

The Binding Value of Earnest Emotional Valuation

John J. Davenport (*Fordham University*)

Recent work on the cognitive function of emotions has frequently highlighted how emotions allow us to escape problems of practical reasoning and motivation that we would face if we were simple egoists or pure maximizers of individual preference-satisfaction (as assumed by standard forms of rational decision theory). There is wide agreement that a range of common human emotions play very important roles in supplementing the finite rational, perceptual, and desiderative resources we bring into the process of making choices. For example, philosophers have recently argued that emotions help us avoid the framing problem for practical relevance by establishing patterns of salience among details and possible inferences;¹ that they focus attention on states of affairs or persons associated with satisfaction or frustration of powerful desires;² that some emotions recognize complex patterns of value or concrete value-gestalts;³ or that emotions are “concerned-based construals” involving perceptual

¹Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (MIT Press, 1990), 195.

²Richard Wollheim, *On the Emotion* (Yale University Press, 1999), 70-75.

³Gabrielle Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 10-12.

“phantasia”, i.e. a way in which the situation appears, looks, or strikes us.⁴

None of these theories hold that every state we call an emotion (or even some subset of them, such as distinctively human emotions) always requires that the agent makes an evaluative judgment; and in general, there is no consensus that human agents must have a proposition about value-properties in mind to experience an emotion. However, the concept of emotional earnestness⁵ as a state in which the emotion is experienced primarily for the sake of registering certain values and is guided by these values does depend on the weaker cognitivist thesis that emotions typically include evaluative attitudes of some kind – whether propositional or broadly perceptual (including imaginative association etc.). In other words, this thesis is part of the best explanation of (i) why normal emotions are earnest or non-instrumental attitudes towards the world, and (ii) why such emotions often disrupt forms of strategic decision-making that measure our rational interest in terms of material gain, maximum net satisfaction of subjective preferences, or other types of cost-benefit tradeoff. Thus, while I offer no direct arguments for the cognitive approach to emotions in this paper, if my account adequately explains the binding value of earnestness in our emotional life, that is indirect support for the weak cognitivist thesis as well.

⁴Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 69, 99.

⁵We might also use the labels “sincerity” or “authenticity” for this state, but I’m avoiding these terms here because they are loaded with theoretical overtones that can obscure our analysis, when the goal is phenomenological clarity.

I. Elster on the Role of Emotions in Escaping Paradoxes of Rational Decision

In social and economic theory, the work of Jon Elster towers above all other treatments of emotions and their role in our practical life. Among the many themes in his work on emotions, Elster is especially interested in way that people bind themselves to prevent deviation from their current plans, betrayal of their present values, and self-defeating forms of self-interested decision-making. One major reason for self-binding is that sudden passions “may cause a discrepancy between plans whether based on [impartial] reason or rational self-interest and behavior in several ways.”⁶ Various devices of precommitment may keep us on course when passions would pull us aside and lead us to discount the foreseeable consequences.

Yet paradoxically, it is precisely the capacity to ignore rational self-interest that is required to sustain prior commitments (including reasonable commitment to our own well-being) in many circumstances. Thus Elster considers the arguments of Robert Frank and Jack Hirshleifer that strong emotional dispositions to guilt, anger, and envy can make promises and threats more credible, thus avoiding collective

⁶Elster, *Ulysses Unbound* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8. Like Rawls, Elster uses “the reasonable” for an impartial perspective capable of considering the interests of other persons and other considerations that perspectives of strategic rationality that aim to maximize some kind of good consequence. He uses “passion” as a generic term for the more cognitive emotions and for a range of visceral feelings that can produce strong motives (Ibid, 8). On this topic, see Elster, *Strong Feelings* (MIT Press, 2000), 1-4 and ch.3.

