The case against unconscious emotions

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1. Talk of the unconscious in the philosophy of emotions concerns two things. It can refer to an emotion whose existence is not in any way present to consciousness. Or, it can refer to emotional phenomena whose meaning lies in the unconscious. My interest here is in the former issue of whether emotional states can exceed the reach of conscious awareness.

I start with a presentation of psychoanalytic views that inform contemporary work toward a cognitivist analysis of emotion. The discussion of cognitivism leads to a consideration of work in experimental psychology that appears to establish the reality of emotional phenomena that transcend conscious awareness. However, I argue that a careful consideration of the relevant evidence falls short of supporting the claim that there are unconscious emotions.

2. One can build a case for the possibility of unconscious emotions by trying to extend the psychoanalytic view of the unconscious so as to include emotional states. Let us assume that there is no a priori stricture on what can fall in the category of the unconscious. What makes something unconscious is the process of repression by which that thing moves out of conscious awareness and is kept there. Given the psychological power of intense or recalcitrant emotions it is only natural to think that emotions would be among the primary targets of repression.[1] Ordinary experience seems to lend support to this view. We often encounter a friend who would deny that she experiences an emotion (such as anger, jealousy, or sadness) that is obvious to us suffuses every waking moment of her life. A simple explanation of that phenomenon would be that although the emotion is present in that person's experience, it is absent from her consciousness – in other words, it is an unconscious emotion.

[1] The conceptual and epistemic issues raised by the experience of emotions that seem to resist cognitive control are thoroughly addressed in D'Arms and Jocobson (2003).

ANALYSIS 67.4, October 2007, pp. 292–99. © Anthony Hatzimoysis

This might look like an attractive proposal for introducing unconscious emotions, but it faces several problems. Psychoanalysis conceives of mental states in terms of thought contents, or of affects, or, as in the case of emotions, of combinations of mental content and affect.[2] The process of repression effects a dissociation of the thought from the affective energy originally attached to its content. Hence, the thought is kept in the unconscious and the affect either dissipates or acquires a different form, ranging from free floating anxiety to the sophisticated activities of artistic creation. Consequently we can no longer speak of an emotion being (in the) unconscious. What we can say at the most is that a constituent of it, namely its thought content, is kept beyond conscious awareness.

At this point, theorists who identify emotion by its thought component could argue that admitting the existence of repressed thoughts amounts to an acceptance of unconscious emotions. If all that characterizes an emotion essentially is the thought (cognition, or judgement) that something befalls a person, a quality or an object that is of import to one's well being, and that thought remains inaccessible to consciousness, then we should conclude that there are unconscious emotions.[3]

For this argument to succeed, one would have to accept that a conscious thought retains its identity after it has been repressed. However, human thoughts are not little rocks that survive through much moving and going. The identity of a thought is a matter of the constancy of its content in reasoning, reflecting or deliberation. What a thought is depends to a large extent on how it is related to other thoughts one has, and of how the whole network of thoughts is structured into interrelated units of meaningful content. And the problem with the cognitivist manoeuvre is that the norms that govern conscious thought – most notably the principle of non-contradiction, the rules of temporary succession, and the distinction between the internal and the external – do *not* (allegedly) apply to the realm of unconscious processes. Therefore, the relations of entailment, implication, or negation that characterize the content of a thought do not necessarily carry through to the unconscious. A thought entertained yes-

[2] Cf. Wollheim's concise and insightful reconstruction of the psychoanalytic view on this point (1991). Wollheim talks about 'idea' and 'affect'; however, the notion of mental content is I think more apposite given, on the one hand, the philosophical equivocity of the term idea, and the Freudian emphasis on mental states as 'representations'. See, also, the meticulous discussion of the unconscious dimension of emotional phenomena in Lacewing 2007.

[3] That line of reasoning can help us reconstruct the epistemology of emotion encountered both in psychoanalytically minded philosophers, such as Deigh (1996), as well as some straightforward judgementalist such as Solomon (2004), and Nussbaum (2001).

terday with a content that implied *p*, and a thought occurring today with a content implying anything *other than p*, is not *ceteris paribus* the same thought. It is therefore not clear what sense can be made of the idea that thoughts repressed in the unconscious are identical to their conscious predecessors. But if that idea is implausible, so is the idea that emotions, reduced to their thought component, can move to the unconscious without loosing their identity.

