

Milan Zeman, 'On the nature of emotion: A systematic analysis'. Master's thesis.

Opponent's report

The title of this thesis gives a clear indication of its aim and subject-matter: it is a systematic attempt to determine the fundamental nature of emotion. The author treats emotion as a natural kind—a psychological category with an inherent unity and a simple essence and which is clearly demarcated from other psychological categories such as conative states, cognitive processes and bodily sensation. He argues that emotion is a *sui generis* mental phenomenon (9-10), where 'mental' is understood in a functionalistic sense (10) with the subjective aspect of the implementing process being 'emotional experience' itself (15). The author thus presupposes a dual-aspect theory whereby the abstract function of mental activity, with its 'output', can be described in objective physical terms, while its attendant subjective character can only be characterized from the first-personal point of view, and is irreducible to the physical. In addition, the author treats emotional experience as a type of feeling that relates directly to the self—'thymic feeling' in his terminology (23). Emotion is thymic feeling of a phenomenologically specific kind, to be distinguished from other thymic experiences, such as mood and conative states. Moreover, the author asserts that emotion is *purely* thymic feeling or, in other words, that is in no way constituted or co-constituted by experiences of bodily state, cognitive states or processes, thought, perception or imagination (25). The author goes on to argue that emotion discloses what is significant for us (34) and presupposes a process of 'appraisal' which, the author insists, is not an act of cognition (41). Emotion shows to us the relevance of an object or stimulus to our interests.

The thesis is a concerted attempt to justify and defend this purist analysis of emotion, making strenuous attempts to distinguish emotion from other psychological process such as judgement (44-46) and perception (46-47). The case made for this purism should be commended for its sustained and systematic presentation. The author should also be commended for the attempt to situate his position within the literature on emotion, both past and present. I was particularly pleased to see not only the work of contemporary philosophers and psychologists being discussed, but also the work of late-nineteenth century German psychologists/philosophers, who approached the question of emotion before the divorce between 'scientific' psychology and philosophy had been properly enforced.

The author's overall approach is original, and not in obvious debt to any predecessor, though multiple piecemeal influences are detailed and cited. I believe that the methodology of the author, as well as some of the steps in argumentation, are open to criticism, and I shall list several objections below. Nevertheless, it

should be stressed that the author displays an awareness of a wide range of opposing orientations against which he seeks to defend his own position.

The follow critical points might be discussed in the course of the defence.

- (i) In general, it looks as if the analytical purism is a methodological requirement for the author. He seems to assume, right from the start, that emotion cannot a complex phenomenon made up of multiple components (which may, or may not, include a *sui generis* thymic feeling). As early as the second paragraph the author records with seeming dismay that some theories 'even speak of emotion in terms of multiple genera of phenomena at once ... as a complex event constituted of various components, e.g. a mental component, a physiological component, a behavioral component, and an experiential component' (7). These theories, the author opines, 'cannot provide an adequate account of the nature of emotion in principle, because they are looking for it in the wrong place, so to speak' (7). Thus, simplicity of nature seems to be stipulated, not discovered.
- (ii) Part of this analytical purism is a strongly and exclusively mentalistic understanding of emotion, excluding bodily sensations and states as extrinsic to emotions properly understood. For example, the author rejects the idea that physiological arousal might be an integral part of emotional experience (26-27). The author backs up this claim by observing that physiological arousal can be induced—say, in sport, or after a 'cold plunge'—without it constituting emotion. This observation is undoubtedly true, but the most it shows is that physiological arousal is not the whole story. The observation non-emotional forms of arousal therefore only speaks against a far-fetched position which would hold that physiological arousal is a necessary *and sufficient* condition for emotion. More promising, of course, are complex definitions of emotion that treat physiological arousal as a necessary component, but by no means a sufficient condition. Schachter and Singer (1962), for example, argue that bodily arousal must be interpreted by the subject in a certain way on the basis of cues, if the arousal is to qualify as a particular emotion. Emotion would therefore have an additional judgemental dimension (and perhaps other dimensions too). Further, the author's use of depression—a mood-experience—as a counter example to the relevance of physiological arousal (26-27) is surely beside the point. The author himself distinguishes emotion from mood (48-9), we should note. More importantly many would hold that emotion is an episodic 'perturbation' of the mind (Cicero defines emotion as a *perturbatio*), in a

way that mood is not, and that the perturbation in question is due to some degree of arousal.

- (iii) The author often seems to assume a kind of methodological solipsism in his treatment of emotions, treating the essential thymic feeling as definitively presented to the subject's consciousness. It is far from clear, however, that the inter-subjective character of emotions can be ignored. For example, it is not clear how one would distinguish between the emotions of envy and jealousy without making reference to the fact that envy involves two subjects and jealousy involves three. The methodological solipsism might, rather dubiously I think, be defended by saying the inter-subjective dimension is in principle dispensable, because only subjective *beliefs* about other subjects are necessary (perhaps one might feel jealousy because of a delusionary belief that the other subjects in question exist). But such an appeal to beliefs about others would not be open to the author, who has excluded from emotions all judgemental and cognitive components.
- (iv) In general, I find it hard to understand how the act of 'appraisal', which the author thinks is involved in emotion in determining the relevance to our concerns, does not involve cognition, which the author thinks is extrinsic to the nature of emotion (40-41). The author's puzzling statement that the appraisal in question does not involve cognition, yet still somehow yields 'information' (41), is dictated, I believe, by the questionable assumption of analytical purism.

These questions aside, this master's thesis is a systematic and original contribution to the debate about the nature of the emotions, written in consummate philosophical English, which offers a position that is highly stimulating, regardless of whether it is ultimately sustainable. I therefore recommend the thesis for defence and I suggest the grade of 1 (*výborně*).

James Hill, 27.08.2024