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An Anti-Philosophy of the Emotions?*

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Philosophical work on the emotions can take a variety of forms, among which the following three are perhaps most common. There are, first, studies that attempt to analyse the nature of emotions in general, identifying the features that distinguish them from psychological states of other kinds, and their connections with such phenomena as rationality, perception, experience, memory, action, and the like.[1] Second, there are works that focus on particular emotions or classes of emotion, such as guilt, pride, love, and friendship;[2] these works attempt to identify the features that set the selected emotions apart from other emotional states, tracing their links with cognition and affect and their characteristic expression in action. There are, finally, studies of the significance of the emotions for the philosophical understanding of morality.[3] These typically address questions concerning the importance of emotions for character, action, and moral education, and explore the implications of such questions for traditional conceptions of practical reason and moral principle.

Valuing Emotions by Michael Stocker is an ambitious work that addresses questions of all three kinds. Actually, the title page of the book informs us that it is by Stocker "with Elizabeth Hegeman," a psychoanalyst and anthropologist, who evidently collaborated with Stocker on chaps. 3, 7,

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* Michael Stocker, with Elizabeth Hegeman, *Valuing Emotions* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Pp. xxviii, 353.

1 Examples are Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1987), and Robert Solomon, *The Passions* (New York: Doubleday, 1976).

2 See, for example, Gabriele Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt. Emotions of Self-Assessment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), and David Velleman, "Love as a Moral Emotion," *Ethics* 109 (1999), pp. 338-374.

3 Exemplary here are two classic papers by Bernard Williams, "Morality and the Emotions," as reprinted in his *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 207-229; and "Moral Luck", as reprinted in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 20-39. See also Lawrence Blum, *Friendship, Altruism, and Morality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), and—in a very different vein—John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971), especially part 3.

8, and 10.[4] This already hints at one of the large themes of the work as a whole, which is that the emotions raise questions that cannot be addressed by philosophy alone, but that require complementary work in other, more empirically-oriented fields, such as psychoanalysis, clinical psychology, and anthropology. More generally, the book includes all of the different kinds of inquiry into the emotions that I distinguished above. There are large claims made about the nature of emotions in general, such as the thesis that affectivity is important to emotion in ways philosophers have tended not to notice. There are also illuminating case studies of particular emotions and classes of emotions, including treatments of anger, fear, pity, shame, and sympathy. Finally there are explorations of the significance of the emotions for morality and moral philosophy—indeed, the overarching theme of the book is probably the idea that emotions have a kind of importance for morality and the moral life that moral philosophers have systematically failed to appreciate.

It is difficult to provide a more detailed summary of the results arrived at by Stocker in *Valuing Emotions*. This is no accident, for Stocker is concerned throughout to emphasize the enormous complexity of the emotions, the sheer variety of ways they can express themselves in character, affect, and action. The emphasis on complexity raises the question, however, whether philosophy as a discipline has anything distinctive to contribute to our positive understanding of the emotions. A philosophy attentive to the complexity of emotional phenomena can, of course, continually remind us of the simple fact that they are important to our lived lives. It can also alert us to the ways in which philosophers have heretofore neglected this simple fact, and to their simplifications and distortions of the emotional phenomena. But this alone does not amount to a constructive theoretical contribution. Stocker himself does not put the matter this way, but I believe his book raises by its example the large and interesting question of whether there could be a positive philosophy of the emotions that does justice to the complexity and particularity of its subject. I shall return to this question below.

First, however, I should like to discuss in a bit more detail some of the main themes of *Valuing Emotions*. These are laid out, in a passage that also gives a good indication of Stocker's style of writing and arguing, on the very last page of the book (326):

> In conclusion, emotions and other affective states are essential to value and are, themselves, valued and valuable. They are forms of lived, engaged, human value. And these include, just to take a very unprincipled selection, the personal, the impersonal, closeness, friend, neighbor, family, stranger, honor and slights. They are central not only to personal life, but also to interpersonal life, and to social and political life. They are also central to what makes these sorts and aspects of lives good, bad, or indifferent. They help show and constitute a considerable part of very large and complex evaluative, psychic, and social worlds. At the same time, they

[4] For the sake of simplicity I shall ignore this qualification in what follows, referring to Stocker as if he alone were responsible for the claims made in the book.

are to be understood within those worlds. In addition, emotional knowledge—including both knowledge and understanding of emotions and also the knowledge shown in emotions—is important, often vital, for knowledge and understanding of value. Indeed, much evaluative knowledge just is such emotional knowledge.

