acquires a new role and his existential crises has passed.

Maclaren thereby arrives at her conclusion that emotion is not opposed to reason, but is rather an essential element in the construction of a rational understanding of one’s place in the world. Through the phenomenological view of emotion as being-in-the-world, one draws the understanding that emotion is the experience of tension within an individual’s reality and is comprised of both internal and external components. The expression of emotion is neither irrational nor uncalled-for. Emotional expression represents the struggle to develop and maintain coherence of the understanding of the self within one’s environment and the presentation of that environment. Factors within the environment include other subjects; these subjects have an effect on an individual and may therefore either provide, challenge, or deny existential resources with which one can make sense of one’s place within the world.

Finally, Maclaren describes the ethical implications of subscribing to the moralistic interpretation of emotion. Treating emotion as irrational and superfluous may deny an individual crucial existential resources needed in the development of herself as a subject, and may even drive her to “madness.” Maclaren explains that the moralistic

¹¹ Maclaren, 34.

interpretation “neglects both the validity of a person’s expressions and the necessity, in a human life, of *learning*, or *developing* through inter-subjective encounters, better resources for making sense of ourselves and our world.”¹² It is therefore imperative that one interprets emotion as an attempt at rational understanding of the relationship between subject and world, and that one understands the potential for harm in not acknowledging emotion as such.

II.

Maclaren concludes that emotion is “an essential element of our rational development toward autonomous ways of being.”¹³ In part II of this paper I break this conclusion down into three smaller, distinct claims: that the subject is not inherently rational, but rather possesses the potential for rational development; that this rational development leads towards autonomous ways of being; and that emotion is an absolutely necessary factor in rational development and is therefore necessary to autonomy. In the following paragraphs I examine each of these claims in an attempt to disprove them and to argue my own claim that emotion is not necessary in autonomous ways of being, but rather is an absolutely necessary element in *moral* development toward *ethical* ways of being.

The first of these three claims by Maclaren, as mentioned, states that the subject is not inherently rational, but rather possesses potential for rational development. In other words, human beings are not born naturally rational, but develop rationally instead. They are born with solely the potential to reason and not reason itself. This statement, I believe, does the human race a disservice. I argue that both humans and even animals are inherently able to reason and do so from the start of their lives; they must reason in order to survive. Acting rationally is adhering to a code of conduct and acting in a specific and predictable manner. Animals must act according to a basic, biological code of survival: stay alive, propagate. Though simplistic, all living creatures are born subjected to this biological law. In following this biological law an animal thusly acts rationally, this is evident from the understanding that it is irrational of an animal to commit self-harm or suicide. Reason is not unique to the developed or mature human being, it is present across the broad spectrum of living things. Though mature humans subject themselves to much more complicated codes of conduct and may be aware of reason, this does not make other human beings/animals less rational or irrational. It is therefore folly to conclude that the subject is not inherently rational. Instead, I propose that the subject is both inherently rational and retains the capacity to develop both awareness and complexity of reason.

¹² Maclaren, 43.

¹³ Maclaren, 26.

The second claim I have identified in Maclaren's conclusion states that rational development leads to autonomous ways of being. I will here examine the latter part of the claim, as I have already discussed the former. Maclaren's claim that "autonomous ways of being" are even possible contradicts her description of emotion and integration. Maclaren describes emotion as being-in-the-world, illustrating that emotion can be understood as the relationship between how a subject is situated within the world and how the world presents itself to the subject. Her article is an attempt to persuade readers into considering the significance in the treatment of others with regard to emotion, and stresses the apparently external sites of existential resources within others. The subject is then, seemingly, completely dependent upon others and her environment in order to develop rationally. Phenomenologists argue for the dissipation of absolutes such as mind/body (as Maclaren explicitly argues) and subject/reality (as implied in Maclaren's explanation of emotion existing as a relationship). Through the phenomenological understanding, there cannot be autonomy, but only the complete integration of the subject within her reality at any given moment. The concept of autonomy "is in fact an *artificial product* of philosophical reflection." As Maclaren herself writes, "we are not subjects ... *actively* choosing how to act; we are, rather, beings perceptually caught up in ... an immediately meaningful world."¹⁴ This claim and Maclaren's use of the word autonomy cannot be supported by her argument.

Maclaren may, however, be asking the reader to redefine autonomy. In following the traditional view of autonomy one is by definition subscribing to the Cartesian understanding of subject as separate from the world—the subject processes information given by the world and then chooses how to act on this information. It is this processing of information that Maclaren would define as interpretation or reflection. Maclaren describes pre-reflective thought as the experience as being immediately caught up in and moved by the world; she later explains that the individual's body, rather than being a mechanical instrument of will, is instead a vessel oriented toward and defined by meaning in the world. As previously discussed, autonomy is not possible in this understanding. However, Maclaren may be implying that autonomy, rather than residing in post-interpretive action, lies in pre-reflective experience. This pre-reflective thought is without bias or other influence; it is the rawest form of cognition and therefore the most accurate representation of the individual's thought. Pre-reflective thought may serve as the new home for autonomous action, as any decision subject to reflection is by definition subject to bias. It may prove prudent to reconsider the definition of autonomy in order to gain a more accurate understanding of the subject's undeniable relationship with her world. This reorientation sheds new light on the conception of the individual and facilitates the understanding of emotion as existentially significant, providing further reason to regard emotional expressions as something more than irrational outbursts.

¹⁴ Maclaren, 27.

The third claim I have derived from Maclaren's conclusion is the one that carries the most weight: that emotion is absolutely necessary in rational development and is therefore necessary to autonomy. As per earlier discussion, the subject is inherently rational and autonomy is not possible considering the phenomenological view on emotion. However, I argue a claim that is similar though not the same: that emotion is absolutely necessary in moral development and therefore necessary to ethical ways of being. Moral development, because it is influenced by emotion, is subject to the reconstructed definition as discussed in the preceding paragraph.

Morality is solely a human construct. All animals act rationally, but they do so without regard for morality whatsoever. Animals, therefore, act neither morally nor immorally; all actions performed by animals are amoral actions. Humans, on the other hand, are subject to emotion; it is the experience of emotion which defines whether a creature can act morally. Human beings can experience empathy and cannot therefore act amorally.¹⁵ This conclusion ties emotion and morality closely together. However, acting purely on emotion cannot be consistently moral, for this brings into the picture a relativistic approach: different people experience different emotions, i.e. different things make different people happy, upset, hurt, etc. How then can emotion define the potential for moral action? Reason must be incorporated. Emotions are universal enough to dictate an ethical code, however they are not precise. Morality is the application of reason on emotion; emotion and reason are inseparable with regard to emotion. I thereby conclude that emotion is absolutely necessary in moral development and therefore necessary to ethical conduct.

Maclaren offers an insightful phenomenological understanding of emotion in her article. However, it remains imperative that further research be conducted in order to further understand emotion and to be able to move forward in new productive ways of thought. In understanding emotion and its role in the development of the individual as subject, one may engage in more appropriate and positive interactions with others and with her world. As implied here, interdisciplinary work between philosophy and the sciences may prove indispensable in the exploration of emotion, autonomy, and ethical ways of being.

¹⁵ There are of course exceptions to this rule: there exist cognitive defects that may impair a human being from feeling empathetic, as in the case of a sociopathic individual. Individuals who cannot experience a sense of commiseration are exempt from morality and therefore can act only amorally, as animals do. The opposite is also true: some animals possess a rudimentary limbic system and so too can experience some emotion (e.g. dolphins, elephants). The actions of these animals therefore cannot be amoral actions.