action dilemmas that apply to groups of agents each of whom decides according to a direct calculation of rational self-interest in every choice.⁷ In situations like this (e.g. Prisoner's Dilemma) each agent knows that the others will decide their moves by a direct determination of the option that maximizes their own expected utility, and each knows that the others know this about her, and know that each other know this about them, etc. Taking this knowledge about their competitors into account leads these agents to make choices whose aggregate result is Pareto-suboptimal (since a better outcome could have resulted if they had reasoned differently in deciding).⁸ Frank and Hirshleifer think that certain emotions can make this difference, and that this explains why these emotions have evolved. Emotions such as shame and guilt can counteract impatience or high rates of discounting the future benefits of postponing gratification,⁹ and moral sentiments such as benevolence, gratitude, and willingness to suffer material loss to punish wrongdoers can make the promises necessary for mutually beneficial forms of cooperation more credible.¹⁰

⁷Elster, *Ulysses Unbound*, 44-47.

⁸Pareto-optimality is defined a distribution of advantages and disadvantages (on some index, i.e. measure of goods) such that no agent can be made better off in these goods without making one or more other agent(s) worse off. Thus an outcome is Pareto-suboptimal if it was possible to bring about another outcome in which some agents are better off without making others worse-off. Prisoner's Dilemma situations are *wholly* Pareto-suboptimal, in the sense that if the parties could bind each other to an agreement not to confess, they *all* would be better off.

⁹Elster, *Ulysses Unbound*, 48.

¹⁰Ibid, 53-54.

However, the general problem with Frank's and Hirshleifer's approach is that it regards emotional dispositions merely as *altering* the individual's assessment of costs and benefits in the options before him in ways that happen to conduce to his long-term advantage, when in fact emotional motivation may operate against such strategic consequentialist thinking altogether. Elster recognizes that the social dimension of some moral emotions depends on others' belief that the agent acts purely on the emotion (or on the evaluation it contains), and *not* as a means to maximizing her expected material utility. For example, "gratitude presupposes the belief that one's benefactor acted out of sympathy rather than for the sake of gain;" hence it is incompatible with the belief that our benefactor wanted us to believe he was sympathetic *so that* we would do him a favor in return.¹¹ The full power of emotions to support precommitments and to help us avoid individual deviation from our priorities and collective action problems cannot be understood without seeing that emotions are often important to us for reasons that cannot adequately be represented as a cost or benefit on a preference-hierarchy.

Thus Elster rightly criticizes Frank, Hirshleifer and Gary Becker for starting from the standard way of modeling emotion in rational decision theory:

¹¹Ibid, 55. I am ignoring Elster's other objections to details of Frank's and Hirshleifer's analyses, since they are not as relevant to the more general objection that I'm developing. In general, his critique of their evolutionary analysis is incisive, though he seems to assume that every alteration in a process of evolutionary development that leads to increased fitness must itself increase the survival chances of the individuals with the new trait.

To the extent that economists consider the role of emotions in behavior, they tend to view them simply as a source of [brute] preferences. The most typical approach is to assume that a given action may have emotional costs and benefits, as well as material costs and benefits. In choosing among various options, the agent maximizes a utility function in which all costs and benefits are considered together.¹²

So envy, for example, operates as a brute (not subject to critique or justification) wanting to see a rival suffer, and the pleasure derived from this is worth the material cost up to some point at which the marginal utility lost from further material sacrifice outweighs the marginal utility gained from one further increment of harm to the rival.¹³ Elster responds that this approach is “conceptually flawed”, as we can see with a moral emotion like guilt over stealing a book:

If guilt were nothing but an anticipated or experienced cost, an agent whose guilt deters him from stealing or retaining the book should be willing to buy a guilt-erasing pill if it was sufficiently cheap. I submit that no person who is capable of being deterred by guilt would buy the pill. In fact, he would feel guilty about buying it. For him, taking the pill in order to escape guilt and be able to steal the book would be as bad as just stealing it.¹⁴

¹²Jon Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 301.

¹³Ibid, 302.

