

THE PASSIONATE LIFE

A Series on The
Philosophy of Emotions
by Robert C. Solomon

Not Passion's Slave: Emotions and Choice

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ROBERT C. SOLOMON

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Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core

Shakespeare, *Hamlet* Act III, Scene ii.

which made up emotions was the fact that they were either pleasurable or painful. David Hume, for instance, distinguished love and hate, pride and humility, in this way. Spinoza sometimes made similar suggestions, and Spinoza's best twentieth-century incarnation, in the person of Dutch psychologist Nico Frijda, has argued the same.⁷ Others, notably the Stoics and later Spinoza, suggested that the emotions were not so much feelings as "judgments" or "thoughts" about the world and oneself. I locate myself in this tradition. Nico Frijda, leaning toward behavioral (but not behaviorist) analysis, insisted that they were proto-actions, intentions, action tendencies. Outright behaviorists suggested, with varying degrees of implausibility, that emotions were *nothing but* behavior and dispositions to behave in certain ways, thus remaining Cartesians but simply denying "the ghost in the machine." More often than not, however, they hung onto some vestige of the mental, for instance, Ryle's infamous "twinges and itches" and Wittgenstein's "wheel that plays no part in the mechanism."⁸ Others suggested that emotions were complexes of beliefs and desires—the rather simpleminded model of "folk psychology" that now reigns supreme in some cognitive science circles. But what all of these views have in common is their shared acceptance (or, in the case of behaviorism, a defiant rejection) of an emotion as an "inner" psychological state. The differences between these views are significant, of course, and I have spent much of my career defending one of them over the others. But I now see the challenge in a very different way, one that provides a Hegelian *aufhebung* to the "emotions are judgments" view and relocates it in non-Cartesian space.

One of the philosophers who best pursued a nondualistic alternative to the understanding of emotion was James's pragmatist colleague John Dewey. He insisted on a holistic, all-embracing view of emotion. Another is Martin Heidegger, whose obscurity on other matters did not seem to cloud his view of "moods" (*Stimmung*, but which, in his treatment, clearly includes many emotions), and Sartre, who despite his seemingly Cartesian ontology defended a view of emotions (and consciousness in general) as thoroughly political.⁹ Other such views can be found scattered through the history of philosophy and psychology (before those fields were so unfortunately wrenched apart by university administrators and mutually jealous colleagues). But the prototype of the political approach still seems to me to be Aristotle. What all of *these* views have in common is a perspective on emotions as primarily situated in human relationships and inextricable from ethics.¹⁰ The problem, as I now see it, is to retain the personal and experiential ("phenomenological") grasp of emotions but situate the emotions in a larger social context, treating them not only as the result of, but also as constituted in relations with, other people.¹¹

The Purpose(s) of Emotions

One of the more exciting theses about emotion to (re)emerge in the twentieth century is the insistence that emotions are purposive. They have what Jean-Paul Sartre

called *finalité*.¹² That is to say, they are not only functional and occasionally advantageous, and they are not just the fortuitous residue of fickle evolution; they are *in themselves* strategic and political. To put it differently and somewhat controversially, emotions do not just "happen" to us, as the whole language of "passion" and "being struck by" would suggest. They are, with some contentious stretching of the term, activities that we "do," strategems that work for us, both individually and collectively. Or, to put it yet another way, there is a sense in which the emotions can be said to be rational (or irrational) despite the fact that "rationality" is often restricted to those contexts involving articulate thought and calculation. (Vengeance born of anger is exemplary here.) But rationality is often used in an "instrumental" way as well, to refer to the choice of means employed to reach some end. Insofar as emotions are purposive, they have ends. It is not just a matter of their happening (and how to get rid of or enjoy them). There are also questions about what will *satisfy* them. As strategies, emotions seek their own satisfaction, in anger, through vengeance, in hatred, through vanquishing, in love, through "possessing." This is not to say that all emotions can be satisfied or have conditions of satisfaction. (Grief, for example, is an emotion with no such conditions, except *per impossible*, the resurrection of the lost loved one.) Nevertheless, even such emotions may have a purpose or purposes, for example, to mend a suddenly broken life, not only for the individual but for the group together.

No doubt much of this can be explained via both biological and cultural evolution, but that is not the critical point. Of course, one can readily surmise, the energizing supplied by both anger and fear prepares an organism for extraordinary bursts of aggression or retreat, as the case may be. Such an account of emotions requires nothing whatever by way of self-awareness or voluntariness. In evolutionary theory, an individual or a species need not "figure out" its adaptive advantages. It simply lucks into them. It turns out that frogs and butterflies which resemble poisonous members of their classes have a competitive advantage. They are not so often eaten. It turns out that certain male birds with more tail plumage are more likely to attract a mate and thus have a reproductive advantage. So, too, it will turn out that creatures with a certain temperament, who react emotionally and express certain emotions in appropriate situations, may have a competitive or reproductive advantage. A dog that growls and attacks may be better suited to survive in certain environments. Dogs that run, hide, or cuddle may have competitive or reproductive advantages in other environments. (Dog breeders thus supplement Nature with marketing considerations.) I take it that none of this, as such, is all that controversial.

But most of what passes for evolutionary explanations of emotion in both psychology and philosophy these days are no more enlightening than Molière's famous explanation of the powers of a sleeping potion. To show that something serves a purpose or a function says no more and no less about the evolutionary process than the crudest creationist or contingency theories. Evolution is the new magic wand, which with a wave changes something inexplicable into something only seemingly ex-