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Imaginary Emotions

I want to discuss the possibility that some of the emotions we ascribe to others, and to ourselves, do not exist. I mean more than the relatively weak claim that from the point of view of a different culture we might come to label our feelings differently, so there was no room for some emotion that seems familiar to us now.[1] That claim is made more probable by the possibility in question. But it is meant also to include the more drastic possibility that there really is no state corresponding to some familiar emotion term, to be picked out in any culture by any commonsense doctrines. This would be true of anger, for example, if people were simply deluding themselves, accepting a myth, in thinking that they were ever angry. In the case of anger the claim is just overwhelmingly implausible, so my aim is to find examples for which we can make more of a case.[2] By the end of the paper the possibility will remain just that, though I hope the reader will have come to understand why it is a serious possibility, one that we should be alert to. So I shall discuss a number of very different sources of examples, trying to bring out systematic ways in which ungrounded emotion-ascriptions might arise, and at the end I shall try to draw some general conclusions.

In looking for them I am not going to make the task disappointingly easy by counting as nonexistent emotions real emotions with false contents. Fearing ghosts, for example, may for all I know be a state of mind with some characteristic psychological features. It is also in a way an unreal state, since there are no ghosts, both for people who believe in ghosts and for those who do not but still feel jittery in haunted houses. (The latter *may* feel the emotion that Kendall Walton describes as pretending to themselves that they feel fear of ghosts, as discussed below.) The unreality of the emotion must consist in its features as an emotion. It must be closely tied, as a matter of the beliefs that people use to explain and characterise it, to beliefs that are irremediably wrong. Ascriptions on it must be based on mistakes about human psychology. To be definite: an

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emotion is unreal, or imaginary, or impossible as I will use all these as stylistic variants, when ascribers of the emotion have a description of it in mind, and there is no psychological state satisfying the description. (There may be a state of taking oneself to satisfy the description, or of acting in a way that would lead others to ascribe it to one. That is not the same.)

1. Fiction

Fictions migrate, from their homes in invented stories to our descriptions of real life. If a made-up person is described as being in a certain state of mind, and acting in a certain way as a result, then the way is opened for the behaviour of real people behaving in analogous ways to be explained in terms of this state of mind, even by themselves and sincerely. But the state of mind may not figure in the psychology of any real person. Consider an example.

In Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the eponymous character is a young man who commits suicide after falling unhappily in love with a recently married woman. He writes:

> I am afraid of myself! Is not my love for her of the purest, most holy, and most brotherly nature? Has my soul ever been sullied by a single sensual desire? but I will make no protestations. And now, ye nightly visions, how truly have those mortals understood you, who ascribe your various contradictory effects to some invincible power! This night I tremble at the avowal—I held her in my arms, locked in a close embrace: I pressed her to my bosom, and covered with countless kisses those dear lips which murmured in reply soft protestations of love. My sight became confused by the delicious intoxication of her eyes. Heavens! is it sinful to revel again in such happiness, to recall once more those rapturous moments with intense delight? Charlotte! Charlotte! I am lost! My senses are bewildered, my recollection is confused, mine eyes are bathed in tears—I am ill; and yet I am well—I wish for nothing—I have no desires—it were better I were gone.[3]

And so on. The emotion he is ascribing to himself is common in romantic works of those times. Call it disembodied passion. The central idea is that the feelings it provokes are intense and the devotion to the person who inspires it is overwhelming, but it does not motivate sexual behaviour. Strangely, though, it is directed only at people who are suitable to be sexual partners, typically young women when it is the emotion of a young man. So the questions for us are whether actual young men took themselves to be feeling disembodied passion, and whether there is any such emotion.

