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# Justifying the Emotions

GABRIELE TAYLOR

It is perhaps no more than a commonplace that moral education is in part at least an education of the emotions. Yet moral philosophers have often taken this to mean merely that we must learn to control them, for if we fail to do so we are at the mercy of what is fickle and irrational, and so are unable to exercise any control over our lives. It is a corollary of such a view that the emotions as such do not contribute to the moral worth of a person, and in consequence the role they play in our moral outlook and assessment has largely escaped philosophical scrutiny.<sup>1</sup>

One reason for this frequent neglect is a lack of appreciation of the complex features involved in individual emotions; a lack due perhaps to the spell cast by the traditional distinction between Reason on the one hand and Feeling on the other, with its consequent tendency to simplify. The thesis I want to defend is that an investigation of such features will bring to light a close connection between the emotions and our evaluation of human beings. I am not here interested in excessive emotional reaction which ought to be controlled. My claim is rather that once we have identified what is conceptually involved in individual emotions it can be shown that a deficiency of this or that emotional reaction, either in general or on some specific occasion, may be traced to some moral failing or human short-coming. This will give us a sense in which it will sometimes be appropriate to say not just that it is natural for a man in such-and-such a situation to feel a certain emotion, but even that in this sort of situation he ought to have felt it. To illustrate this thesis in an exemplary way I shall concentrate on the case of anger.

## I

To make good my claim that conceptual considerations indicate a link between the emotions and our moral life I have to start with

<sup>1</sup> But recently this role has been discussed by B. A. O. Williams in his Inaugural Lecture 'Morality and the Emotions' and by P. F. Strawson in 'Freedom and Resentment'.

a brief discussion of the relevant characteristics of the emotions. Again I begin with what is now a commonplace: the emotions involve specific attitudes and certain ways of looking at the world.<sup>1</sup> This is the basis of my enquiry. It may be the case that for some reason or other we regard the way of looking at the world involved in a particular emotion as a bad way. If so, we may here have a case for saying that this emotion ought not to be felt. Or it may be the case that the way of looking at the world is for some reason thought admirable. Then a lack of the relevant emotion may at least indicate, even if it does not constitute, an inability to look at the world in this way. And this would be a defect.

It is largely<sup>2</sup> by reference to the sorts of thoughts and beliefs we have about the world that we distinguish between different emotions. If, say, I feel fear then I see something or somebody as dangerous or threatening; if I feel pity or envy, I see somebody as being in a sad state or as possessing something which I want for myself. And so also for the other emotions for which we have common names.

Of course, thoughts and beliefs such as these are not sufficient for a person to experience the relevant emotion: at the very least he must pay more than passing attention to the situation. Emotions tend to disturb, overwhelm or hold us in their grip, and without some concentration on the situation none of this is possible. The stronger the emotion, the stronger and even obsessional the thought-concentration. The obvious focus of such concentration at least initially<sup>3</sup> is the 'somebody' or 'something' which occurs in the characterisation of the various features of particular emotions. In one sense of the ill-fated phrase 'object of emotion', this focus of the attention may be called the 'object'.<sup>4</sup> For example, if I fear the bull, then I believe certain sentences to be true, namely: 'there is a bull in the vicinity and it has some qualities in virtue of which it is dangerous to me'. The object (the bull) is that which is believed to have the relevant qualities. This will normally be the person, thing or event which is indicated by the grammatical

1 For a more detailed examination of this point see e.g. I. Thalberg: 'Emotion and Thought', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, January 1964.

2 Not necessarily only: other features, such as behavioural reaction, may well be relevant.

3 E.g. if his cutting remark caused my resentment then this is what I brood over. But given my emotional state I may well recall or fabricate other occasions for resentment and my attention may shift or spread to these.

4 See, e.g., J. C. B. Gosling, 'Emotion and Object', *Philosophical Review*, no. lxxiv (1965).

object-phrase in sentence-forms of the type: 'he  $\phi$ s X', 'he is  $\phi$  with/of/about X' (where ' $\phi$ ' stands for an emotion-term), whether the person, thing or event exists or not. For my purposes such an informal account of 'object' is adequate enough. I shall not be concerned with those cases where the grammatical phrase in question is 'nothing' or 'everything' and so does not indicate an object. Typically, it is moods like happiness or depression which may be 'about' everything or nothing, and these will therefore be excluded from the discussion.

