



## The Passivity of Emotions

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## THE PASSIVITY OF EMOTIONS

Robert M. Gordon

A number of philosophers object to the traditional classification of fear, joy, jealousy, embarrassment, and the like—collectively, “the emotions”—as “passions”: ways, or products of ways, of “being acted on.” For it is thought that if the emotions are passions, then a proper attitude toward them would be one of helplessness and fatalistic resignation. If the emotions are passions, then, according to some, we are not responsible for them. Edward Sankowski expresses the view succinctly:

We are often tempted to think of emotions in general as phenomena which are not under the control of those who feel them, as “passions” with respect to which we are passive, as phenomena which happen to us rather than as phenomena we may bring into being somehow. Adequate understanding of the relations between action and emotion, however, shows this to be bad faith.<sup>1</sup>

Some writers have even thought it necessary, in combating such *mauvaise foi*, not only to deny that these states are passions but even to assert that they are to be classified among our *actions*. Robert C. Solomon sums up his view as follows:

Emotions are judgments and actions, not occurrences or happenings that we suffer. Accordingly, I want to say that emotions are choices and our responsibility.<sup>2</sup>

Evidently Solomon thinks that to conceive emotions as passions is to conceive them as *involuntary* states. The remedy he proposes is that they be conceived instead as actions.

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Sankowski, “Responsibility of Persons for Their Emotions,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 7 (1977), pp. 834–835.

<sup>2</sup>Robert C. Solomon, “Emotions and Choice,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 27 (1973), reprinted with an Appendix in A. Rorty, *Explaining Emotions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 270 as reprinted. The same view is presented at length in Solomon’s *The Passions* (New York: Doubleday, 1977).

I think the attack on the passivity of emotions trades on a common misconception of what the passivity consists in: of what it is for something to be a passion. Contrary to the assumption of a number of philosophers, it is not a consequence of the passivity of emotions that they are states with respect to which *we* are passive. More specifically, neither of the following is a consequence:

that emotions are *states that act on us*;  
that emotions are *involuntary states*, states that are not  
“up to us.”

To show this will be the burden of Section II, below (“Two Fallacies”). The main *positive* thesis I put forward in this paper is presented in Section III (“The Causal Structure of a Passion”). There I point to a certain difference between emotions and actions and argue that it is this difference that underlies the traditional and intuitive classification of emotions as “passions,” or ways (or products of ways) of being acted upon. Let me anticipate by giving the general outlines of that thesis.

What emotions *share* with actions is, most importantly, an ontogenesis in propositional attitudes rather than in “brute” causes exclusively. If, for example, the sight of some particular person causes fear, anger, embarrassment, or joy, it does so, at least typically, by way of one’s *beliefs and attitudes* concerning that person. But not everything that is caused by beliefs and attitudes is an intentional action, of course: it all depends (or at least mostly depends) on *how the beliefs and attitudes interlock*. Where intentional action, or at least *rational* intentional action, is concerned, we often find the following pattern: a positive or a negative attitude toward some possible state of affairs S—for example, a “wish” or a “desire” for S—engaging with an *instrumental* or *means-end* belief, one that functions as an *instruction for bringing about* (or avoiding) S. (There are alternative patterns as well.)

But beliefs and pro/con-attitudes sometimes interlock in a very different way. Notoriously, a wish for S may meet up with the “cold, hard fact”—or, at least, the cold, hard *belief* (be it true or false)—that *S cannot be*. Such *wish-frustrations* (as one might term such engagements of pro/con attitude with belief) have certain characteristic *effects* on human beings. Stated baldly and boldly (not to

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mention vaguely), my view is that we use words such as *displeased*, *sad*, and *upset* to baptize some of these effects. We use more specialized emotion terms such as *angry*, *indignant*, *embarrassed*, and *ashamed* to mark the effects of particular *types* of wish-frustration, for example, the *knowing and willful* frustration of one's wish by someone else.<sup>3</sup> And in addition to words that designate "negative factive emotions" (as I call this most populous class of emotions)<sup>4</sup> there are others, such as *pleased*, *proud*, *afraid*, and *hopeful*, that signalize effects of *still other* patterns of engagement between cognitive and pro/con types of propositional attitudes.