Stocker refers in this passage to the "emotions and other affective states," and this hints at one of his main theses about the nature of the emotions. This is the thesis, defended especially in chap. 1, that affectivity is essential to the emotions as a class. Stocker defends this thesis by criticizing the standard accounts of emotions offered by philosophers in the recent tradition. A great many of those accounts are reductive, identifying emotions with some combination(s) of belief, desire, and evaluation. It has been suggested, for instance, that to hope that something is the case is just to believe that it might be the case, and to regard its being the case as a good thing; a further element of feeling or affectivity, over and beyond the mentioned combination of cognitive and evaluative attitudes, is simply not necessary to count as being in the state of hope (compare 41). About accounts of this kind, Stocker agrees that the beliefs, desires, and evaluations they identify are often necessary parts of the emotions. But he urges that any account that restricts itself to such materials will fail to capture precisely what is distinctive about the emotions, namely their quality of feeling or affect. To show that this is the case, Stocker constructs a series of examples in which the beliefs, values, and value judgments singled out by various conventional accounts of emotions are present, without the emotional states that were to be analyzed in terms of those elements being present. Reading about an event that is eagerly anticipated in a distant community, for instance, a person could well qualify as having the belief that the event might occur, and the attitude that its occurrence would be a good thing, without actually *hoping* that the event takes place (43–44).

I find Stocker's examples here persuasive by and large, and agree with him that they raise serious doubts about the adequacy of reductive approaches to understanding the emotions. There is a widespread tendency in philosophical psychology to treat all psychological states as constructions out of two basic kinds of propositional attitude, the paradigms of which are belief and desire, respectively. Most of the theories that Stocker considers and rejects are examples of this tendency, and his discussion of them provides a convincing demonstration of how it has led to a distorted picture of our emotional lives. At the same time, however, it has to be said that it is very hard to give a perspicuous general account of the element that is missing in the reductive analyses of the emotions that Stocker sets himself against. He himself refers to this as "affect" or "psychic feeling," and cites as more concrete specifications of what he has in mind the phenomena of care, concern, and interest (54). Such psychic feelings are not exclusive to the emotions as we commonly understand them, but are shared as well by such phenomena as

moods, interests, and attitudes in both their conscious and unconscious manifestations (20).

But what exactly are psychic feelings in this sense? As Stocker would undoubtedly agree, it would be misleading to think of them on the model of bodily sensations or pangs (see 19–20, 53–54). Presumably many of the reductive accounts Stocker discusses are motivated in part by a suspicion that there is no distinctive quality of feeling or sensation that is necessary to count as being in such states as fear, anger, jealousy, rage, or shame. This seems correct, but it raises the question of how we are to understand the psychic feelings that Stocker takes to be essential to the emotionality of states of these kinds. I suspect these are not really best thought of as feelings at all, in the conventional sense, but rather as facts about the direction of one's interest and attention in the concrete circumstances of life. What is missing in the reductive account of hope, for instance, is precisely the element of attention and concern regarding the hoped-for occurrence. To hope that something comes about is thus not merely to believe that it might come about and to regard its possible occurrence as good, but also to take an interest in whether it comes about or not. Stocker does us a great service in drawing attention to this important (if elusive) element in our emotional experience.

