

Let's Talk About Emotions¹



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Abstract: This paper testifies the crucial importance of Philosophy for Children for Emotional Growth. It begins by establishing the open ended character of emotional processes, showing how feminist philosophers have criticized the fixed conception of negative valence of certain emotions, and how, ultimately, the normative structure of emotions is open to modification. Then, it shows how talking about emotional processes and emotional situations can foster emotional growth once we understand that the acquisition of language and emotional vocabulary is one way to best capture the open-ended character of emotions. Finally, attention is turned to Philosophy for Children. Taking as an illustration the emotion of hope and its importance to inquiry, the paper concludes by examining in what way P4C both benefits and reinforces the previous insights about emotion theory.

Introduction

Talking and writing about emotions is an exciting matter. The amazing development of research on emotions is a proof that such a topic can be taken seriously. No doubt the rise of the study of emotions is partly due to feminist philosophers who have, among other things, placed emotions and emotional processes in the center of various philosophical debates.

In this paper I want to focus on the fact that there is an aspect of such development that is liberating: I can talk, think, research on emotions! Wow! I want to show that the liberating feeling that accompanies the possibility of the study of emotion is at the center of emotional reality

itself: for there is a sense in which emotions are open ended entities. This open-ended character of emotional processes means that they are open to modification, to re-creation, and that talking about them, fortifies the continuing lively transformation of our emotional world.

The contribution of feminist philosophers is fundamental to appreciate the lively openness of emotions. Therefore, I begin the paper by showing the way feminist philosophers have criticized the fixed conception of negative valence of certain emotions, and ultimately showing that the normative structure of emotions is open to modification. Then, I explain how understanding acquisition of language and emotional vocabulary best captures the open-ended character of emotions, and how talking about emotional processes and emotional situations fosters emotional growth. Finally, I turn my attention to Philosophy for Children seeing in what way Philosophy for Children both benefits and reinforces the previous insights, and how its practice provides opportunities to explore the dynamic nature of emotions. In order to show how Philosophy for Children is a crucial element for emotional education, I take up the emotional process of hope as an illustration of the impact of dialogue for emotional development. I conclude by pointing to several suggestions for future inquiry in the fruitful connection of Feminist Philosophy, Philosophy for Children and Philosophy of Emotions.

Feminist Philosophy: Negative emotions and their meaning

Despite the common sense belief that women are more emotional and more emotionally expressive than men, the contribution of feminist philosophy for the topic of emotion is not due to that mistaken interpretation of gender reality. What studies show is that males and females express emotions differently (Simon & Nath 2004, 1162-3), though they do not necessarily differ in the experience of emotion (Simon & Nath 2004, 1142-3, 1149-50). Nevertheless, studies also show that there are different expectations concerning gendered emotional

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expression. For instance, not only women are viewed as feeling and expressing sadness more frequently than men, and men are viewed as feeling and expressing anger more frequently than women (Simon & Nath 2004, 1138) but, in addition, there is the general belief that women are both more emotional and more emotionally expressive than men (Simon & Nath 2004, 1138). As a consequence, women's emotional reactions are overestimated, and when women fail to express an emotion which is expected from them, they are negatively evaluated (Kelly & Hutson-Comeaux 2000, 515-517). This harsh reality is difficult; not only because it stands as a mode of social pressure, but also because it diminishes the importance of emotional reactions that lay outside of expectations by solidifying and petrifying conceptions and expectations about the world of emotions. This means that social conceptions about our emotional world have clear effects on the way we judge the appropriateness or inappropriateness of emotional displays.

It is at the center of this difficulty that we find one of the interesting contributions of feminist philosophy to the theory of emotions. Feminist philosophers have pointed out how social expectations about emotional processes format emotion evaluations, and how such evaluations determine and reinforce emotional processes plus their subsequent evaluations. Perhaps more importantly, the possibility of criticism by feminist philosophers makes us realize that this state of affairs is not eternally given, that is, that the norms that rule emotional expectations are not immutable and eternal. Feminist critique illustrates how it is possible to jump out of the social determination and reevaluate emotional processes differently, and by doing so, enrich our emotional world, enabling us to change social expectation.