¹⁴Ibid, 303. We might ask what would happen if the agent knew that the pill would also erase his memory of buying and taking it. But Elster's

But if the agent who cares about morality and is thus susceptible to guilt cannot see the pill as a benefit that would offset a psychological cost of wrongdoing, this must be because she sees the wrongdoing that guilt registers as *more* than a mere cost or brute dissatisfaction (even though people can be tempted to it by prospect of material gain).

Rather, guilt is tied to making what Charles Taylor has called a “strong evaluation” that wrong actions should not be done, irrespective of the material *or emotional* cost and benefits (or their sum, if such values can really be aggregated). In other words, guilt reflects the deontic or non-consequentialist character of the underlying moral judgements. Elster’s agent also would *not* take this pill even if the crime it allowed him to commit would cause him to respect moral laws more frequently in the future, and thus feel less total guilt. For guilt is not like a cost to be minimized over time. Elster recognizes that other emotions, such as shame, vengeful anger, and limerence can also function this way when they become stable dispositions that “shape preferences in a durable manner”. Thus he suggests that we “model them by a lexicographic preference ordering. For the person who is in a state of

point is about how things look to the agent *in advance* of deciding. In deliberating about whether to steal, Elster thinks the guilt-susceptible agent would see this extra power of the pill as *increasing* its moral wrongness. If he did not, then he would not see stealing the book as wrong to begin with, and so would have no moral aversion that the pill might help him overcome. Thus the agent sees the pill either as having negative value, or as superfluous. So either way, the pill is not viewed as a benefit. I think this helps bring out the full power of Elster’s insight, which I wish he had developed more fully.

limerence or in pursuit of revenge, there is no trade-off between satisfaction of the emotion and material interest.”¹⁵

Elster’s conclusion that many emotions undermine the standard economic model of rational actors is an insight of the highest importance for moral psychology. But his own explanation of why this is so does not go deep enough. He simply says that many emotions transcend cost-benefit maximizing because they operate as motives with a direct causal influence on our decisions. For example, “Guilt...acts not as a cost but as a psychic force that induces the individual to rationalize his behavior.” And “Shame has a causal effect on the evaluation and perception of other rewards *over and above its own role as a (negative) reward.*” This analysis gives the impression the role of emotions not captured in the economic model is a purely causal mechanism; so although guilt, shame, envy, limerence, and vengefulness may show “that the simple cost-benefit model is *too simple,*”¹⁶ it may still be possible to complicate the analysis to capture this extra psychic impact of certain emotions. Thus Elster fails to explain why, from the *internal* perspective of the agent as acting intentionally for reasons, these and other emotions normally have a kind of practical significance that trumps material and psychic benefits like wealth and (1st-order) pleasure. A better explanation of this is that we normally regard the cognitive function of emotions (as perceiving or judging value-properties) as an *end-in-itself*. This end has a value that, while not always

¹⁵Ibid, 305.

¹⁶Ibid, 304 (Elster’s italics).

inviolable,¹⁷ remains incommensurable with material and psychic goods and harms that can be aggregated for strategic tradeoff in our deliberations. In that sense, several distinctively human emotions are naturally *for their own sake*.

II. Directly Experiencing Value: Emotional Earnestness versus Existential Numbness and Sentimentalism.

What Elster fails to clarify, then, is that some emotions can serve as forms of precommitment because we can act with no other goal than to *fully experience, express, or acknowledge* the value perceived or judged in our emotion. In such cases, we may hope that others understand and perhaps agree with our emotion, but our goal is not primarily discursive, if we think of a communicative intention as one that aims to bring about a special sort of consequence that could be maximized (namely, true beliefs in others about our thoughts and intentions, including our intention to communicate to them). For the goal of *expression*, in the special sense that I mean here, can be intended without any hope of successfully communicating our feelings to others, and even without others who could be witness to it. Though in human life, the emotional expression of value is often (or even usually) combined with communicative goals, the motive of expression in its pure form is reflexive: it aims only at *affirming for ourselves* the objective importance of the value-states that are perceived or evaluated in our emotions. In other words, in the ideally pure

¹⁷Thus it differs from the existence, proper functioning, and effectiveness of an individual person's moral freedom (or responsible agency) as an inviolable end-in-itself, whose value *always trumps all* other types of terminal value according to deontic moral theory.

case, we aim simply at being true to the *reality* of whatever inspired our emotion: we testify that this reality should not be denied; we insist of ourselves that we recognize it for what it is, and respond accordingly, rather than in other ways that might be more convenient or comforting.