So where an emotion has an object, a person experiencing it will hold certain sorts of beliefs about the object: that it is dangerous, insulting, etc. He will also normally be aware of and able to produce specific reasons which explain why, e.g. he thinks himself to be in danger or to have been insulted, as for example: 'it's a poisonous snake', or 'he implied that I was open to bribery'.

It is specifically in this area that we have a basis for rational or objective assessment of the emotions, for deciding whether there is something 'wrong' with any particular emotional reaction. I shall leave aside the extreme case where the particular reason given has no explanatory force at all and so does not show why the object of the emotion should be seen in the relevant light. Normally the specific reason given implies a belief that there exists (or will exist, in some cases) that which the emotion is directed at, and one may clearly be mistaken about the implied existential claim. If so, the emotional reaction in question would be unfounded though not necessarily irrational. It would have this latter feature only if the grounds for the belief are very weak; if, for example, my tendency to 'see' dangerous snakes may itself have to be accounted for by reference to my obsessional fear of them. Again, and this case may not always be distinguishable from the other, I may be right in my belief that the object exists but mistaken in attributing certain features to it; e.g. I correctly believe that there is a cow in the field but mistakenly believe it to be dangerous; or I may be right in thinking that Mary uttered such-and-such words but mistaken in regarding them as constituting an insult. My first belief, though true, does not warrant my second belief. It is usually much harder to establish the rationality or otherwise of the second belief than the truth, or even rationality, of the first one. Just how complex it will turn out to be varies to a large extent with the different emotions. Physical fear is probably the most straightforward case: some situations just are dangerous, an acknowledged threat to life

or health. And so there is nothing irrational about feeling fear when confronted by them. Or one might be able to tell with no great difficulty whether certain situations are a threat to you, the concert pianist, but not to me, the policeman. It is much harder to determine whether a situation is insulting or pity-deserving.

It may also be the case that my beliefs are true, or at least well-founded, and yet my emotional reaction is unjustified because disproportionate to the situation as I see it: I may believe the threat to be a minor one but my fear is very great, or conversely I see that the danger is great and feel no or little fear. Very roughly, in the first case I concentrate my thoughts on the object to an extent that is not warranted by the situation, in the second my degree of concentration falls short of what is warranted. The term 'unreasonable' is normally applied to the first but not to the second of these cases (perhaps because it is after all the more prudent course?), but it may well be used to cover both.

The only general conclusion we can draw from this account of the assessment of the emotions is that an emotional reaction is unjustified if it rests on irrationally mistaken beliefs or where it is disproportionate to a given situation. Conversely, where all my beliefs are true and well-founded, and where my reaction is appropriate to the situation, my emotion would at any rate not be unjustified, and if not unjustified then perhaps it is justified. This 'justification' does not, however, seem to amount to very much: it leaves open the possibility that, in order perhaps to avoid the dangers of excess, it may be as well to feel as little emotion as possible and even to rid oneself of the emotions altogether. For from the occurrence of an emotion on some particular occasion being justified in the sense of not being irrational or unreasonable nothing follows as to whether it is a good or bad thing to experience this emotion at all. So one may be inclined to think that to speak of 'justified emotion' here is out of place,<sup>1</sup> and that at best we are dealing with occasions where the emotional reaction is not unjustified.

This conclusion would, however, be mistaken, for if we investigate what in individual cases is required for the relevant beliefs to be rational the notion of 'justification' given will acquire rather more content. If a man's beliefs about a given situation are not rational and if *in consequence* he is deficient in emotional reaction,

1 See Ewing's reply to Mrs. Warnock in 'The Justification of the Emotions', *Proceedings of the Aristotelean Society*, 1957.

then we will have a case where it would be appropriate to say that he ought to have felt the emotion in question. To illustrate this point I shall now turn to a more detailed discussion of the features involved in one particular emotion.

## II

'There are some things at which we ought to feel angry', Aristotle says,<sup>1</sup> and what follows may be seen as an elucidation of this remark.

