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The Transformation of Emotion: First and Third Person Perspectives in Developmental Context

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ABSTRACT

Shun argues that the distinction made between emotions experienced from the first-person perspective and those from the third-person perspective does not capture our everyday emotional experience. My proposal is that even if we accept this claim, first- and third-person perspective taking is still crucial in the development of our emotional psychology. This is so in two respects. First, the features of intimacy and impartiality that mark adult emotional response are a product of a developmental process that involves perspective taking. Second, perspective taking is a crucial part of refining and developing virtuous emotional responses.

Shun [2022] argues that the distinction made between emotions experienced from the first-person perspective and those from the third-person perspective does not capture our everyday emotional experience. My proposal is that even if we accept this claim, first- and third-person perspective taking is still crucial in the *development* of our emotional psychology in two ways: it allows us to illuminate the contours of adult emotional responses and it is an invaluable way in which we virtuously refine our emotional responses. I will briefly examine Shun's claim (§1), before providing a sketch of how the distinction between first- and third-person perspectives plays a crucial role in understanding the development of both anger and sympathy (§2). I then show how the resulting account can aid us in our reflection on moral development (§3).

§1

Shun illustrates his primary claim by examining the domain of anger and compassion. In the domain of anger-related emotions, a distinction is usually made between resentment and indignation [Strawson 1962]. Resentment is supposed to be an emotion experienced in response to a norm violation that is committed against oneself. Indignation, on the other hand, is a distinct attitude experienced in response to a norm violation that is committed against some third party. Similarly, a common distinction is made between empathy and sympathy [Darwall 1998]. Empathy is supposed to be a

stepping into the shoes of another to experience a harm from their first-person perspective, while sympathy is supposed to be a kind of care for another's well-being that is experienced from the third-person perspective.

Shun [2022] points out several features of ordinary emotional experience that suggest this distinction is not as categorical as has been presented and hence not useful in theorising. His general strategy consists in showing how, even in paradigmatic cases where the situation appears to call for a first- or third-person response, the emotional response of the agent can easily display features from the alternate perspective. In the realm of anger, I can thus respond in a violent and 'personal' manner to a norm-violating offence against someone else. I can also respond in a detached manner, registering an offence without taking it 'personally', even when an offence has been committed against my person. In the realm of compassion, we can respond in an intimate and unmediated fashion to harms involving others the same way we would respond to a harm involving ourselves instead of simply caring from a third-person perspective. At the same time, this caring need not be the same as projecting ourselves into the situation of others and 'sharing their pain' from a first-person perspective.

The emotional responses we experience thus typically display both features of intimacy and a kind of 'impartiality' that I will provide a gloss on later. Elsewhere, Shun [ibid.] heralds emotional responses that are maximally intimate but also maximally impartial as the normative ideal. The question arises, however, as to how that ideal is meant to be achieved. I argue that the kinds of perspective taking that Shun overlooks are crucial to the development of adult emotional responses and also to the development of his normative ideal.

§2

My claim is that the features of intimacy and impartiality that mark our emotional responses to ourselves and others are explained by forms of perspective taking that inform our emotional development. To be clear, these are not the forms of perspective taking that Shun primarily targets in his lead article, nonetheless, I suggest that understanding perspective taking will serve to illuminate the contours of the very emotional responses that Shun describes. The story that I tell here draws from Nussbaum's [2001] account of emotional development, but also takes insights from Darwall's [1998] account of empathy and sympathy to draw attention to the role of perspective taking. The details of Nussbaum's account, which draws from psychoanalytic theory, are no doubt controversial. Regardless, one may treat the account as a heuristic; it provides a useful illustration of the contexts within which perspective taking takes place. What I want to draw from the story is primarily the effect of perspective taking on the development of the emotions.

The newborn infant 'has no clear sense of the boundaries of self and other' [Nussbaum 2001: 190]. She experiences a world that variously satisfies and frustrates her needs but is unaware of the agency of others. At this stage, we may presume, her primitive emotions are experienced purely from the first-person point of view. Her interactions with her caregivers, however, provide the context through which more specific emotional responses are developed. Gradually the infant will recognise that both good things and frustrations have sources in external agency and from this, primitive gratitude and anger start to form. At some stage, however, the child

begins to realise that both anger and gratitude are directed to the same object, generating a 'crisis of ambivalence' [ibid.: 193]. The emotion of guilt arises here, because the child realises that 'the person who had saved me from the wasps was the one whom I had bitten' [ibid.: 214]. The solution to this crisis is ultimately for the child to accept proper boundaries to one's demands—notions of justice and reparation appear that constrain the child's responses and provide a means for the child to 'atone' for the badness she sees within herself. This story provides a general frame within which emotional responses develop. However, I think that this development is inadequately explained until we flesh out the role of perspective taking.

To being with, note that the crisis of ambivalence is supposed to be generated by the recognition that anger and gratitude are directed to the same object—but why would this be so? For the crisis to generate guilt, the problem cannot merely be that there is a tension between rejecting and being drawn to the same object. Instead, it must be that the child recognises that the 'biting' has harmed the caregiver and is incongruous with the care expressed in the child's primitive gratitude. It is thus crucial that the problem is generated because the child begins to care for her caregiver as a person and not as a mere object.

