philosophie.ch
SWISS PORTAL FOR PHILOSOPHY

**Swiss Philosophical Preprint Series**

**# 56**

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# Moral Emotions

Added 28/02/2009

ISSN 1662-937X

An abridged version of this essay is to appear in eds. David Sander & Klaus Scherer, *Oxford Companion to the Affective Sciences*, OUP.

# MORAL EMOTIONS

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Emotions are said to be moral, as opposed to non-moral, in virtue of their objects. They are also said to be moral, for example morally good, as opposed to immoral, for example morally bad or evil, in virtue of their objects, nature, motives, functions or effects. The definition and content of moral matters are even more contested and contestable than the nature of emotions and of other affective phenomena. At the very least we should distinguish moral norms (one ought to keep one's promises, one ought not to tell lies), moral obligations (to look after one's aged parents), moral right and wrong (murder), moral values (goodness, evil) and moral virtues (courage). And different accounts of morals and of morality understand norms, values and virtues and their interrelations in different ways. For example, such accounts disagree (1) about the relation between moral and non-moral oughts (the norms of prudence and rationality), the relation between moral and non-moral values (cognitive and aesthetic values, the values of pleasure and well-being, vital values such as health), and the relation between moral and intellectual virtues (accuracy, open-mindedness); and (2) about the moral weight to be attached to self-regarding attitudes and behaviour (egoism, egotism, self-love, self-respect, self-esteem, amour propre) and other-regarding attitudes and behaviour (altruism, "empathy", sympathy, intolerance). Thus we may expect the range of putative moral emotions to display a bewildering variety.

Are there emotions which are moral, as opposed to non-moral, simply in virtue of the nature of their objects? The question is ambiguous. It may be understood as a question about *types of emotions* or about *instances* of types of emotions.

Is there an emotion every instance of which is moral in virtue of its object? A favourite candidate is: guilt-feelings. The object of a feeling of guilt is some action of the agent which he takes to involve an infringement of some moral ought or obligation, an action which may simply be an omission, a failure to do the right thing. But are guilt-feelings really emotions (Ortony 1987)? Unlike emotional episodes of shame, pride and remorse they are often long-lasting. Guilt weighs on one, it is a burden. Shame, pride and remorse may recur regularly (in the shame- pride- or remorse-prone) but do they last like guilt? Guilt, once triggered, is an enduring affective state. But if enduring affective states are merely dispositions and emotions are either episodes or dispositions,

then guilt-feelings are indeed moral emotions. They are also, it may be thought, morally valuable: someone who is incapable of guilt-feelings is morally defective. On the other hand, novelists such as Dostoievski and Freud and Heidegger report guilt-feelings which have objects quite different from infringements of moral norms or which have no objects at all.

Instances of many types of emotions have as their objects moral features of people, actions and situations. Lies, corruption or betrayal may trigger moral disgust. One may hope that one will do one's duty. Indignation or resentment may be triggered by the injustice of an action or of a situation; shame by the sudden realisation that one has failed to live up to some moral ideal. One may take pride in one's moral goodness or virtue. Although such indignation, shame and pride are reactions to (what seem to be) moral properties and are therefore moral (as opposed to non-moral) emotions, one may think that, whereas the indignation and shame described are morally valuable or morally indifferent, pride in or admiration of one's moral goodness or moral excellence is immoral, a bad thing or evil. (In some languages there is a clear distinction between morally bad prides and a pride which is not morally bad and may be, for one reason or another, morally positive: "orgueil" vs "fierté", "Hochmut" vs "Stolz" (Kristjánsson 2006)). In some traditions affective pro-attitudes towards one's moral goodness or excellence count as pharisaical. The Pharisee is a man who not only admires his own generosity or political commitments but admires these because they are morally good. He admires what he takes to be his moral superiority and glows with self-righteousness (Ranulf 1938).

The distinction between instances of an emotion which are moral and instances which are non-moral is closely related to the distinction between the natural and non-natural instances of a kind of emotion, for example, between natural shame (the shame of the woman who does not have red hair) and moral shame (Rawls 1971). The latter distinction is in its turn closely related to the traditional distinction between virtues which are natural (benevolence) and artificial (justice).