Anger has in common with emotions such as fear, grief and sorrow that it is the response to a situation which is seen as in some way detrimental to a man's well-being. The loss, or anticipated loss, of well-being can be greater or less and take very many different forms. But there are certain limitations which distinguish anger from these other emotions and so specify the features involved in it:

(i) Unlike my grief and my sorrow, my anger is *with* as well as *about* or *at* something or someone. This gives anger a focus of a special kind at which it is directed and which is lacking in the case of the other two emotions. The focus provides the target which attracts our desire to hit back. In this sense anger is active where grief and sorrow are passive, for there is typically a way of acting, indeed of aggressive action, connected with it.

(ii) It is futile to hit back at something which cannot take the point. So while we allow the small child to be angry with the sharp corner because it was hurt by it, this would be an absurd attitude in an adult. It implies a belief that the table-corner is animate, an agent with intentions and purposes. The existence of some such being is always implied in a situation I regard as anger-arousing. It is strange to be angry, rather than sad or upset, because lightning killed my favourite tree unless I think that some malevolent deity had a hand in it. The agent need not always be specifiable as this or that particular agent but may simply feature as, 'whoever is responsible for this state of affairs'. In being thus linked with agency and intention, anger differs from fear as well as from grief and sorrow. I may well be afraid of what I believe to be inanimate. Further, the fear aroused, e.g. in a non-swimmer when he finds himself in the deep river, will not be a function of whether he has been pushed in or not, whereas his anger very

1 *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. III, ch. 1.

likely will be (though he may also be angry with himself for having been so careless). If his degree of anger is to be justified, then it will in this case depend on whether the push was intentional, a piece of carelessness, or due to an accident which nobody could be expected to foresee. But this is not to say that the degree of anger I feel, or even justifiably feel, must necessarily vary according to the presence or absence of an intention to cause me that particular harm. In Trollope's *Barchester Towers* (ch. 5) Mrs. Proudie, when she first meets the Archdeacon and Mr. Harding, still tries to be pleasant, but her condescending, overbearing and self-righteous attitude is such that it arouses anger in even the meek Mr. Harding. He sees her behaviour as offending his dignity, particularly his dignity as a clergyman. The annoyance caused is not intended, but that is in this case not a mitigating circumstance. People in general and Mrs. Proudie as the Bishop's wife in particular ought to know better than to behave like that. What I see as anger-arousing may be the result of carelessness, stupidity, clumsiness or lack of consideration on the part of the agent as well as the result of his intentional action.

(iii) Again in contrast to the other three emotions, the loss of my well-being is seen not as just a loss but as one which is in some way undeserved and unfair. I believe that some wrong has been done to me, where the wrong can of course range from the trivial (a child's request when we have just settled down with a book) to the weighty, as when we see ourselves and what we value held in contempt. Trollope's Mr. Harding is a case in point here: he is not made just uncomfortable and unhappy, but he sees Mrs. Proudie's treatment of him as a wrong; as a member of the laity and a woman at that, she has no right to meddle in spiritual affairs. This supports the point that the intention to cause injury is not necessarily central here, for we may well feel much more bitter about some casual remark not meant as an attack at all but expressing quite clearly that we don't count for much.

These three features of anger, that it has a focus at which it is directed, that it is connected with (human) agency and intention and that the situation is seen—at least at the time—as undeservedly detrimental to a man's well-being are not independent of one another; if I see what is happening to me as a wrong of some sort then naturally I introduce an agent into the picture who is responsible for it, for I cannot see as a wrong what I regard as just a natural event. And this agency, once isolated, will again naturally

be the focus of my anger, that which I want to hit back at. This does not mean, of course, that in order to count as being angry I must at the time be aware of all these features, or that I must be able to handle moral terminology. The 'wrong' may after all be no more than an interference with my well-being or pleasure which I find irritating or intolerable. But if we are to speak of justified anger then certain further conditions have to be fulfilled:

(a) The object of my anger must exist.

(b) The wrong I believe myself to be suffering really must be a wrong and not just irrationally be seen as such. And this involves:

(c) I must have a well-founded notion of what is due<sup>1</sup> to me, or due to people in general, for otherwise it will not be the case that what I regard as undeserved or unfair harm really was undeserved.