One way of rescuing the cognitivist scenario would be to claim that it is plausible to see the emotion-thought through its transformations so that, if and when it comes to the surface at an analytic session, one is able to identify it as an up-to-that-point unconscious emotion. However, keeping track of the transformations of a mental state implies that the state is within the purview of consciousness – and thus that it is not unconscious.

The failure of what I have called the cognitivist appropriation of the psychoanalytic view of unconscious states is symptomatic of the problems that beset the interpretation of the unconscious as a second mind, populated by contentful states that just happen to inhabit a mental universe that runs in parallel to the conscious one. What the correct interpretation of the unconscious might be is an issue that far exceeds the agenda of the present paper – and the expertise of its author. We may make some progress, though, on the specific issue of unconscious emotions by looking at relevant research in contemporary psychology.

3. An evaluation of recent work in experimental psychology would be facilitated by understanding what exactly the issue is that the work purports to explore. However, a careful reading of the relevant literature reveals that there are several different meanings attributed to the locution 'unconscious emotion', with the result that the debating parties may talk past each other. I suggest that we adopt the meaning attributed by psychologists who argue in favour of the existence of unconscious emotion. In that way, we offer the opposition a fair hearing, allowing for the possibility that the claim for the necessary presence of consciousness in emotional phenomena should be qualified or even abandoned in the light of the relevant evidence. I suggest that a definition that would capture the sense in which emotion can be unconscious is that we can attribute to someone the experience of an emotion of which she is not aware. With that definition in mind, let us look at the evidence submitted in favour of unconscious emotions.

Unconscious emotions have been thought to underpin the phenomenon of alexithymia.[4] Subjects are characterized as alexithymics when they systematically show difficulty in identifying or describing their own emo-

[4] DeLancey directly invokes alexithynmia in this context. See his (2002) for a clear and systematic discussion of this issue.

tions. The sources of that phenomenon are a matter of debate among cognitive- and neuro-psychologists.[5] However, what is not in dispute is that the subjects experience emotions and, in most cases, are also able to report on that experience. What they lack is an ability to place their emotion under some set category, or to identify the causes of their experience.[6] Lacking that ability may limit the range of their affective responses, as well as hinder the development of personal attachments enabled by communicating or sharing our emotional experience. None of these points, though, tells against the view that the subjects are not unconscious of their emotional experience. To oppose that view one would have to establish that the subject is not aware of her experience unless, first, she knows what caused the experience; and secondly, she is able to conceptualize and express in linguistic medium the nature of that experience. Both assumptions are highly controversial and there are reasons to cast doubt on their plausibility. There are several of our experiences we would find hard to describe, but we do not take this difficulty as a reason for denying their existence. Moreover, we may feel puzzled about what really caused the way we currently feel, but, again, we do not treat this as a ground for denying that we are feeling something. Alexithymia shows how sharp these difficulties might become in extreme circumstances – that usually follow upon traumatic experiences that, we may assume the subject would not to want to process conceptually, to describe, and categorize.[7] Conscious experience is not necessarily conceptually structured and linguistically packaged. Therefore, the difficulty of conceptualizing and talking about one's emotional experience provides as such no evidence against the view that one is conscious of the experience.

4. I have belaboured this point because it will prove useful in the discussion of the next and perhaps major case presented by defenders of unconscious emotions. So-called 'fear conditioning'[8] refers to experiments where subjects are exposed for a very short period of time to stimuli that can be received as a danger to the subjects, who then exhibit physiological

[5] For presentation of the relevant experimental work on alexithymia, interpreted as a clinical condition associated with a range of medical diagnoses, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Anorexia Nervosa or Asperger's Syndrome, see the pioneering work of Sifneos (1972) and Lane et al. (1996).

[6] I employ Delancey's formulation in order to attack his defence of unconscious emotion that invokes precisely those two inabilities (2002: 13–14).

[7] Cf. Lane et al. 1997.

[8] See LeDoux 1984, Zajonc et al. 1989 for the experiments and Delancey 2002 for the relevant interpretation.

changes, such as increased electric skin-conductance, which are also characteristic of experiencing fear.[9] We have two main variations on this theme. In some experiments, a neutral stimulus appears simultaneously with a mild electric shock or other unpleasant event; in other studies, images of things that have been treated as dangerous by the subjects, such as snakes or spiders, are projected masked by neutral stimuli for a period of time that is too short for processing the relevant images conceptually.[10] In both cases, the re-appearance of the neutral stimulus in the subject's vicinity is followed by autonomic changes, and facial or bodily alterations that are similar to phenomena exhibited in fear response. The moral drawn from such cases is that the subjects, unbeknownst to them, are experiencing fear. Is that conclusion justified?