Both questions have clear answers. Thousands of young men identified with Werther, and disturbingly many of them killed themselves. But the existence of a state that is not sullied by a single sensual desire but which leads to dreams of being locked in a close embrace is more than dubious. All we have learned about the psychology of romantic attachment since Goethe's time tells against it. (Not that we can take Goethe as being as naive as his character.) The real emotion that we can take young men in the late 1700s to have really felt is that of *imagining* that they were feeling disembodied passion. I say "imagine" rather than "think" or "attribute" to bring out the self-dramatizing and self-construing aspect of the process: they told themselves stories in which they were the central characters featuring emotions such as these, and as a result they imagined performing corresponding actions for corresponding reasons, and as a result of this they actually performed some such actions, though not for the reasons they took to be their motives. The phenomenon here is a powerful and widespread one: imagining a narrative of oneself feeling an emotion—a narrative in which it is said that one has an emotion fitting a description—produces some of the same effects as an emotion fitting the description would have, were it psychologically possible. One tells a story to oneself in which one is described in terms of that emotion and one's actions explained in terms of it, and in reacting to this story one feels *something* in imagination—a combination of imagined physical sensations,[4] attributed motives, and impulses to act—which one then attributes to one's real self rather than just imagining it of one's fictional counterpart. (This can be facilitated by a Cartesian attitude to introspection, presenting impressions of self as authoritative.) Though the result is an erroneous self-attribution, the process builds on real processes of imagination and psychological attribution, processes that are undeniably real but whose detailed functioning is not well understood.[5]

Something like the Werther phenomenon is found in connection with many works of literature, especially literature that makes claims to be psychologically realistic, or which at least invites identification by its readers with its characters.[6] (Presumably there can be other cultural vehicles, other vectors for the meme, besides fiction. A *Treatise on the Passions* would serve well, if written in a way that engages the reader's imagination.) Identifying specific unreal emotions that in this way find an entry into human psychology is made harder by a typical narrative style in

which the protagonists' emotions are given in terms of their inner feelings, and their behaviour described separately, leaving it to the reader to collect the feelings into a unified emotion which then motivates the actions. When the story is told this way, the emotion is never named. One just reads "you feel like this, and then here is what you do." There could be many examples from 19th-century authors, from Flaubert to Dickens.[7] I return to the issue under "situationism" below, but the result is that there is an inevitably speculative step in the argument: the reader is taken to imagine an impossible but unnamed emotion from the fiction, which has emotion-like effects on her. The real emotion is "imagining oneself in the situation of fictional character F"—or "imagining one's story being told in the manner of F's story"—from which we must project to an impossible emotion that the reader takes herself really to have. The impossible emotion is thus hypothetical, and its existence is merely probable, though in many cases, such as that of Young Werther, it is hard to doubt. (A similar case would be that of courtly love, supported by a body of literature, belief, and practice, and encouraging its adherents to imagine that they are having experiences of a particular kind.[8])

One might describe the result as pretending that one has the literature-coloured emotion. This way of putting it makes a connection with Kendall Walton's much-discussed suggestion that in reacting emotionally to a work of fiction one experiences a pretend emotion, similar to but not the same as the real thing.[9] So is the romantic young man pretending to himself that he is experiencing lustless passion? Yes, in a way, but not in exactly Walton's terms. In Walton cases the pretence is that someone, typically oneself, is experiencing a real emotion, such as fear. On the other hand in Werther cases the pretence is that one is experiencing an emotion fitting a certain description, where there is no reason to believe that there is any such emotion. We could accept that there are many Walton cases without accepting that there are Werther cases. More subtly, we could accept that there are Werther cases while denying that there are Walton cases. We could do this by accepting that people pretend that they are in the grip of emotions such as lustless passion, typically as a result of reading fiction, but that in responding to fiction we do not experience pretend versions of the real emotions mentioned or expressed in the fiction. Young Werther *has* lustless passion in Goethe's novel, on this account, and the young man who has just read the book has a self-pretence

of it, but in relation to real women rather than while reacting to the book. I do not see that this position would be contradictory. A more attractive position, though, would be that there are both Werther cases and Kendall cases, and that both result from the interaction of the processes by which we understand and react to fictions with the processes by which we attribute states of mind to ourselves and others. To get really strong evidence for the position we would have to understand these processes and their interactions better than we do now.