(d) I must have reason to believe that the agent I hold responsible is capable of recognising what is due to me or to others, either on the grounds that the individual belongs to a class of beings members of which are expected to conform to certain standards, or because in this particular situation it is natural or proper to make certain demands of that particular agent.

(e) For the sake of completeness we should add that if my anger *with X* is to be justified then it must be X and no one else who brought about the harm I suffered.

Conditions (b) to (d) all involve appraisals or an appeal to standards of various kinds. These standards may, of course, be debatable; not only because it may be hard to settle, e.g. what is due to me on this or that occasion, but also, and more fundamentally, because talk of 'wrong', 'deserts' and 'dues' evidently relies on some moral framework. A defence of these standards is beyond the scope of this paper, but at least the ones I appeal to are those, I believe, which are commonly accepted. If they are accepted then it is partly by reference to them that we can judge a belief about some situation to be rational or otherwise.

It is not difficult to judge, given (b) to (d), what may go wrong if my feeling angry is unjustified. As a result of not fulfilling either condition (c) or condition (d) I may be mistaken as to what constitutes a wrong done to me, or perhaps to others, and hence fail

1 I use 'due' in want of a better word to cover the range of possible cases. The beliefs involved in anger may but needn't appeal to a norm or convention. They do in the case of Mr. Harding, but hardly when I believe that an unbroken night's sleep is 'due' to me and shouldn't be disturbed by uninvited callers.



to fulfil condition (b) as well. I may, for example, have a very exaggerated and distorted view of what is due to me and hence constantly and irrationally regard what people say and do as an injury to me. Alternatively, although the other person's behaviour does express a slight and is perhaps intended to show me his contempt I may be mistaken in taking his attack seriously enough to think of it as in some way injurious to me. It may be that the person concerned is too ignorant or generally despicable to warrant such attention. Contrary to appearances I have not really received an injury, and if, nevertheless, I feel myself wronged then there is an element of irrationality in my assessment of the person involved. So the 'worth' or 'status' of the insult-producer is a relevant consideration; we must judge whom and what we are to take seriously and why. Unlike Mr. Harding, the Archdeacon is not angry with Mrs. Proudie: as she is a woman what she says and does at this particular meeting is—in his view—quite irrelevant and not worth dwelling on; Mr. Slope, occupying an official position at the Bishop's palace, is however a very different proposition.

Justifying one's anger on any particular occasion is, then, a complicated procedure. It may be no easy matter to show that one fulfils conditions (c) and (d), which are in turn necessary for fulfilling condition (b). If the conditions are fulfilled, then this amounts to my feeling angry being justified. This does not *imply* that I ought to feel angry. However, on the basis of the various features of anger now collected together it is possible to show that a lack of anger on this or that occasion may well be *evidence* for a misreading of the situation, which in turn will indicate some shortcoming or failing in the person concerned. Different sorts of failings may be involved, depending on different ways of looking at the situation.

1. You don't feel angry although you realise that the man next door is trying to insult you. This lack is due to the fact that you take a very low view of him, regard him as utterly despicable. What such a man thinks or does cannot possibly be of the slightest interest to you and hence cannot possibly provoke an emotional reaction, for if it did this would imply that he and his actions are worthy of having your attention focused on him, at least for a time. In such a case one may well think that your lack of anger shows up a failing in you, either on the grounds that no human being whatever should be held in such contempt, or on the more

restricted and hence more easily supported grounds that this man at least is not despicable at all, and that your implied view of him will in fact give him just cause for anger. It seems quite appropriate here to say that on this occasion you ought to feel angry because your lack of it is due to an improper attitude to your neighbour.

Such an attitude very likely involves some form of conceit. It may be that the man deficient in anger has in the past compared his neighbour and his actions with himself and his own and has come to the *ex hypothesi* mistaken and unfounded conclusion that his own way of life and his own values are so greatly superior to his neighbour's that any sort of relation between them would be beneath him. He overestimates his own worth in comparison with that of the other, and the chances are that this is not an isolated occasion.