A further theme of Stocker's book, also hinted at in the summary passage quoted above, is that the manner in which the emotions express themselves in feeling and action, and the occasions on which they are experienced, depend in complicated ways on larger matters of character and personality. This claim is illustrated in great detail in Part 3 of the book, which is devoted to case studies of the emotions and their complexities. In illuminating chapters on Aristotle's views of the emotions, for instance, Stocker shows in detail how Aristotle's characterizations of such states as shame, pride, fear, pity, and above all anger apply only to persons with certain identifiable—and far from universal—ways of conceiving themselves in relation to their social world. Specifically, the people Aristotle writes about tend to be "proud, striving, spirited, and active;" they "like themselves quite well and take themselves seriously, immediately, and personally" (244). The subjects of Aristotle's discussion of anger exhibit, on the whole, the personality structure characteristic of narcissism (in the psychoanalytic sense), including a strong concern, bred of insecurity, for their own worth and a corresponding tendency to conceptualize self-referential values in comparative terms (268–86). This shows itself in the fact that the Aristotelian person responds to slights with anger, whereas persons with other personality structures might respond to similar slights with reactions of shame and self-blame. It shows itself further in the fact that Aristotle does not even acknowledge the kinds of "spiritual maladies" that can make it difficult for people to take an abiding interest in much of anything at all, such as depression, melancholia, and accidie (244–46).

Aristotle's pronouncements on the various emotional states are not rendered invalid by the fact that they do not apply universally to all kinds of persons, but by calling attention to their restricted scope Stocker helps us to see the enormous complexity of the emotional phenomena with which he is concerned.

The reference in this context to the spiritual maladies raises a question, however, about another aspect of Stocker's discussion. This is insistence on the epistemological significance of the emotions, the thesis, in the words of the summary passage cited above, that "emotional knowledge...is important, often vital, for knowledge and understanding of value" (326). This is one of countless examples in the book of Stocker's insisting on the importance of the emotions, a pattern of assertion that articulates the central positive thesis of the book. In the present instance, however, it is not entirely clear what exactly the assertion of vital importance amounts to. I can imagine a rather bold philosophical thesis in this spirit to the effect that certain emotions simply must be present before one can grasp the concrete value of a person, object, or possibility for action. But Stocker's own discussion of the spiritual maladies serves to undermine this thesis, reminding us that it is perfectly possible to know the good without particularly caring about or taking an active interest in it (245; compare 203–4).

This suggests that we should prefer a weaker interpretation of the claim about the epistemological importance of the emotions, perhaps to the effect that our emotional states and dispositions often tend to influence our judgments and reasoning about the good. And indeed, Stocker seems to argue for a thesis to roughly this effect in the central chapters of Part 2 (especially chaps 3, 4, and 7). Typical passages from these sections of the book include the following: "having certain emotions is often systematically connected with being epistemologically well-placed to make good evaluative judgments" (105), and: "Emotions are part and parcel of, not merely useful for, being a good evaluative judge, being able and willing to act on those judgments, and also being a lover of value" (137). These quotations are clearly more hedged and judicious than the bald thesis about the necessity of emotions for evaluative knowledge formulated above, and Stocker provides many convincing examples to illustrate his qualified generalizations.

But in the more qualified form his claim about the importance of the emotions threatens to become obvious, and so uninteresting from a philosophical point of view. Especially if we follow Stocker in thinking of emotions primarily in terms of such affective conditions as interest, care, and attention, then it seems virtually truistic to assert that emotions can render one "well-placed to make good evaluative judgments," or enhance one's "willing[ness] to act on those judgments." That is, I find it difficult to think of anyone who would seriously deny that an emotional condition such as love (say) can, through the affective dimension of interest, care, and concern that it

involves, enhance one's attention to the concrete goodness or badness of the loved person's life. This is a particular example of the general difficulty to which I alluded above, namely that Stocker's alertness to the complexity of the emotional phenomena tends to blunt the philosophical interest of the claims about the emotions that he wishes to put forward. Those claims get watered down to the point where they are often virtually platitudinous, and over long stretches discussion in the book is advanced less by argument than by accumulation of illustrative anecdote.

This applies equally to other versions of the positive theme that lies at the center of Stocker's book, concerning the evaluative importance of the emotions. This theme is stated succinctly at the beginning of the summary passage cited above: "emotions and other affective states are essential to value and are, themselves, valued and valuable" (326). This and other formulations of Stocker's main thesis are presumably meant to point in at least two directions (though it is often hard to tell which he has in mind). First, emotions are evaluatively important insofar as they are implicated in the psychological conditions through which we value things; and second, they are evaluatively important insofar as they are themselves among the things we do and should value, contributing directly to the goodness of our lives. Again, however, it proves difficult to think of an interpretation of these claims that renders them both interesting and plausible. The importance of emotions to the psychological condition of valuing things seems to follow fairly truistically from Stocker's account of emotions in terms of the affective conditions of care, concern, and interest; there is, after all, a fairly common sense in which to value something just is (*inter alia*) to care or be concerned about it, take an interest in it, and so on. And the thesis of the goodness of emotionality, as Stocker understands it, seems similarly hard to dispute—though also hard to pin down very exactly.