2. Pseudodissociation

A Texan man in the 1950s discovers his wife in bed with another man. Ten minutes later he looks around the blood-stained bedroom and the two corpses and says "I just saw them, then everything went red, and when I came to they were dead." Blind rage. In Texas, until 1974 a husband who killed his wife and her lover caught *in flagrante delicto* was not held criminally responsible, so our man does not have to appeal to blind rage to escape prosecution. He might, though, in order to escape his own condemnation. (He may have loved his wife, and her lover may have been his friend, and he may know how he drove them towards one another.) In this case it will be attractive to him to suppose that he had been possessed by an emotion of anger so powerful and so different from normal anger that it created an agency out of his conscious control, and whose actions he cannot later remember.

A Victorian woman receives some very unwelcome news, which calls for an immediate response. Perhaps she is present when her husband reads a letter describing a large sum she has spent on jewellery, perhaps an attractive but unsuitable man makes a suggestion she ought not even to understand. She swoons to the floor, servants help her to a couch and bring smelling salts, and by the time she has regained consciousness she has a well-articulated response to the situation. She may indeed have fainted, debilitated by lack of exercise and tight corsets. She may also have artfully sunk to the floor, calculating that the disturbance will give her the time she needs. But there is a third possibility. She may have taken herself to have fainted, while suffering none of the physical symptoms of syncope, in a pattern that includes later thinking of her past in terms of the numbing advent of a horrified swoon. So on this third possibility she imagines herself to have felt an overpowering emotion, the swoon-induc-

ing horror, and to have acted the way in which, in the folklore of her times, women affected by this emotion do.[10] (*Is* she conscious during the swoon? As Daniel Dennett argues, consciousness is a matter of a person's retrospective self-narrative, and when there is a conflict between the moment-to-moment aspect and the now-its-all-over aspect there is not going to be a simple answer.[11])

The blind rage and the horrified swoon cases are similar. In both a person imagines what it would be like to have a certain emotion, as in *fiction* above, and then understands her own life in terms of it. She honestly takes herself to have experienced the emotion, by a process that will work for imaginable emotions whether or not they are imagined under descriptions that are realisable in actual human psychology. (So, to repeat, there is a real emotion here, the emotion of imagining what may be an impossible emotion.[12]) In both these cases the result is a kind of dissociation of the person from "her" actions.

It is not clear how the dissociative state in question is related to any real state, because the psychology is controversial. Psychology no longer talks of hysteria, and treats dissociation and somatisation separately. One possibility is that we have pseudodissociations, in that the causes and full nature are different from the literally dissociative phenomena that are a standard category of psychopathology.[13] Imagination-based pseudodissociation will have features in common with the real thing, notably obstacles to memory and to a sense that it was oneself acting. It will arise in situations in which it would be better if one's conscious deliberate self were not responsible for an action, when there is a culturally transmitted image of an emotion whose effects would dissociate that self from the action. So imagining that such an emotion has been at work will come to be among the person's options. This can happen as easily when the emotion is real as when it is a psychological impossibility.

Another possibility is that there are only the imagined states, that there is no systematic dissociative phenomena in which people act with no connection to their usual processes of anticipatory planning, momentary self-control, and retrospective memory. Instead, on this alternative, people can learn a theory that such dissociation is possible, and can then act on plans that they hide from themselves while generating memories that they are careful rarely to access. On either this account or the alternative that

allows real dissociative phenomena, self-deception based on a description or popular theory of such phenomena is possible. The question separating the accounts is whether the description is accurate. On either account there is a distinction between satisfying the description and imitating it, and there is no shortage of examples which are plausible cases of imitation.

3. Situationism

I shall assume that 1980s social psychologists were right when they concluded that we tend to give a wide range of traits a greater role as permanent causes of the behaviour of others, underestimating the role of other causes, usually not describable in common-sense terms, that depend on the particular varying situations in which people find themselves. (And that, conversely, in our own cases we overestimate the role of situation in comparison with character.[14]) I am thus aligning myself with more recent philosophical exploiters of these ideas who argue that a range of common-sense psychological concepts have false presuppositions that vitiate their explanatory use.