Worse still, our man may not have taken the trouble of comparing himself with others at all, he may just as a matter of course judge the world entirely in terms of his own values, being blind not only to the value of others, but even to the possibility of there being values other than his own. He is thoroughly arrogant. What is not caught in the net of his own values is simply insignificant. He is not necessarily selfish or even vain, he is just totally indifferent towards others, their way of life, their interests, their fate. His value-ascriptions, as they are not based on empirical evidence, cannot be shaken by such evidence either, for given his attitude the arrogant man cannot even think that such a thing as counter-evidence might exist. It follows that he is self-sufficient and isolated, incapable of a relationship with others where these others are regarded as of equal status and worth, as beings to whom respect is due. Arrogance in this form amounts, no doubt, to that sort of pride which is one of the seven deadly sins. But even in lesser degrees arrogance, I take it, is a human short-coming, and it as well as other forms of conceit is at least a possible failing accounting for a deficiency of anger.

2. Such a deficiency may, however, have nothing to do with arrogance but indicate failings of a different sort: Emma Woodhouse thought that Miss Campbell should, if not angry, at least have felt offended when her fiancé preferred Jane Fairfax's piano playing to her own. Frank Churchill remarks: 'it was not very flattering to Miss Campbell; but she really did not seem to feel it', to which Emma replies: 'so much the better—or so much the worse—I do not know which. It may be sweetness or it may be

stupidity in her—quickness of friendship or dullness of feeling'.<sup>1</sup> Not that one wants to agree with Emma's view that here we might have a case of justified anger or at least offence, but still she has a point: deficiency or lack of anger may be due to 'stupidity', a dullness of perception. A person may fail to see that what has been said or done to them is hurtful at all. This may be due to a total lack of sensitivity, but it may also be due to a simple trust in human nature. Particularly in the former case—though possibly also in the latter—some short-coming is involved, though no doubt of a very different kind from the one discussed earlier. It is a failing largely because such lack of perception dissociates us from the world as it really is, and partly also because if we don't see anything as hurtful to us we may be similarly blind in the case of others and so do less towards helping them than perhaps we should.

Alternatively, although I may recognise what has been said or done as hurtful I may not regard it as undeservedly so. Miss Bates, for example, does not feel angry at Emma's unkind remark though she certainly feels hurt.<sup>2</sup> She is not angry because, being a humble person, she does not think Emma's words unjust: 'Ah well—to be sure. Yes, I see what she means. . . . I must make myself very disagreeable, or she would not have said such a thing to an old friend.' Sweetness of nature no doubt, but surely even that can be carried too far. To see every slighting remark as a just one does seem to indicate a failing which might be seen as the opposite of arrogance: an acceptance of values from outside at the cost of one's own.

Either conceit or humility may, then, be the reason why a man does not feel angry on a given occasion. Both rest on the fact that I do not regard the behaviour in question as constituting a piece of unjust wrong done to me, in the one case because I regard myself as so superior to my neighbour that nothing he does can be regarded as an injury to me, in the other because I regard myself as so inferior that nothing he does can be regarded as undeserved. Both are unbalanced views, though of course the former is the more reprehensible: he himself may be the just cause of someone else's anger, and someone holding such views can hardly be an admirable person. True kindness, pity or generosity, for example, would not be something of which he would be capable. People falling under the second description are of course

1 Jane Austin, *Emma* (Clarendon Press), vol. 2, ch. vi.

2 *Ibid.* vol. 3, ch. vii.

a very different matter: they may well be kind, helpful, self-sacrificing; they may be well-equipped with other-regarding virtues. On the other hand, they will be lacking in self-confidence and possibly even self-respect, and this would be a serious deficiency in a person.

3. Cases 1 and 2 are concerned only with anger about an injury directly affecting the person himself. It is also possible to feel angry at someone else being injured.<sup>1</sup> Aquinas says that anger is always aroused by something done to oneself 'or done to someone with whom we have something in common'.<sup>2</sup> The 'something in common' may be a close personal tie: I may be angry with the teacher because I believe he interferes with the well-being of my child. Or it may be that what I see attacked is some quality I value and think of as belonging to anyone having the same job or status I have, or as belonging to any human being, such as human dignity. But beyond this I may also be angry with someone whom I regard as trying to undermine some institution or creed I set store by. What is crucial here is not so much possessing something in common, but caring for whatever I see attacked. If so, then, it is plain what may be wrong with a man who does not feel angry where an injury is not one he directly suffers himself: he fails to be angry at what happens to someone else because he is incapable of recognising anything as being of value unless it directly concerns himself, and such self-absorption we should certainly regard as a defect.