We may answer this question by considering the dialectic of the arguments for and against the possibility of unconscious fear. It is assumed that the duration and manner of exposure to the stimuli precludes the possibility of processing the relevant information in a way that permits the formation of an appraisal of the stimuli. It is further assumed that such an appraisal is necessary for the experience to be conscious. Both assumptions reflect the standard interpretation of ordinary cases where someone can account for her experience (of fear) by pointing to the things she perceives (as dangerous). Let us grant that those assumptions are in order when we wish to understand the subject's *account* of her emotional experience. However, is offering an account of the experience necessary for an experience to be conscious? The fact that someone cannot tell why she feels fear might imply all sorts of unwelcome things about her situation, but it does not entail that she is not aware of being afraid.

It is worth noting here that, in ordinary discourse, denials of understanding why one feels a particular emotion are often a means of highlighting one's own dissatisfaction with what appears to be the cause of the emotion. Usually, it is not a matter of not being able to refer to anything *at all* as a cause for one's feelings, but that none of the obvious candidates seems to satisfy one's quest for the real cause. However, my response to the argument from fear conditioning does not depend on such a loose reading

[9] I have used the neutral expression 'received as a danger' instead of 'conceived' or 'perceived' because the latter two can be taken to imply cognitive activities that can be absent from the phenomenon under consideration.

[10] See Öhman and Soares 1994, and Esteves, Dimberg and Öhman 1994; Zajomc's work is an important source of methodological and theoretical considerations on conducting experiments that induce a certain range of emotion-related responses (Zajonc 1984).

of 'I don't know why I feel like that all day.' My point is that *conscious experience* does not require awareness of *the causes of* that experience.

5. A proponent of unconscious emotions might retort that it is not only the causes of the emotion that are unconscious; it is the emotion itself. The assumption here is that it sounds totally improbable to claim that a subject can be aware of experiencing fear in the span of milliseconds within which the exposure to stimuli lasts. That claim is indeed implausible but admitting its implausibility lands the defender of unconscious emotions with a dilemma neither horn of which is very attractive.

First, we may deny that the subject is able to be conscious of experiencing fear in a span of milliseconds for the simple reason that no such experience can occur in a span of milliseconds. Thus we can accept that no awareness of fear occurs by admitting that there was no fear to be aware of, in the first place. However, by accepting this, the whole case for unconscious emotion is thrown away.

The second horn of the dilemma states that we should believe in the existence of the emotion on grounds other than those already dismissed, i.e. awareness of the causes of the emotion, or awareness of the emotion itself. What grounds might that be? The obvious answer is the occurrence of physiological changes that follow on stimuli exposure, such as skin-conductance and other autonomic changes. It is usually taken for granted that such changes should count as 'fear response'. However, far from being self-evident, it is precisely this point that needs most support from the defender of unconscious emotions. It is not clear why changes such as skin-conductance amount to an emotional response in the absence of any other relevant considerations. Raised hair on your skin is a response, but it is not by itself a 'fear' response – perhaps your woollen jumper is too rough, or your back is exposed to a mild draught.

To see how this bears upon the current problem, consider first the case where such changes (due to their extremely short life span or because one's mind is otherwise occupied) are not in any way registered by the subject. The subject is in a safe place, and is not aware of any change in her body, or in her environment, or in her thinking. Does it still make sense to talk about that subject as experiencing fear? I believe not.

Consider, on the other hand, the case where the subject is aware of her raising skin hair. We may then assert that she has a feeling of a change located in her body. However, a bodily feeling does not on its own an emotional feeling make.[11] In either case, we have not been offered an

[11] A point, I think granted, even by contemporary supporters of the James-Lang approach, such as Jesse Prinz 2004: chs.2 and 4; for further discussion see my (2003).

argument that would establish that the occurrence of physiological alterations induced in an experimental setting would amount to emotional experience.

I have argued that a critical examination of the relevant theoretical work in psychoanalytic and experimental psychology casts serious doubt on the reality of unconscious phenomena. Whether some alternative interpretation of the phenomena can resuscitate the belief in unconscious emotions is an important issue that should bear upon our explanation, interpretation, and evaluation of human emotions.

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