I take it that situationist considerations pose their greatest threat to attributions of virtue, followed by attributions of character, followed by attributions of emotion. That is true if we take the threat to be that there is nothing real to be attributed, rather than the weaker disqualifications that the attribution on some occasion is false or that it does not explain what it is claimed to. Consider courage, as a virtue—consistently standing up to threats when and only when this is the right thing to do—as a character-trait—having a tendency to stand up to threats, even when it would be easy to evade them—and as an emotion—feeling at a particular time the preparations for courageous actions.[15] Suppose that permanent traits of a person are only a small factor in determining whether they will stand up to a particular threat on a particular occasion. Then it would be hard for there to be any such virtue, as a particular person would have to have such a permanent trait. It would be less difficult for the character trait to exist, as one person can have a long-term disposition that makes it more likely that in suitable circumstances she will stand up to a threat than that another person will. And it would be least difficult for the emotion to be real, as the feelings and behavioural preparations can exist and affect the person's sense of what her life is like, even if features of the situation

often cause them not to be translated into action. It is even possible for someone to have regular feelings of courage in the presence of threats and then regularly to flinch, and give in or run away.[16]

But there are emotions that do not have this immunity. Stay in the territory of courage, and think of the emotions of the ideal brave person. She notices threats and the kinds of resistance that will minimize them, and also realises tendencies in herself that could lead her to flinch. She summons emotions of resoluteness to confront and disperse these tendencies, as if the tendencies too were enemies that must be resisted. "Go away, fear," shout her courageous emotions. "Ignore that," they assure her, of irrelevant or subversive aspects of the situation. These appeals succeed, so that fear is dispelled and situational features that would prevent her seeing the courageous route, or would allow fears and excuses into her motives, are managed.

Call this the emotion of Quixotic courage. It is an emotion that Don Quixote often *thought* he was experiencing, and which a real person can take herself to experience, or attribute to other real people, perhaps in self-demeaning comparison. But it is not a real, psychologically possible, emotion. There is no specification of the emotion that is satisfied by any real state. If there was such an emotion then people possessing it would be able to summon courage whenever it was required. But no one can. The impression that one can steel oneself to uniform reliable courage is like the conviction that in a Milgram-like situation one will resolutely resist the instructions to do what one knows one should not.[17] Quixotic courage, though, is more than the false belief that there are characteristics that can produce the virtue of uniform reliable courage. It is, or rather would be if it existed, an emotion that does the work of such characteristics.

The formula is: emotions that produce virtues. Once we see one we can think of many candidates. Many of them are just candidates, emotions whose existence is postulated by theories of virtuous thought or action and whose existence should be considered in the light of evidence. For example there is Epicurean Ataraxia, utter indifference to what nonperceptible facts might be true or what one's larger fate may be.[18] Perhaps there is such an emotion, enlightened calm. But perhaps, too, it is a fiction, a state that people can imagine entering and can persuade themselves that others have attained, but which in fact no one can attain.

4. Imagination and Emotion

The aim of this paper has been to produce candidates for unreal emotions. I have taken an emotion to be unreal when, like dragons or witches, it is not in the casual workings of the world: it is not in the psychological repertoire of real human beings. But just as it takes physics and biology to assure us that dragons and witches do not—cannot—exist, it takes psychology—real data-based psychology and not psychological speculation—to assure us that an emotion cannot exist. So we cannot clinch the case against any particular candidate with familiar facts, made-up examples, intuition and logic alone. What we can do with these means is to make a case that there are likely to be emotions which seem real to us as descriptions of our experience and as explanations of other people's behaviour but which are not real possibilities for us. Moreover, we can extract suggestions about where to look for them. The main suggestion that has emerged concerns the link between emotion and imagination.