One important difference between the objects of shame and of guilt indicates a possible difference between the moral scope of these emotions. Shame and guilt, like pride and remorse, are always self-reflexive emotions. The object of shame and of guilt is always a self and something else – a failure to live up to or to exemplify some ideal or value of a subject in the case of shame, the infringement of a norm by the subject in the case of guilt. But the self does not play the same role in shame and in guilt. The exclamation or question of the guilty woman is "How could I have done *that*?" .The exclamation or question of the ashamed man is "How could *I* have done that, had those feelings or beliefs, have been a such and such?". The primary object of guilt is the infringement of a

norm, that of shame a self. The secondary object of guilt is the self, of shame some feature or action of a self and one of its values, moral or non-moral (Tangney et al. 2007, Taylor 1985).

Guilt-feelings are morally valuable, it is sometimes claimed, because they are essential to being a morally autonomous person. For consider one difference between shame, according to a very old and popular view, and guilt. Shame, it is argued, whether its object is a moral or a non-moral failing, is typically, centrally or essentially triggered by the presence of a real or imagined observer or judge. Since shame is social it is not the reaction of a morally autonomous person. (It is also argued by psychologists that differences between the effects of shame and the effects of guilt show that shame, in contrast to guilt, hinders moral development). Against this it has been argued that moral matters are at bottom social matters and that the moral significance of guilt is not greater than that of shame the object of which is moral failings. A very different objection simply denies that shame is essentially social: there is shame before oneself and shame before others. A stronger version of this objection adds that shame before oneself with respect to one's moral failings is just the sort of reaction which characterises a morally autonomous person (Rawls 1971, Williams 1993, Wollheim 1999).

So far we have considered the relation between moral emotions, on the one hand, and values and norms, on the other hand. What is the relation between moral emotions and virtues and vices? On most accounts of virtues and vices emotions and other affective phenomena are essential to them. Virtues and vices are habits. It is therefore not surprising that it is emotional dispositions, sentiments and the will rather than emotional episodes which go to make up vices and virtues. Perhaps the single most important feature of these dispositions and sentiments is that they are the motives out of (or from) which the vicious or virtuous person acts. Sometimes they are referred to indirectly: the "feelings of benevolence" of someone who has the virtue of benevolence (Zagzebski 1996 77-136). Sometimes they are directly characterisable as features or qualities of a person's loves, hates, preferences and will: kindness, tenderness, affection, vindictiveness, vengefulness, distrustfulness, trustfulness, gratitude. Sometimes they are said to contribute to a person's character, sometimes they are held to be more fundamental than mere character traits (Goldie 2004). Thus a person who has the virtue of justice acts out of a concern for fairness and this concern underlies the disposition to feel indignation when confronted with examples of injustice. If this sort of claim is correct, then the emotional dispositions and sentiments which help to constitute moral virtues such as courage and justice are morally valuable and the affective components of moral vices such as cowardice and injustice are morally bad.

Many sentiments and emotions are often held to be (at least *prima facie*) morally valuable in virtue of their nature – for example, respect, remorse, love and joy. In some but by no means all moral traditions, pity and compassion would belong here too. Similarly, envy and *ressentiment* (sour grapes) are often held to be morally speaking a bad thing, like our earlier example of pharisaical pride or self-admiration. But there is a view of morality which denies that emotions and sentiments are morally valuable or significant. According to this "deontological" view, the heart of morality is the rightness and wrongness of actions, our obligations, and what we ought and ought not to do. Actions are subject to the will. They are what we are responsible for. Emotions and sentiments are only indirectly subject to the will. So emotions and sentiments are not morally significant although they may be moral in virtue of their objects. Another consequence of the deontological conception of morality is that values and virtues, whether moral or not, are not central to morality (Oakley 1994, Wallace 1994, Strawson 1974, Haidt 2003, Nichols 2004).