But it may after all be the case that a man gets the situation right and yet does not feel angry, i.e. he sees that something of value is being attacked and yet experiences no emotional reaction. There cannot possibly then be a failing here due to a wrong assessment of the relevant features. And indeed there may be no failing involved here at all. On the other hand, while recognising that something of value is being attacked, a man may lack the thought-concentration and so the concern with its object which is a requisite for feeling angry. If this is the case then we may have quite legitimate doubts about his sincerity: perhaps he appreciates that something of value is being attacked, but it can hardly be something he values greatly given his degree of detachment. His

1 It is a mistake to think that this is a case of indignation rather than of anger: X feels indignant with Y if he thinks Y has broken some rule which he ought not to have broken. Whether this breach results in harm to X himself or to some third person is irrelevant.

2 *Summa Theologica*, Question 47, Article 1.

appreciation of such values is theoretical only, he is too indolent or self-centred to have much concern for them unless they directly involve himself.

There are some emotions which can be seen without difficulty to operate like anger in that not feeling them on some occasion may be taken as evidence for a failing. Examples are pity, gratitude, regret, remorse, shame and guilt. In other cases, however, the application of the scheme may not seem to be so straightforward. It is tempting to argue that the failure to experience some emotions, such as hate or perhaps envy and jealousy, can never indicate a failing. On the contrary, the experiencing of the emotion itself is evidence for some character-weakness. If so, then here, in contrast to the anger-case, it would never be appropriate to say: 'On such-and-such an occasion you ought to have felt (say) jealous'. This in turn would imply that, e.g., jealousy cannot be justified in the sense given, and hence that one or other of the beliefs involved in it is always ill-founded.

Even if we accept this view it does not follow that the same scheme is not applicable to these cases. Of course, within the framework of one's beliefs it is perfectly possible to regard, and to have good reason for regarding, certain other beliefs as always unfounded, whatever the particular circumstances. So one might plausibly hold that it is always wrong to be jealous at least where the object of jealousy is a person, on the grounds that this emotion involves the belief that another person is a thing to be possessed. But a person is no such thing, and hence this reading of the situation is always ill-conceived. This does not mean, of course, that on certain occasions one may not think it perfectly natural for A to be jealous of B; only that, natural or not, A ought to reconsider some of his beliefs. Nor does it follow that A's lack of jealousy on some occasion may not be traced to a failing in him. It may after all be the case that his lack of feeling is due not to a proper reading of the situation but rather to a misguided belief about it, e.g. that B is not worth paying much attention to. But given our view of the nature of jealousy we should of course refuse to take the further step of saying that he *ought* to have felt jealous on this occasion.

These considerations show not that the scheme here outlined is limited in its application, but merely that there may be a variety of respectable views as to what beliefs are rational and why. It may for example be possible to argue that anger, too, should be

classed among those emotions which one is never justified in feeling, because, e.g., it is wrong to be so concerned with what is due to one. An ultimate justification for the division of the emotions along these lines will of course amount to a justification of the moral system adopted, and so is beyond the scope of this paper.

Yet there is still one emotion, namely love, where the inappropriateness of 'you ought to feel  $\phi$  on this or that occasion' cannot be wholly explained by reference to a diversity of moral beliefs. It seems that love raises conceptual difficulties which set it apart from all the other emotions here discussed. In these latter cases it is always possible to describe a situation which is at least a candidate for being justifiably emotion-arousing. But in the case of love it does not appear that there are any stateable features which all such situations must share, and if so then any talk of justification would here be without basis.

While this description makes the situation look more hopeless than in fact it is, it cannot be denied that love occupies a peculiar position in the emotion-area. It requires special treatment and a paper to itself.

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