It is here that Darwall's [1998] account of empathy and sympathy is crucial. It is crucial to Darwall's account that empathy, though distinct, is supposed to inform sympathy. Taking the other's perspective and experiencing the other's situation from their point of view is what informs me that something is bad or good for you. It is only through this that my sympathy for you as a person can have content. It does not mean that I simulate your experiences each time I sympathise, but that my third-personal sympathy obtains its current shape because of previous acts of empathy. Sympathy is therefore an appreciation of your hurt 'from my standpoint in appreciation of yours' [ibid.: 269]. The intimacy of the response is therefore a product of sympathy being informed by empathy. The crisis of ambivalence can thus only be generated when the child experiences a form of sympathy informed by empathy—a form of first-personally informed caring for her caregiver.

This crisis is now supposed to generate pressure for the child to regulate her emotional responses to deal with her anger. Through this regulation, I suggest, the child's primitive frustration becomes transformed into the reactive attitude of anger. Perspective taking plays a crucial role again. Adam Smith's [1853] insights into the role of perspective taking, laid out in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, are especially helpful here. According to him, our ability to take the perspective of the other is not simply a form of emotional contagion where we simply 'catch' the emotion of the other. Instead, we can put ourselves in their situation and figure out what we would experience if we were them. This leads to the possibility that we recognise that another's expressed emotion and the emotion the situation appears to call for come apart. The possibility of mismatch thus leads us to form a conception of situations that *warrants* (or not) certain emotions instead of merely eliciting them. Once we have obtained this ability, however, we are also able to stand back from our own emotional responses and look at them from a third-person perspective to wonder if *our* responses are warranted. This sort of perspective taking is 'central to the formation of normative communities—like minded groups who can agree on norms of feeling' [Darwall 1998: 270].

When these kinds of norms become operative, the child does not merely feel guilt when they are flouted; instead she also, with her caretaker's help, begins to regulate her

emotions in accordance with them. As the child's emotional responses grow increasingly in line with the response that appears apt when she takes the third-person perspective on herself, the response can come to stand as a reliable indicator for their own propriety. The experience of anger now becomes an experience of the situation *as warranting anger*. This does not mean, of course, that when we are angry we always believe, all things considered, that someone has culpably offended us in some way, but that it will feel to us as if it is the case.[1] Crucially, anger will now present to me the conditions that warrant it from the third-person point of view. When I am angry, it will seem to me not just that *I* should not be treated in some way, but that anyone who is in my position should not be treated in that way. This explains why it is difficult to maintain explicit hypocrisy in our anger.[2] If I have just stepped on your foot and thought nothing of it and then you stepped on mine, it seems difficult for me to be angry with you without thinking there is some justification that distinguishes my position from yours (perhaps because I believe I did it accidentally, or because I believe I have a special status that constitutes a relevant difference between us). Once again, therefore, it is not that we undergo an act of perspective taking every time we are angry, but that our ability to do so has informed and transformed our anger.

In this way, we see how adult emotional responses can come to display both intimacy and impartiality; intimacy even when it comes to emotional responses to events befalling other persons (because they have been informed by empathy) and impartiality even when it comes to emotional responses to events that befall ourselves (because they have been informed by the notion of propriety obtained from a third-person perspective).

§3

In this final section, I make a further claim: the distinction between the first- and third-person forms of perspective taking is also crucial in thinking about how emotional responses can be refined. Perspective taking is not only crucial in the development of adult emotional responses, it is also crucial in the development of *virtuous* emotional responses. It is thus crucial in both *constructing* and *refining* our emotions.

Let's first consider how to understand defect in our emotional responses. Clearly, one way our emotional responses can be defective is if we are impaired in our ability to take the perspective of others and to ascribe mental states to them. In typical human development, however, most of our emotional responses still display some defect to a larger or smaller degree and I will focus on the kinds of defects that plague persons with a typical human development.

The normative ideal that Shun [2018] wants to advocate is what he calls the ideal of 'no self'. Our emotional responses are supposed to 'reside in things and not in the self' and our emotional faculties are to be as an untainted mirror: they are to accurately represent the evaluative situation, not obscure it via undue influence from our own

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[1] If one subscribes to the perceptual theory of the emotions, one would have a good account of this: the phenomena would then be akin to being subject to a perceptual illusion (see e.g. Tappolet [2016]; Döring [2009]; Yip [2021]).

[2] Indeed, this is probably how Strawson understood indignation. To feel indignation is to conceive of some injury as an affront to persons in general, but you can take such an attitude even when you yourself are the direct personal target of the injury—so long as you conceive of your injury under the general description. Thanks to Victoria McGeer for pointing this out to me.

persons. Now, I have suggested that typical human development would lead us to develop emotional responses that already bear the mark of impartiality in the sense that they present a situation to us as warranting that response not just from our point of view but from the third-person point of view. How do we make sense of the way our emotional responses fall short on this account?