Stocker supports the latter thesis by drawing attention to the concrete contexts in which the emotions are experienced—in connection with friendships and other close relationships, personal achievements, the kind of ongoing and complex activities that infuse life with meaning, and so on (compare chap. 6). But it is hard to say whether it is really emotionality *per se* that we value in his examples. Stocker observes that emotions are inextricably bound up with the things we obviously value in the contexts he describes, such as friendship (174–77); but even if this claim is correct, it does not follow that friendship (say) is valued *on account of* the emotional dimension it necessarily involves. The things that we intrinisically cherish in our friendships and close relationships, including, for instance, our friends themselves, may well be distinct from the emotional states that are implicated in friendship. Indeed, if we follow Stocker in tracing the distinctive character of emotions to the affective conditions of interest and attention, it begins to sound peculiar to suggest that emotions are among the things we particularly value in our

friendships. Is it really plausible to hold that the direction of our attention onto the needs and interests of our friends is itself something that is intrinsically valuable about friendship?

More basically, Stocker insists on the sheer pervasiveness of emotionality, as a necessary condition of any full human life we can really imagine: "emotions are important for values because they are important for the generality of life, activity, and thought" (180; compare 85). But the very ineluctability of affectivity in Stocker's sense raises a question about the point of global assertions regarding the value of the emotions. If the emotions really are essential to life itself, then there is no practical issue of whether we would be better off without them, and so no genuine question to be answered by insisting on their immense wonderfulness. In the end, I tend to agree with Stocker about the goodness of at least certain classes of emotions (something revealed, for instance, in moments of Proustian reflection on lost happiness, in which it is precisely the affectivity or mood of remembered experiences that one finds oneself focussing on). But Stocker's way of formulating and defending the thesis of the goodness of emotions raises difficulties that he himself does not entirely succeed in addressing.

It is helpful to distinguish, I think, between two different levels on which talk about the importance of emotions can operate. The claims just discussed are assertions of the importance of the emotions to our lives: both as psychological conditions of our activity as valuers, and as among the particular items that we value. In addition to claims of this kind, however, we can also distinguish the claim that the emotions are important to *philosophy*, things that we neglect at our peril in reflecting about, say, the moral life. Presumably Stocker's documentation of the importance of the emotions to life is ultimately meant to support a claim of this second kind. That is, by drawing our attention to the ways in which emotionality actually does matter to our lives, Stocker hopes to make plausible the thesis that emotions ought to matter to moral philosophy, that philosophical reflection about the moral life needs to be much more attentive than it has been to this side of the phenomenon it is reflecting on.

If this is the point of Stocker's reminders concerning the role of the emotions in our lives, however, then it would have been helpful to engage more directly and systematically with the kinds of considerations that have led philosophers to neglect the emotions in their work. The philosophical interest of Stocker's reminders lies in their status as correctives to the allegedly distorted picture of moral life that the philosophers have left us with. But—in contrast to some of his own, now classic articles[5]—Stocker's book tends to

[5] See, for example, Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976), pp. 453-466, and "Desiring the Bad: An Essay in Moral Psychology," *Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1979), pp. 738-753; also Stocker's earlier book *Plural and Conflicting Values* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). I should mention

neglect the distorted philosophical pictures that give his engagement with the emotional phenomena its philosophical point. Perhaps this is his conception of what moral psychology should become once it has left behind the fantasies of the philosophical tradition: a careful, detailed accounting of the variety of emotional phenomena, grounded in the empirical results of such allied fields as anthropology and psychoanalysis, and hedged in ways that do justice to the complexity and variety of human personality types. But Stocker's results in this vein are, to my mind, not very gripping—they read rather like a mere list of examples. Of course, Stocker has a positive organizing thesis that he means his examples to support, namely the thesis of the importance of the emotions to life. But for reasons I have tried to explain this thesis is too diffuse and platitudinous to function effectively as a self-sufficient organizing principle. This prompts me to wonder whether there is any positive task for ethical theory to accomplish, on Stocker's view, once it has absorbed the lessons regarding the emotions that he wishes us to draw.