Let us look more closely at the contribution of feminist philosophers regarding emotion interpretation. Feminist philosophers re-evaluated several seemingly negative

emotions such as anger, resentment and bitterness pointing out that the evaluation of emotional processes is formatted by social expectations and that, when one changes perspective, the same emotional processes can be seen, understood, and evaluated under a different light. As Bell writes, "many feminist philosophers have argued that emotions traditionally considered immoral or detrimental should be considered moral or political accomplishments when they are felt by women within a context of male domination" (Bell 2005, 80).

In "A Woman's Scorn: Towards a Feminist Defense of Contempt as a Moral Emotion", Bell makes an insightful summary of the reasons by which negative emotions can be seen positively. First, some feminists have argued that the negative emotions are ways by which women try to refuse and fight social norms and constraints. In this way, negative emotions have been seen and praised for their subversive quality. This type of insubordination may be a way to sustain self-respect (Bell 2005, 81). In the second place, it seems that these negative emotions



have an important epistemological role because such emotional states directly format the epistemic position of the subject in a context of oppression, giving subjects an insightful perspective in which one can see to certain aspects invisible for those without those same states (Narayan 1988). In addition, emotions can have indirect epistemological import by providing a way to gain knowledge of the position of the subject. As Bell writes, "through the process of noting, analyzing, and categorizing circumstances in which we become angry and have our anger be given uptake, women can map out others' conception of who and what we are (Bell 2005, 82). Also, seemingly negative emotions can be seen as moral and political achievements when they are seen as ways to witness and testify injustice (Bell 2005, 82). Finally, the information given by emotional processes

may transform their negativity when they become means of initiating, maintaining and leading others to social change (Bell 2005, 82).

The feminist analysis of seemingly negative emotions changes the meaning of valence by enlarging and showing the complexity of such emotional processes, and by doing so illustrates how feminists show that emotions' norms are subject to criticism and reevaluation; and consequently to transformation. Given that the sense of appropriateness and inappropriateness of emotions lies at the base of the notion of rationality of emotion, it is of crucial importance to recognize the possibility of transformation. For if emotions' norms are formatted by social expectations and such reality is capable of modification, it is important to continue the work of revising and reevaluating the role, impact of various emotions, and continue to construct the rationality of emotions.

Open Character of Emotions

What the feminist critique allows us to recognize is that one of the missing insights from theories of emotion is that emotions reveals something about ourselves and the world, and this revelation has an impact in the way we will be in the future, because it may allow us to transform the colors of our emotional world. That is, appealing to criticize and place under the focus of dialogue emotional processes, and be willing to accept a different interpretation of them, may transform our engagement with emotional process themselves. An appeal voiced by John Cogan in "Emotion and the growth of consciousness. Gaining insight through a phenomenology of rage". Cogan writes that when he appeals to engage with emotion he is in fact claiming that there is an alternative understanding of emotion provided by emotion itself (Cogan 2003, 213). There is something truly revealing in the eruption of emotion. Cogan writes, "the eruption of emotion produces an awareness of enlightenment and revelation—a revelation that is reminiscent of the Greek word *charis*, meaning grace, a kind of divine gift. I become informed about the world and myself" (Cogan 2003, 223).

What this means is that understanding the rationality of emotions does not mean to discover connections of emotional processes with the rationality already put forward, but that emotions embody, as an ultimate illustration, the dynamic relationship between others and myself, between the world and myself. I think this is how we should understand Solomon's claim for the rationality of emotions. It is not simply that once emotional processes

are interpreted that we find their reasonableness, but that they are reasonable because they make explicit the intensity and the mode of our relationship with the world. Thus, when Solomon writes, "the rationality of emotions is a prereflective (or "intuitive") logic, but one which, like all logics, can be brought to the surface upon reflection and rendered explicit" (Solomon 1993, 182), he is not claiming that the rationality of emotions is there, simply to be grasped as a complete and finished logic. Instead, it indicates that continued reflection upon emotional processes helps us to better understand the crucial relevance of participating in the emotional character of the narrative of being in the world.

In sum, when one agrees to accept that there is a sense in which emotions can be adequate or inadequate, one must be careful to avoid the sense that such appropriateness is already determined and closed. For emotions are essentially interactive and, as Wholheim writes,

This interaction is embedded in the narratives that we associate to our emotions, and in these narratives, conscious or unconscious, lie the identities of the emotions. But we must not think that these narratives are stories that we can make up at whim or at will. They are probably as deep as anything that we know about ourselves (Wholheim 1999, 224).