This is true for the emotions on which Elster focuses: if we have reason to be ashamed, we may value feeling that shame, even if it is painful; if we have done wrong, then we need our guilt to make sure that we remember; if we love another with the burning passion of limerence, then we don't want relief from their beauty and other qualities, for it is better to experience these qualities in pain than not to experience them at all. Likewise for envy, spite, and malevolence, although in these cases it may be argued that the negative values to which we respond so passionately have been misjudged. Perhaps these emotions are mistaken, but they can be in earnest (they are not necessarily attributable to ulterior motives). My claim that painful emotions can have positive intrinsic value for us may seem counterintuitive. But consider a case of earnest grief, which is one of the most difficult emotional experiences in our repertoire.

In Tolkien's *The Two Towers* (Part 2 of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy), when King Théoden of Rohan is able to grieve for his slain son Théodred, this is a sign of his reawakening from depression, his renewed grip on reality. Théodred's death is of course a great evil, but Théoden's grieving in earnest for him is an intrinsic good. It would be misleading to say that this is only because it shows that he can now distinguish good from evil again; rather, his poignant grief *is* his recognition of the evil that has occurred. To express such a reality in a way that fits its value is itself a final good – and not just because it is part of psychological health, but also because it fitting, appropriate, or true. This is why, as de Sousa says, often for grieving people, “the very thought that grief will subside can

itself be a source of renewed grief.”¹⁸ Likewise for taking joy in a child’s accomplishments, or having sympathy for suffering: we value being emotionally sensitive to such values. To be emotionally alive to various dimensions of value in the world and ourselves, letting them guide our emotional response, is far better than to be numb to these dimensions, even when that would be easier, less painful, or more expedient.

This is the central pathology of Mersault, the famous anti-hero in Camus’ *The Stranger*. His problem is distinct from the numbness of emotional shock, in which the very inability to express the horror in a particular emotional response is sometimes the only apt response to its enormity. Mersault is not in shock; he is simply blind to the values that are worth caring about in the world. What he expresses is meaninglessness, pointlessness, the total absence of values worth emoting. But this only shows that he lives in a solipsistic dream (or nightmare), cut off from the alterity of a wide set of values that exist quite independently of his consciousness. How he got this way, we are not told. But the neutral monotone of his emotional autism is appalling to us because we recognize that expressing the full range of diverse values just for their value-richness (positive and negative) is an activity of great intrinsic importance for a meaningful life.

The great intrinsic value of emotional earnestness can also be clarified by contrasting it with “sentimentalism,”¹⁹ i.e.

¹⁸De Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion*, 178.

¹⁹This is the term used for such distorted emotions in recent moral psychology, and I follow this usage in order to be understood. But it should be noted that “sentimentalism” has meant different things since

the use of various emotions for their pleasure, their aesthetic value in a romantic picture of someone's character, their interest-value (in staving off boredom), or their strategic value as defense-mechanisms, excuses, or ways to build up our self-image. For example, Solomon considers "A man who loses his son in an accident" and feels tremendous loss; but "[a]fter a certain point, grief becomes feeling sorry for oneself, and here the strategy for self-esteem becomes evident."²⁰ As Robert Solomon argues, such ulterior purposes cannot be (fully) conscious to their agent, for if an agent were aware that her emotion served a manipulative, defensive, or distraction-function, it would lose its instrumental power.²¹ So a sentimental emotion is *not* a feigned or merely acted emotion intended to deceive others²²: the agent feels the emotion, but not (primarily) for its own sake, or equivalently, for the sake

the term was introduced in the 18th century, and the current usage that I follow here is a technical one in philosophical theory.