If this line of thought is correct, it suggests that a moral psychology of the emotions will be most interesting to the extent it manages to keep larger philosophical issues firmly in view, if only as a critical foil. Now there are several points in Stocker's discussion at which he succeeds in connecting his psychological descriptions to issues of larger philosophical concern. He has an interesting discussion of ways in which different emotional configurations can affect the outcomes of universalization tests in ethics (139–49), and later he queries the use of killing as an example in moral philosophy, on grounds of the compartmentalization of thought required to reflect fruitfully about such an emotionally-charged phenomenon (209–13). But nothing much is really made of these points. The fact that emotions can influence the outcomes of universalization tests does not by itself call into question the thought that some such test captures a characteristic pattern of moral reasoning. After all, it seems clear that emotional conditions can affect our thinking in many different areas, without this undermining the assumption that there are basic principles or standards by which such thinking can be assessed as rational or irrational. As for the use of killing as an example, Stocker is no doubt right to call attention to the peculiar fascination that philosophers have with cases that involve killings; but he does not cite a single concrete instance in which use of this kind of example has led to distorted philosophical results.

Beyond these (and other) specific targets, Stocker seems to assume that a great many moral philosophers operate with an overintellectualized conception of persons, and a related conception of ethics as abstracting from the

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that the comparative neglect of questions of ethical theory is a deliberate feature of *Valuing Emotions*; see, for instance, p. xxi of the Preface. My question is whether the decision to pursue issues in moral psychology in comparative isolation from broader questions in moral theory is a wise one.

emotional particularity of human lives—looking "beyond humans to some feature or possibility of reason, the universe, or whatever" (323; compare also the Introduction and chap. 3). If this were correct, then it would be an important service to remind us as Stocker does of the variety of ways in which emotions matter to our actual lives. Stocker is surely right that we humans are stuck with the emotions, and that they should therefore be taken into account in reflecting about morality. But I doubt that there are many philosophers around these days who would seriously question these assumptions. Contemporary philosophers working in the Kantian tradition, for instance, would undoubtedly agree with Stocker in rejecting "the ideal of a life of emotionless reason" (173). The kind of rational guidance that these theorists extol does not exclude the forms of interest, care, and concern that Stocker emphasizes. The life that is lived in accordance with reason is a life that the agent can rationally endorse, and there is nothing in this ideal to suggest that we would be better off without affectivity, or that this is so much as possible for us.

There are, of course, interesting and important issues that are raised by the idea that the moral life should be a life that is guided by the agent's own conception of what they have reason to do. Many of these issues touch on questions about the nature of the emotions and their role in our lives. Questions arise, for instance, about the contribution of emotions as potential bases of our reasons for action and of our capacities for moral agency. To what extent, and under what conditions, are our normative reasons for action (including, above all, our moral reasons) conditioned by our emotional states? Can we have reason to act morally even on occasions when the affective resources of interest and concern let us down (when, for instance, we are in the grip of Stocker's "spiritual maladies")? If so, what does this imply about our capacity to comply with moral requirements? Can we retain the power to act rightly even in the absence of the emotional conditions of care, concern, and attention characteristic of many virtuous agents? More generally, what are the connections between emotions and rational action? Can it plausibly be maintained, for instance, that actions are rational to the extent they give expression to appropriate evaluative attitudes?[6]

These are among the traditional and still gripping philosophical questions that are raised by the emotions for our understanding of practical reason and morality; but discussion of these philosophical questions is not particularly advanced by the repeated insistence on the sheer importance of the emotions. We should by all means agree with Stocker that the emotions are important to our lives—but not, perhaps, with his assumption that it is philosophically important to be reminded of their importance.

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[6] For this suggestion, see Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993).