Without recognizing this lively interaction, emotions lose their identity, and any account of their appropriateness or inappropriateness must incorporate their dynamic nature. It is important that we allow stories of emotion to appear but we must avoid thinking that once given, these stories are finished. Otherwise, we will limit the life and insightfulness of emotional processes, and we will close the needed continuity that attunement with the world requires.

In sum, emotions are open-ended entities, that is, they are not closed and finished modes of interaction, but on going and moving realities. In order to truly profit from emotional insight it is important not only to recognize this livelihood, but also to foster and cultivate it.

Let's Talk about Emotions

It is all very nice to claim that emotions are open-ended entities but how can we aim at capturing their insight if they are continuing moving forces? One way to look into this is to inquire into the way we become

familiar with emotion language². In *The Rationality of Emotions* (1987), Ronald de Sousa argues that we are made familiar with the vocabulary of emotion by association with paradigm scenarios. He writes,

My hypothesis is this: We are made familiar with the vocabulary of emotion by association with *paradigm scenarios*. These are drawn first from our daily life as small children and later reinforced by the stories, art, and culture to which we are exposed. Later still, in literate cultures, they are supplemented and refined by literature. Paradigm scenarios involve two aspects: first, a situation type providing the characteristic *objects* of the specific emotion-type (where objects can be of the various sorts identified in chapter 5), and second, a set of characteristic or “normal” *responses* to the situation, where normality is first a biological matter and then very quickly becomes a cultural one (De Sousa 1987, 182).

I think it is accurate to state that we become acquainted with the vocabulary of emotion through paradigm scenarios, but I think the story of how these paradigms are drawn is more complex than de Sousa describes them. It is not simply that stories reinforce paradigm scenarios, though I'm sure that experience before story telling is crucial for emotional relevance of stories. However, I think, they also introduce new paradigms that are reinforced by daily life existence (or not). That is, stories not only point out possibilities of paradigms as they also increase the complexity of paradigms, and there is probably a creative process of building these paradigm scenarios that consist in articulating relevant intersections between stories and daily events. And only this explains that, as de Sousa writes, “a paradigm can always be challenged in the light of a wider range of considerations than are available when the case is viewed in isolation” (de Sousa 1987, 187). Consequently, part of understanding well this notion of paradigm scenarios is to understand their malleability and how they function as models of emotional life, just as we have models of molecules to understand certain chemical reactions. However, in order to properly understand models requires understanding how they are used in laboratory practices, and how these practices are connected to life occurrences. In summary, understanding well the malleability of paradigm scenarios is to understand that emotions are open-ended. Why open? First because emotions change impact they have “as time does by,” second because they are subject to multiple modes of revision, and finally

because as emotions reveal something about ourselves and bring to the surface how we feel about our feelings and emotions, they modify the emotional tone of previous and directs future emotional processes.

The literature about children's emotional growth points out again and again how acquisition of language is crucial for emotional growth (Oatley & Jenkins 1996, 181, 187, 191, 202-203, 227). It places the question: why is it that becoming familiar with the vocabulary of emotion should be so crucial to emotional development itself.

I want to propose that being able to talk about emotions (saying one is scared, describing situations of fear, identifying why we weren't scared in similar situations, telling a scary story, etc.) allows us to better grasp, explore, and experiment paradigm scenarios, and consequently maintain and explore the open-character of emotional processes. More forcefully, what I am suggesting is that to the dynamic understanding of forming paradigm scenarios (story telling and daily life events) we should add that dialogue is a fundamental part of creating that intersection, for it is the way we incorporates reactions of others, emotional tones of environments, etc. That is, language is a tool of emotional life that helps to modify and solidify emotional activity because it allows us to describe emotional situations and such descriptions are simultaneously revelations about the situations at stake. The creative participation of language in emotional life lies in the ability of language to 1) direct attention in a specific situation, 2) naming the salient comparisons and contrasts with other emotional situation, 3) be part of the group of consequences (for example, making it possible to say “I'm sorry”) and allow enumeration of different consequences, and finally 4) allow the construction of a narrative in different ways, which means that somehow language is able to mimic the evaluative processes that underlies emotional activity. This last contribution of language partly explains why one can overcome emotional difficulties by talking about emotionally problematic events. At the same time, talking about such events is not sufficient³, for after one uses language to re-created the paradigm scenario of a certain emotional situation one still has to return to the daily life and experiment living with the reassessed paradigm scenario. In summary, language use in the emotional world implies development because it can emulate the evaluative process that underlies emotional activity, and consequently, allow not only a better experimentation of the complex identity of paradigm scenarios but also a creative tool for handling emotional difficulties.