It is essential here that the experience of imagining an emotion resembles that of having one. In fact very often it is one, a claim that I have defended elsewhere. It is this that makes moral emotions such as shame and condemnation possible. In shame, to summarise a formula that really ought to be longer and subtler, one imagines that some censorious audience feels hostility to one's failings, and in condemnation one imagines that some respected authority feels hostility to the failings of another. Both are emotions themselves—shame can be unbearably painful and condemnation can become obsessively vivid—and both have a subjective resemblance to the emotions that they imagine. Shame feels like receiving hostility and condemnation feels like directing it. And indeed shame tends to generate defensiveness and condemnation tends to generate hostility. It is the same in the cases discussed in this paper. First a person imagines having an emotion, which may sometimes be harder than actually having it when the emotion is real but is certainly easier when the emotion does not exist. This imaginative experience is much like an emotion, so the person takes herself to be having the emotion that she imagines, and acts or expects a disposition to act accordingly.[19]

I take our self-descriptions to be suffused with states generated in this way. To this extent our lives are fictions of which we are coauthors, as many have suggested.[20] Such fictionalism loses its force, though, to the

extent that it fails to contrast the real and the unreal. If everything is a fiction then nothing is. But the view sketched here contrasts impossible emotions such as disembodied passion, blind rage, and Quixotic courage with real ones such as affection, anger, and bravery. In fact it relies on there being a fictional/actual contrast to give substance to the slogan "imagining a fictional emotion is a real emotion." The category of emotion itself may be an artefact that could do with much refinement before it corresponds to any psychological kind, but these particular states are things that really happen to us.

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NOTES

1. What we know about emotions in other cultures is summarised in ch. 1 of Fox (2008). See also Shaver (1992). One can get something near to an insider's sense of a different system of emotions from studies of classical cultures. See Williams (1993), Kaster (2005), Braund and Gill (2007).
2. For the immediacy and intuitive reality of many emotions see Goldie (2000) and Deonna and Teroni (2012).
3. Goethe (1774)
4. Forms of imagined physical sensations: imagining a specific sensation, and imagining having a sensation fitting some description, which one may or may not have ever had and where there may or may not be sensations fitting the description.
5. Some of the issues that would be needed for a discussion of this topic are treated in Morton (2013).
6. Confusions of real and fictional characters are discussed in Currie (2011) and build on the general account in Currie (1995).
7. The discussion of "free indirect style" in Wood (2009) is all about subtle expressions of a fictional person's point of view.
8. The example was suggested to me by Mark Alfano.
9. Walton (1978; 1990).
10. Nora, in Ibsen's *A Doll's House,* does not resort to, or find herself, swooning. It is a sign of the cultural difference between now and the 1880s that we do not find this remarkable.
11. See part II of Dennett (1992).
12. The topic of the status of imagined emotions as emotions themselves is very tricky and needs an extended discussion, which I give it in Morton (2013). For our purposes here the argument can use the intuitive force of my examples of imagined emotions as evidence that there is often an emotion-like aspect to the act of imagining an emotion.

13. See Ross et. al. (2002).

14. Much of this work is summarised in Nisbett and Ross (1991). See also Doris (2002) and ch. 3 of Goldie (2004). The topic has gone cold, in that there it is no longer researched in psychology, and philosophers say "as social psychologists have shown." But in fact many interesting and delicate questions are still open.

15. See Morton (2002) for more on emotion-virtue-character.

16. I discuss the relation between emotions, character traits, and virtues in Morton (2002).

17. Discussed in Nisbett and Ross (1980).

18. Stoic views of emotion are discussed in Nussbaum (2001), Braund and Gilbert (2007), and Braund and Gill (2003). It is interesting that in Kaster (2005) Roman emotions are largely identified by corresponding virtues. Here too I have been helped by a suggestion from Mark Alfano.

19. For more discussion of the retrospective moral emotions and of the emotional status of imagined emotion see Morton (2013).

20. For one such suggestion see Demeter (2010) and for a rather different one Alfano (2013).

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