



UNIVERZITA
KARLOVA

MA Thesis Final Evaluation

Milan Zeman, *On the Nature of Emotion: A Systematic Analysis*

ÚFAR, FFUK, Academic Year 2023/2024

General Description of the Work

The MA thesis by Milan Zeman offers a systematic and, in many respects, original investigation of the nature of emotions at the intersection of phenomenology, philosophy of mind, and psychology. For, although the work is of course of purely philosophical character, the candidate displays great familiarity with, and mastery over, an array of different ways of approaching the problem at stake. The candidate sets out to tackle the question, *What are emotions?*—with the ambition of offering a finally satisfactory answer to it. Before I get into a more detailed description of both the content and structure of the work, I would like to dwell upon Milan’s own argumentative style. In a way that is very remindful of the medieval and scholastic *quaestio*-style, the candidate usually proceeds by first recalling an already established and accepted view; then, after he—more or less quickly—shows the untenability of the proposed solution, Milan offers his own view on the matter.

Generally speaking, Milan contends that—although to different degrees—all the most important theories available on the stock market of ideas either fail to grasp and fix what “emotions” properly are, or they do manage to grasp it—but then they reduce emotions to some other phenomenon. His alternative solution to the problem consists of two steps that build on one another. In the first place, Milan will argue that “emotions” belong to the category of *mental phenomena* (and they are not to be understood as brain processes, experiential states, or the like); in the second place, he will try to also determine and clarify *what kind of mental phenomenon* they are in contrast to others.

The thesis unfolds through three different chapters. In the first chapter, Milan discusses the more general nature of emotions—thus setting the stage for proposing his own solution to the matter. The “generic nature” of emotions is summarized by the candidate as follows: as far as their “nature” is concerned, an emotion is a “*mental phenomenon*,” that is, “a *naturally occurring function* which is realized by the brain, which influences or determines behavior as well as other mental phenomena, and whose realization is typically accompanied by specific experiential states” (p. 11). It is here, in the first chapter, that Milan also addresses the methodological problem of how to ascertain the nature of emotions. The method, he writes, is that of directly analyzing our “emotion experience,”

which in turn requires a *phenomenology of emotions*. This phenomenology is adopted by Milan in the second chapter, where a more fine-grained account of emotions is provided. It is here that Milan reaches what I consider some of the important outcomes of his investigation. A first “distinction” is made between bodily and psychic feelings; within the latter, Milan identifies the two sub-groups of cognitive and thymic feelings. As he claims, emotions belong to the group of *thymic feelings*, which are feelings that, he remarks, belong “to ourselves in the most intimate, proper sense” (p. 37). With respect to other thymic feelings, however, emotions are characterized by affection and, considering our relation to the world, they “disclose” (Milan’s own word) the “significance” of things for us. In the third, and last chapter Milan elaborates on the *specificity* of emotions. It is here that he re-states some of the key-claims of the work, that is, that on the one hand emotions are “mental functions” that “pertain directly to the self” and, on the other, that “emotion experience” is “the subjective aspect of the output of the brain process implementing” the emotion itself. As he also adds, since “emotions” consist “in informing us about the significance that stimuli have for us,” and since “the significance of a stimulus is constituted by its relation to one or more of our concerns, the proper role of emotions in our lives is to inform us” on “what is relevant to our concerns” (p. 50).

Although only implicitly, this latter—and most important—conclusion of his work testifies to the complexity with which, I would say, he uses the concept of *phenomenology*. For, phenomenology is both a method for investigating (say, from a first-person perspective) the nature of emotions and, in particular, of what Milan refers to as “emotion experience,” and an investigation of how the world’s meaningfulness for us (and our concerns) is constituted.

Remarks and Questions

I will now make a few remarks on what I regard as Milan’s most interesting but also difficult claims and results of his approach to the nature of emotions.

- The main claim, which I have always deemed difficult to fully understand, concerns the relation between emotions as mental phenomena and the brain (or brain activity). As Milan puts it in Chapter One, §5, “in each particular case, emotion experience is the subjective aspect of the output of the process that implements emotion in the brain, or, in other words, that output given subjectively” (p. 15). The argument is first presented in §4. Here we are explained that emotions, as mental phenomena, are “in essence, a particular function that is realized by the complex activity of the brain.” Immediately after this, using the instantiation-language, Milan writes that an emotion occurrence “is instantiated in the brain in the form of a particular complex pattern of brain activity” (p. 13). I must confess that I am not fully sure

I understand the thesis and the meaning of all the terminologies/conceptualities mobilized by the candidate to argue for it.

My questions as regards this first problem would be:

(1) How can X (= an emotion) be at the same time the subjective aspect of something else, i.e., a brain process and of the output of this very same process? Since the output of a process is or should be something different, although not distinct or separated, from the process producing it, if what we call an emotion is the subjective aspect of the output, it cannot also be the subjective aspect of the process. Because before the process comes to a conclusion, there is no output, hence no emotion.

(2) By the same token, I am not quite clear on the use of the instantiation-language. What does it mean that an emotion, as a mental phenomenon, is instantiated in a complex brain process? Cannot a mental phenomenon (in general) be instantiated *only in an individual mental phenomenon*? And an individual complex brain process cannot only be the instantiation of a general brain process? For me, to say that an emotion—as a mental phenomenon—is “instantiated” in a complex brain process is like to say that a color in general, say red, is instantiated not in an individual red portion of space (this color), but rather in a stretch of electromagnetic radiation. Better would it be to affirm that an emotion-mental phenomenon-type is instantiated in an emotion-mental phenomenon-token, which in turn is the subjective aspect of a brain process-token (which instantiates a brain process-type).

(3) I am also wondering whether we should also avoid saying that an emotion is “*in essence*, a particular function that is realized by the complex activity of the brain (my italics).” How can one reconcile the two claims that, on the one hand, emotions have a *nature of their own* and, on the other hand, that they *essentially*, that is to say, according to their nature, are functions of the brain? By saying *essentially*, are we not in the end identifying emotions with the brain activity itself?

(4) Last but not least, I find it quite odd that we can call “the real world correlate” of a statement on our emotions “the particular complex pattern of activity in the brain” (pp. 14-13). I find quite odd the statement that, “when we say, for instance, that we are *afraid...*” what we *really mean in the world* is the brain process and not the mental phenomenon intending, say, a “famished” approaching wolf.

- The problem of the relation between emotions (as mental phenomena) and the brain is a quite thorny one, which Milan tries to tackle carefully and to approach from different angles. In this respect, it is worth focusing on a series of considerations from page 14. Milan claims that emotions cannot be identified with the brain itself. This amounts to recognizing, not the existence of an entity “over and above” the brain, but that “the term emotion belongs to an

entirely different level of an analysis *of the brain* than that at which neuroscience operates.” I am puzzled by the use of the term “term.” If I take this passage at face value, it follows that “emotion” is nothing else *but a different terminological way of referring to a brain process*.

My questions will then sound as follows:

(4) If I am right, and that of “emotion” is just a different “terminological” way of describing the very same process, then how can we claim that emotions have a “nature” of their own? How can we avoid, for example, concluding that emotions are something *un-real* if we affirm, as Milan in fact does, that the “brain process” is *the real world correlate* of our statements about emotions?

(5) I am under the impression that Milan implicitly reasons against the backdrop of the following alternative: either emotions are real, but then we need to assume their existence as something “over and above” the brain; or they are nothing “over and above” the brain, but then they have to be fully un-real.

All my objections notwithstanding, the **excellent** quality of the work cannot be questioned. I would then propose **1** as a final grade.

Prague, August 23, 2024

Daniele De Santis