Philosophy for Children and Emotional Growth

It has become more and more visible that emotional literacy should be promoted in schools (Kristjánsson 2006, 53), perhaps not so clear is how such emotional education should be done, and what does it mean to take up emotional literacy. I think Philosophy for Children can have an important role to play in participating in emotional education.

There are many ways in which one could show the relevance of Philosophy for Children program to foster emotional development and growth. For this paper, I want to concentrate in showing that Philosophy for Children keeps alive the lesson of feminist philosophy of aiming to keep at the surface the open character of emotional processes in at least two ways.

First, Philosophy for Children fosters the open-ended character of emotional processes by giving, through its novels, situations that are capable of being explored in the on going dialogue of the community of inquiry. This provides opportunities for participants of a community of inquiry to listen to other descriptions of the emotional connotation of emotional situation as well as explore their own descriptions. As some developmental psychologists assume, the realization of the possibility of emotional ambivalence of situations and episodes marks an important step in emotional development (Harris 1989, 109-125), and the sharing process of the community of inquiry is a constant place to compare and contrast emotions of the different participants. The practice of Philosophy for Children promotes the search for the sense of mixed emotions of situations and episodes and makes it part of the emotional growth of the members of the community. Clearly supporting the wise comment that different emotional realities are not “a psychological and

educational problem to be negotiated or overcome but, rather, as an avenue for emotional learning and growth” (Kristjánsson 2006, 51).

It is not just the case that talking about emotions in communities of inquiry helps participants to become more aware of the surrounding emotional world and thereby more capable of emotional control and emotional management. Of course, this increase of control is also desirable and the literature on children emotional development seems to indicate that language acquisition is determinate for emotion regulation. But in addition, dialogue about emotional situations and episodes, provides tools for continuing questioning and exploring the emotional world. For the argument that emotions are not closed entities (that is that emotional processes can be transformed, developed, changed



through new emotional experiences and reflection) is necessarily connected to the conception that emotions are also very revealing of what is important to us and how to we relate to the world. If we have this in mind, it is very important that children’s emotional reactions are not denied, like when we say “Don’t cry, don’t be said.” Instead we must develop practices of dialogue to engage with children in exploring what are they feeling, how it is revealing. When such continuing dialogue about emotional processes takes place, there is an interchange in creating the ability to name emotional processes, and simultaneously cultivate the ability to make such emotion-words sensitive to context and make them an integral part of the larger vocabulary of our emotional world.

The insights provided by dialogue about emotional situations in Philosophy for Children are, of course, neither automatic nor immediate. Learning emotional literacy is obviously a long-term process (Kristjánsson 2006, 54). This leads me to the second way in which I think Philosophy for Children lively embodies emotional

education. For in addition to providing situations and episodes through its novels, Philosophy for Children fosters, in its own practice, the cultivation of crucial emotional abilities. It is possible to illustrate this by showing how Philosophy for Children cultivates the ability to practice and learn empathy, or by showing how Philosophy for Children increases self-esteem, or how Philosophy for Children enables and develops trust, or how Philosophy for Children embodies the practice of Caring Thinking. For the present purpose of the paper I think it is insightful to acknowledge how Philosophy for Children gives rise and promotes hope because the sentiment of hope is crucial for a good understanding of the notion of inquiry that underlies its educational methodology.

In a very interesting article entitled “Transcendental Hope: Peirce, Hookway, and Pihlström on the Conditions for Inquiry” (2005), Elizabeth Cooke shows how hope is a necessary condition for inquiry. She begins by showing how for Charles Sanders Peirce, logic is based on the sentiments of faith, hope and charity (EP1:150, 1878) and that, “in inquiry, the role of hope is willingness to ask questions” (Cooke 2005, 663). Taken this way hope can be seen as a habit of openness, for it stands as an attitude of willingness to ask questions despite the lack of expectations (Cooke 2005, 664). However, the willingness to ask question is not born out of nowhere but arises from the practice of dialogue with others, which is internally connected to the achievement of thinking and keeping dialogues with oneself. Thus Cooke describes,

