

Cognitive Theories of Emotions

According to cognitive theories, emotions are constituted by judgments. One influential cognitivist theory has been defended by Martha Nussbaum. Other prominent proponents of cognitivist theories include Solomon.

According to Nussbaum:

"emotions are forms of evaluative judgment that ascribe to certain things and persons outside a person's own control great importance for the person's own flourishing. Emotions are thus, in effect, acknowledgements of neediness and lack of self-sufficiency." (p. 22)

Emotions always involve thought of an object combined with thought of the object's value or importance.

Who is Nussbaum's opponent? She suggests it's someone who thinks that "emotions are "non reasoning movements", unthinking energies that simply push the person around and do not relate to conscious perceptions.

A worry: Does anyone really hold this view? Is Nussbaum attacking a straw man here?

Establishing that Judgments are Necessary for Emotions

Nussbaum's central motivation for going in for a judgment view: Emotions are about something. They have intentional objects.

What exactly does that mean?

One is simply that the content of emotions is opaque; we cannot substitute co-referring terms *salva veritate*. (Oedipus is delighted that he married Jocasta but not that he married his mother.)

More substantively emotions have formal objects: "my fear's very identity as fear depends on its having some such object: take that away and it becomes a mere trembling or heart-leaping" (p. 187)

What does formal object mean? It's the "proper" object for an emotion. As Kenny puts it: "one cannot be afraid of just anything" (1963, p. 192).

What are the formal objects of emotions? Each emotion has its own specific formal object but according to Nussbaum the class of these formal objects has something in common:

they all concern something of value to the agent

they are all linked to partiality: it's the fact that the woman is my mother, that inspires grief.

From this, Nussbaum suggests a general role for emotions:

Emotions are eudaimonistic: they have to do with the person's flourishing. Eudaimonia involves all things to which the agent ascribes intrinsic value, including relationships with others.

Nussbaum suggests that emotions have formal objects in virtue of involving complex beliefs about the object. For example:

Fear: In order to have fear "I must believe that bad events are impending; that they are not trivially, but seriously bad; that I am not in a position to ward them off; that, on the other hand, my doom is not sealed, but there is still some uncertainty about what may befall."

Anger: "In order to have anger, I must have an even more complex set of beliefs: that there has been some damage to me or to something or someone close to me; that the damage is not trivial but

significant; that it was done by someone; that it was done willingly; that it would be right for the perpetrator of the damage to be punished."

According to Nussbaum, each of these individual beliefs are necessary for fear or anger to be present. These beliefs are essential to the identity of the emotion. And they are essential to discriminating between emotions: without them, going by feeling alone, it's impossible to tell whether what I'm feeling is fear or grief or pity.

But what about feeling an emotion contrary to one's judgment? (These are called "recalcitrant emotions")

Are Judgments Sufficient?

Nussbaum's arguments give us some reasons to accept that evaluative judgments may be necessary for emotions. But are they sufficient? Do they constitute them? Why not adopt an alternative: Hybrid View: Beliefs are constituent parts but emotions also involve non-belief parts.

One reason for adopting the hybrid view is that a purely cognitive view seems ill-equipped to account for the phenomenology of emotions. The fact that having an emotion feels a particular way.

Nussbaum suggests that what we need is not to supplement judgments with other things but to recognize that judgment is richer than we might think.

In particular, acceptance of evaluative, eudaimonistic propositions always goes along with "disturbance" with a "particular feeling".

Nussbaum's example: Suppose I had said to the nurse, "Yes, I see that a person I love deeply is dead and that I'll never see her again. But I am fine; I am not disturbed at all."

According to Nussbaum, such a person is not really making the judgment that the person she loves is dead:

"She may be saying those words, but there is something that she is withholding. Or, if she is assenting, it is not to that same proposition but perhaps the proposition "Betty Craven is dead." ... What I could not be fully acknowledging or realizing is the thought "A person whom I deeply love, who is central to my life, had died," for to recognize this is to be deeply disturbed."

Why not think of the embodied component – the "disturbance" – as being caused by the judgment? Rather than being part of it?

According to Nussbaum, this just gets the experience wrong. We do not first coolly judge that our loved one is dead and then set about grieving: "the real, complete, recognition of that terrible event...is the upheaval." (p. 194)

So, the suggestion is that evaluative, eudaimonistic judgments involve bodily components, and so they have distinct phenomenology.

Questions: How plausible is this? Is there something special here about evaluative, eudaimonistic judgments as opposed to judgments in general?

Other Necessary Conditions?

Let's grant that eudaimonistic value judgements go along with a certain kind of upheaval. Does this not leave out other central features of emotions?

What about bodily states? According to Nussbaum, these are not necessary:

"There usually will be bodily sensations and changes involved in grieving, but if we discovered that my blood pressure was quite low during this whole episode, or that my pulse rate never went above sixty, there would not, I think, be the slightest reason to conclude that I was not grieving." (p. 195)

Perhaps Nussbaum is right that the bodily states themselves are not necessary. (Though, compare William James!) But is it plausible that not even the (apparent) perception/feeling of such bodily states is necessary?

According to Nussbaum, it's only feelings with rich intentional content that are truly necessary for emotions, e.g. the "feeling of emptiness of one's life without a certain person". But these feelings are really just judgments. Thinner feelings "fatigue, extra energy" are not necessary.

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