²⁰Robert Solomon, "Emotions and Choice," in *Explaining Emotions*, ed Amélie O. Rorty (University of California Press, 1980): 251-82, 278.

²¹Ibid, 267.

²²Ibid, 269. Solomon says that "to feign an emotion...is to pretend that one holds certain judgments which one does not hold" (Ibid), whereas the sentimentalist makes the emotion-constituting judgment but not for its own sake. Of course, if emotions are more than value-judgments, then one could hold the judgments that Solomon associates with a given emotion E, yet not feel E, and so pretend to feel E. But the bigger problem with Solomon's analysis is that he thinks *all* non-feigned emotions are motivated by ulterior purposes, including especially "the maximization of self-esteem" (Ibid, 277). As a result, like Sartre, Solomon must think that no emotions are *in earnest* in my sense. Elster has given a definitive response to this stretched theory of ulterior motivation in *Alchemies of the Mind*, 310.

of experiencing and expressing the value-complex that this emotions perceives or judges.

For example, when the Johannes the young man in Kierkegaard's "Seducer's Diary" starts a romance with Cordelia, his victim, he does experience a kind of erotic love for her, just not in earnest. Rather, he hopes to experience the tension of erotic love for its beauty and interest: "Plainly and simply to deceive a girl, for that I certainly would not have the stamina;" rather, he dedicates himself to the "idea" of erotic love.²³ He imagines that he has an exclusive passion for "this one girl," but then focuses reflectively on his own imagined pathos and hers in order to enjoy contemplating them.²⁴ He finds endless pleasure in imagining and writing about Cordelia as instantiating the ideal type of erotic lover, rather than really valuing her as a unique individual. Thus his "jealousy" is just an artistic desire for perfection in his artwork, rather than the earnest emotion of romantic jealousy.²⁵ For erotic love is normally a spontaneous response to a value-gestalt that, while hard to specify,²⁶ is completely distinct

²³Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Part I, tr. Hong and Hong (Princeton University Press, 1987), 437.

²⁴Ibid, 427.

²⁵Ibid, 416.

²⁶Perhaps it includes not only bodily features to which we are physically attracted, but also personality traits that we associate with intimacy, vigor, etc, and in the complete case, the other's own erotic arousal towards us as well. For example, in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Lizzy is undoubtedly aroused (though at first against her own strong will) by Darcy's infatuation with her, and the tension in her only heightens his interest. But this is no seducer's game to either of them: they love in earnest.

from interest-value for contemplation, or the aesthetic value of an artifact. The erotic lover is normally focused on his partner, rather than on his own *experience* of loving her. Johannes' narcissistic self-absorption blocks him from the kind of "emotional engagement" that Michael Stocker argues is crucial for evaluative knowledge.²⁷ "Sentimentalism" and "the view that experiences are what are important" prevent the kind of emotional engagement without which Stocker thinks life is not worth living.²⁸

Though Stocker is on the right track here, his essay does not quite get to the root of this issue. He makes a powerful case that "at least some emotions...are themselves of value" or are intrinsically important for human life;²⁹ but he does not fully explain that this is because emotions disclose values *alterior* to the agent, or *outside* her emotion. In focusing on the value of emotional response, as well as the practical knowledge it informs, he takes the focus off the values that are the *intentional object* of these emotions.³⁰ It is loyalty to these alte-

²⁷Michael Stocker, "How Emotions Reveal Value and Help Cure the Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," in How Should We Live, ed. Crisp (Oxford University Press, 1998): 173-90, 186.

²⁸Ibid, 182.

²⁹Ibid, 178-81.