The analogy of the mirror is helpful here. A tainted mirror continues to purport to represent the objects it reflects, but it ascribes to them features that are not truly in the object but arise instead from the mirror. In the same way, we should understand the self 'intruding' into our emotional experiences not so much as that fundamentally changing the *kind* of emotional response but instead skewing the evaluative landscape that the emotion presents to us. The unreasonable boss who becomes furious with her employee at his tiny mistake tends to view the mistake as culpably deliberate and perhaps indicating a serious character defect. When she herself commits the same mistake, however, the issue appears small, or she notices excusing reasons that get her off the hook. The veneer of impartiality is thus maintained in the emotional response. We see this frequently in our political landscape today: personal harms or offences are frequently 'moralised'. A harsh or insensitive tweet is taken not just as some personal offence but as indicative of pervasive systems of injustice, or a slight is interpreted as disrespect for whole ways of life. Anger is thus often not just about us in some deeply first-personal way, but often presents to us things that matter from the third-person perspective apart from our parochial concerns.

If this is the case, how can we improve our emotional responses? I suggest that perspective taking plays an important role here. Consider Shun's proposal that one way to move towards his normative ideal is to increasingly 'sensitise our heart' to others outside our immediate relations so that our responses to their plight becomes increasingly akin to the responses to our own. How is this supposed to happen? Shun [ibid.] also mentions that one of the ways we 'sensitise the hearts' of our children involves bringing them to poorer countries so that they have more direct contact with worse off persons. While this is helpful, one danger is that it might develop an attitude of insensitive paternalism. Even when we see the plight of the poor in distant lands, we frequently understand their plight on our terms instead of theirs. We miss, for example, the agency they express in their situation or certain paralysing features of their social environment. We fail to see this because the problems that loom large in our view of their situation are those that are legible from our own perspective. Once again, the self intrudes. To develop a mature sympathy, we must be able to first bracket our assumptions or immediate reactions to understand their situation and their responses on their terms.[3] This need not mean that we endorse all their responses

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[3] As one reviewer points out, Shun would certainly agree that it is important to understand the situation and minimise our own 'injection' that distorts the mirroring. One worry that might be raised, however, is that the kind of perspective-taking I've described is not a necessary means for doing so. For example, it may be difficult to fully empathise with another in a radically different social position from yours, but we can still try to learn more about the circumstances they are in. Complete empathy is thus not always possible, but there are other means by which we can gain a clearer picture of the situation.

I agree that there will be cases in which, because of differences in social position, one can never fully empathise with another. This does not mean, however, that perspective taking is not important. This is so for two reasons. First, even if empathy is not necessary to recognize certain features of the situation, it may remain an important heuristic that helps us to bracket our assumptions and see the situation more clearly. Second, some of the relevant features of the situation may be perspective-dependent features. We need to respond not only to the (perspective-independent) facts of the situation, but what these facts *mean* to the other person. Thus, for example, someone may *experience* having to report one's expenses to a social

to the situation, but without first sorting out important differences between our assumptions and their circumstances we will be unable to see the situation clearly to have the right kind of compassion.[4]

Perspective taking is thus crucial to refining our emotional responses in order to more accurately and sensitively attune to the situation as it really is. This is because perspective taking is crucial in allowing us to shed the distortions that comes from our partial view of the situation. The movement towards virtuous emotional maturity, then, is a movement away from egocentricity. Not away from egocentricity in the *form* of our emotional responses, but in their *content*; as the feature of impartiality already marks the responses of typical human adults. This happens through our taking seriously the perspectives of others in empathy. Indeed, there appear to be strands in *The Analects* [Confucius 2000] that are consonant with this view of moral development.[5] Consider the following passage:

> Tzu-kung asked, 'Is there a single word which can be a guide to conduct throughout one's life?'
>
> The Master said, 'It is perhaps the word '*shu*'. Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.' [*Analects* 15:24]

The character 'shu', sometimes translated reciprocity, has been understood as 'using oneself as a measure in gauging the wishes of others' [Lau 2000]. There are at least two steps described by Confucius: first consulting what your own desires would be if you were in the other person's situation (surely a kind of projective imagination along the lines of empathy), and then making sure you do not do anything to others that you do not want to be done to yourself. Indeed, to achieve this perspective is a long and difficult process; when elsewhere Zi Gong claims that 'What I do not wish others to impose on me, I wish not to impose on others either', Confucius' curt reply to him is that 'that is quite beyond you'. Bridging this self-other gap thus does not come naturally by Confucian lights but is a process, one in which proper disciplined perspective taking plays a key role. I suggest that the account of first- and third-person perspective taking I have sketched here is one plausible way of fleshing out this process.

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worker every month as a loss of dignity. Whether we agree that such a situation really constitutes a loss of dignity is beside the point—that it *means* this to another person should be part of the features we are attuned to when properly responding to them. This is so even if, according to Shun's Confucian sage, our aim is to try to get the person to a position where they no longer see such things as threatening one's dignity. These features cannot be seen merely by collecting facts but are recognized from a first-person perspective, hence the need for empathy.

[4] For a similar view of the normative development of sympathy based on Adam Smith, see (Ben-Moshe 2020).
[5] I'd like to thank Esther Klein for directing me to this passage.

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