Asking questions is a linguistic habit. And when we develop these habits it is with the response of others in mind. Questions are directed to another person, either a hypothetical person, an actual person, an internalized person from one’s memory, or one’s future self. How one asks a question (to oneself, or another) is conditioned by one’s experience of asking actual questions and the responses one has received, in the same way Mead describes how an utterance acquires its meaning. When we learn to think through dialogue with other, the scope and content of the hope which we develop may be conditioned by the responses we received to our questions in the past. If our questions are ignored by those around us, or pursued with interest, or our ideas are entertained and imaginatively explored, then a corresponding attitude of hope develops, further conditioning the kinds of questions one entertains on one’s own. What is important is that the question is responded to—not necessarily with

successful or correct answers (Cooke 2005, 669)

The previous description is amazingly a wonderful explanation of what goes on in the establishment of the community of inquirers in Philosophy for Children and how participants of a community of inquiry carry the community with them. The social sphere of constructing and maintaining hope allows us to reaffirm that when hope stands as a willingness to ask questions it appears as a condition of all thinking because it embodies how

the individual (implicitly) hopes that another will respond in one way rather than another, even if that other person is her other self. While there may be different content to our different hopes, all hopes have some minimal content in common, namely, that there is another to respond (Cooke 2005, 668).

Therefore, hope is both a condition of inquiry and conditioned by the development of inquiry, for while hope stands as a condition to ask questions, hope also allows for more hope because asking questions and receiving responses reinforces the sentiment of hope. What this illustration shows is that the continual revision of emotional processes does not necessarily mean a modification of valence in emotional evaluation (like in the case of seemingly negative emotions), but can also be the reinforcement of the emotional process at stake. That is, open-ended character of emotional processes does not necessarily mean openness to change but includes openness to the continual assertion of the value and meaning of an emotional process. Taken in this way we can see how Philosophy for Children embodies the necessary acquisition and maintenance of hope as a condition of inquiry.

Hope for Future Research

When I started to write and collect material to write about this topic I found myself having too much material. Such that it seemed I had accepted to write a book on this subject. Honestly, I had no idea it would have been so productive and so full of insights and suggestions for future inquiry. As I organized the material and choose what was to be said and what was to be left aside I continually felt like I was leaving out some very important issues. Granted part of my motivation and justification was that I wanted to highlight the open character of emotional experiences. The following suggestions for further research are a way to make justice to some of the many

crucial topics that appear in the intersection of Emotions, Feminism and Philosophy for Children.

For a more detailed account of how Philosophy for Children provides opportunities to talk about emotions it would be very interesting to identify all possible emotional episodes and situations presented in the novels plus their material in the manuals (exercises and discussion plans) and examples of how they have been taken up in communities of inquiry (it would be an interesting starting point to compare different cultural reactions to emotional situations of the novels). In addition, it should be further investigated how the practice of Philosophy for Children cultivates trust, self-esteem, and empathy given the recent development of research on emotions. Also, emotional process seems a good place to delineate the attitude of the facilitator in the community of inquirers, for emotional development is an on going achievement and consequently an excellent way for the facilitator to test her genuine participation as a facilitator.

Finally, Caring thinking has long been a topic of Philosophy for Children and it would be very interesting to analyze the connections between Lipman's insights about caring thinking and the recent developments of emotion research.

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Footnotes

¹ The research and writing of this paper is supported by a post-doc fellowship [BPD/14175/2003] granted by *Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia*, and is part of a research project "Emotion, Cognition and Communication" [POCTI/FIL/58227/2004] of *Instituto de Filosofia da Linguagem*. I would like to thank Ann Sharp for keeping me in her memory, and for suggesting and challenging me to write on these issues.

² In this paper I refer only to use of natural languages, but there is a very important issue of how language of the arts in general and other forms of communication that either are used with natural languages or on its own (tone of voice, facial expression, body language, etc) is connected to emotional literacy and emotional growth.

³Newirth argues in his book *Between Emotion and Cognition. The Generative Unconscious*. He writes, "I have argued against the analytic injunction to make the unconscious conscious and have rather presented a neo-Kleinian argument for making consciousness unconscious. My paradoxical playing with Freud's famous statement is an attempt to rethink the linked concepts of consciousness and unconsciousness, subjectivity and objectivity, reality and fantasy, and the paranoid-schizoid and depressive modes of experience. It is the development of this active capacity for the creation of meaning ... that I have thought of as the subject of the unconscious, as each participant in the psychoanalytic dialogue attempts to speak from his unconscious symbolic perspective, the generative unconscious."