³⁰Of course, sometimes emotions themselves and their properties (such as their acceptability, their strength, their appropriateness or inappropriateness) are the intentional objects of *higher-order* emotions. But when a higher-order emotion is earnest, that is because of its fidelity to the positive or negative value of the first-order emotion which is its intentional object. For example, it is good to be ashamed of one's envy, if this envy is truly shameful. Even if one does not correct the problem, it is better to recognize it and experience it as irrational or unfitting.

rior values that *makes* emotional engagement valuable in the ways that Stocker details. Ronald de Sousa comes closer to this point in his argument that what he calls “objective” emotions, which “seem to correspond to objective value,” typically come with a second-order desire for their own continuation. For example, someone regretting a divorce may “never want to cease regretting” the failure and harm involved in breaking up a family. On my analysis, this allegiance to the objective source of the emotion is the most important sign of its genuineness or earnestness. When the agent actively wills to maintain the emotion, this is probably because she recognizes the terminal value of such earnestness *itself*: she is determined that her emotions do not become mere means to other goods, or even to her own happiness. Their primary function of expressing how things really stand, for good or ill, should not be distorted for convenience, pleasure, even psychic unity – for our situation may be such that only dissonant emotions can be earnest.³¹

If this analysis is right, then the telos of emotions is simply to *experience and express* a kind of truth that often can be experienced and expressed in no other way. When emotions serve this purpose, they are in earnest. When their content is altered to suit other ends (even very good ends like happiness and psychic harmony), they are being used for something

³¹Of course this does not mean that the *communication* of emotions to others should not be regulated by norms like politeness, or that we should always say just what we feel at all times. But it does explain why there are limits to the scope of such restrictions on the communication of emotions: we should not try to suppress or alter the actual experience of objective emotions just because it might be detected and offend. This point is connected with the intrinsic value of *liberty of conscience*: our emotional conscience should not be a mere means to social decorum.

contrary to their nature, which violates their existential function of disclosing value as it is. This account has one especially important implication for moral theory. For it explains why genuine moral emotions cannot be self-effacing, i.e. they cannot motivate their agents to forget their moral commitments because doing so would bring about what count (on their criteria) as morally superior outcomes.³² On my analysis, a sentimentalist who allows herself to feel moral emotions only to the extent (or in the ways) that were most expedient could sometimes rationalize effacing intrinsically appropriate emotions and/or cultivating inappropriate ones. But anyone who values genuineness in moral emotions could not think this way. For moral emotions are not experienced earnestly if they are used as mere means, even to produce morally better outcomes (including morally better emotions). Thus emotions function like agent-centered restrictions that cannot be modeled in terms of maximizing any kind of consequence or state of affairs.

But this point is not really limited to moral emotions like resentment of injustice, or gratitude for generosity and mercy, or guilt over wrongdoing. For the inherent purpose of virtually all distinctively human emotions is not to produce good outcomes, but rather for the agent to live in touch with a kind of reality that must be experienced and expressed if we are to do justice to it. Our emotions are the way we do justice to the values we are able to recognize; they are not meant to make us happy, unless there are actual grounds for happiness. If not, better to be bored, sad, or even in despair. At least this

³²Derek Parfit argues in *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1984) that there is no reason why morality cannot be self-effacing (38-49). I think this account of moral emotions shows why he is wrong.

way, we do not forget how things stand. It will not do to say that despair must be avoided because it is incompatible with our self-actualization, or any similar eudaemonist criterion. For such criteria do not respect the categorical imperative of axiology: *maintain the earnestness of emotions as an end-in-itself*.³³ If despair is wrong, that can only be because despair ignores values that are still worth caring about. On this view, no matter how dark a pit we have fallen into, we are not Sartre's useless passions: there remains something worthwhile that we can strive for.³⁴

³³I think this principle is more fundamental than de Sousa's "Principle of emotional continence" which says, "Let your emotions be appropriate to the widest range of available scenarios" (*The Rationality of Emotion*, 187). For de Sousa's principle relativizes appropriateness to the agent's (direct or vicarious) experience of "paradigm scenarios" for the various emotions, whereas mine does not.

³⁴For this phrasing, I'm indebted to a lecture by the fantasy novelist Stephen Donaldson.