One reaction to such views is to (1) distinguish between matters ethical and matters moral; (2) assign moral obligations, norms, duties and, for example, guilt, remorse and resentment to the latter category and values, virtues and, for example, shame, love and hate to the former; and (3) argue for the priority of what belongs to ethics. Versions of this reaction are to be found in the writings of three anti-Kantians - Max Scheler, the Austrian novelist Robert Musil and Bernard Williams (1993). Perhaps the simplest sort of argument in favour of the priority of values is to be found in those utilitarian and consequentialist philosophies which argue that what makes an action morally right or wrong is just the consequences it has for the realisation of the values of human well-being, welfare or happiness. This claim can be considered a special case of a more general type of claim which involves no endorsement of utilitarianism or consequentialism: what makes actions morally binding is their relation to values, not just the values of happiness and of the useful but vital, aesthetic, political, cognitive and other values; what makes a preference ethically valuable or good is that it is a preference for higher over lower non-ethical values (Scheler 1973).

Two influential eighteenth century candidates for the role of what were then called moral sentiments are certain types of (dis)approval and of respect or reverence. Adam Smith argues that there are different sentiments or feelings of moral approval the objects of which are character, action and virtue. Amongst the sources of moral approval are sympathy, gratitude, the impression that the approved behaviour is part of a system of behaviour which tends to promote happiness and an impression of the beauty of this utility (Smith 1984 VII. iiii. 3 326-327). Such approval, then, is moral and aesthetic in virtue of its objects and is also morally good or a moral good.

Hume at one point says that "the proper *guardian* of every kind of virtue, and a sure preservative against vice and corruption" is one type of modesty, "that tenderness and nicety of honour, that apprehension of blame, that dread of intrusion or injury towards others", which he also calls "*Pudor*" (Hume 1970 213; my emphases). The Latin word "pudor" is one possible translation of the Greek term "aidos"; another is "sense of shame", yet another is "reverence". And Hume goes on to say that

> [The] constant habit of surveying ourselves, as it were, in reflection, keeps alive all the sentiments of right and wrong, and begets, in noble natures, a certain *reverence* for themselves as well as others, which is the surest *guardian* of every virtue (Hume 1970 225; my emphases).

Reverence of this kind is a moral sentiment and "pudor" a moral sentiment or affective disposition. Both can motivate. Their objects are others, their opinions about us and ourselves: "our regard to a character with others seems to arise only from a care of preserving a character with ourselves; and in order to attain this end, we find it necessary to prop our tottering judgement on the correspondent approbation of mankind (Hume 1970 225; my emphasis). Reverence and "pudor" are moral sentiments in virtue of their objects, which include virtues and vices, and morally valuable in virtue of their functions.

According to Kant there is exactly one moral emotion or feeling (Gefühl): respect (Achtung), which Kant sometimes seems to regard as the same as reverence (Ehrfurcht), the object of which is the moral law. Of this emotion Kant says that it can motivate us, that every good ethical (sittlich) disposition or sentiment (Gesinnung) can be grafted on to it and that it functions as a *guardian* (Kant 1986 I.3. 127, 130, 252-254). It is therefore moral in virtue of its object and morally valuable in itself and in virtue of its function.

Hume's reverence bears on moral *virtues*, Kant's reverence or respect on moral *oughts.* There is thus a third possible view: self-reverence, self-respect and care for oneself (*cura sui*) bear on one's *individual values* or on what one takes or makes these to be. This sort of view has been eagerly embraced ever since the nineteenth century, for example by Nietzsche, personalist philosophers such as Scheler and McTaggart and psychologists such as C. H. Cooley (Roland& Foxx 2003, Rawls 1971). Self-reverence and self-respect presumably should not involve taking oneself to be morally good or valuable, for then they would be pharisaical. Similarly, the self-love which is often put forward as a fundamental ethical sentiment along with self-reverence by fans of the latter should not have as its object any actual valuable feature of the self-lover, for then it would merely be amour-propre, self-esteem or self-admiration. Self-reverence and self-

love so conceived bear on the individual values or "better self" which constitute what one really is and may, with luck, become.

**State of the Art**

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