It will of course be crucial to ask *why* a difference in such patterns of engagement, or "causal structures," is relevant to the distinction between "actions" and "passions": why propositional attitudes that interlock in one way give rise to effects we view as "actions" whereas effects of other patterns of propositional attitudes are viewed as "passions."

I begin the argument of this paper with a datum on which consensus is easily attained: the *grammatical* passivity of emotion descriptions.

### I. PASSIONS AND PARTICIPLES

Grammatical evidence suggests that the "passivity" of states such as fear, anger, and jealousy is not an invention of philosophers or psychologists. That the so-called "emotions" belong to the category of "passions," or states produced by one's being *acted on* in certain ways, is suggested by the fact that the great majority of adjectives designating emotions are derived from participles: for example, *amused*, *annoyed*, *astonished*, *delighted*, *depressed*, *embarrassed*, *frightened*, *horrified*, *irritated*, *miffed*, *overjoyed*, *pleased*, *terrified*, *surprised*,

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<sup>3</sup>I have argued for these theses elsewhere, particularly in "The Aboutness of Emotions," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 11 (1974), pp. 27–36.

<sup>4</sup>In my book, *The Structure of Emotions: Investigations in Cognitive Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). What I now term the "factive" emotions I have referred to earlier as "knowledge-requiring" emotions ("Emotions and Knowledge," *Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1969), pp. 408–413) and "certainty" emotions ("Fear," *The Philosophical Review* 89 (1980), pp. 560–578). These terms all pick out the same states, highlighting different aspects.

*troubled*, *upset*, and *vexed*. Some others, such as *afraid* and *sad*, can only claim participial ancestors: for example, *afraid* was originally a participle of the verb *affray*, and *sad* descends from the etymological forebear of *sated*.<sup>5</sup> And there are current colloquial and slang emotion descriptions that suggest that the participial model remains a compelling one: *tickled*, *ticked off*, *burned up*, *juiced up*, *bent out of shape*, and so on.

It might of course be true that the alleged passivity of emotions remains an invention, after all—an invention of a metaphysics that is naively based on a purely grammatical “decision” (albeit one that is common to all or most human languages) to generate adjectives of emotion from verbs. Still another possibility is this: the emotions are indeed “passive” in some important (perhaps metaphysical) sense, but the grammatical passivity of emotion adjectives arose independently, not as a reflection of passivity in that deeper sense.

Bearing these possibilities in mind, I think it is important, as a prelude to any further discussion of the passivity of emotions, to get clear about the type of passivity that is at least *suggested* by the grammatical passivity of emotion adjectives. For this purpose it will pay to compare adjectives that designate emotional states with *other* adjectives that are derived from participles. Perhaps more important, this exercise will show us what types of passivity are *not* (or should not be) suggested by the grammatical passivity of emotion adjectives.

The emotion words mentioned above belong to a class of adjectives that includes *magnetized*, *frozen*, *rotten*, *hardened*, *torn*, *salted*, *pickled*, *congealed*, *solidified*, *intoxicated*, *irritated* (as a condition, for example, of the skin), and *exposed* (as a state, for example, of photographic film). Such adjectives describe something's *state or condition* in terms of the particular type of *operation* or *change of state* that induces it. Thus, to ask whether the apple is rotten is to ask whether it is in the condition that is (at least typically) brought

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<sup>5</sup>In addition, *angry* originally meant (according to the Oxford English Dictionary) “troublesome” or “vexatious,” that is, “that which *troubles*” or “that which *vexes*,” and later came to designate the corresponding *effect*: being troubled or vexed. (In modern use, the term is more specific.) On the other hand, “sorry” and “enjoy” appear to bear no historical traces of transitivity. Hence I refer only to the “great majority” of emotion adjectives.

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about in apples by rotting; to ask whether the film is exposed is to ask whether it is in the state that is at least typically brought about in film by exposing it to light. (The qualification "at least typically" is needed to cover, for example, a variety of apples that has been genetically engineered to be physically and chemically indistinguishable from rotten apples; and films that have been manufactured to be physically and chemically indistinguishable from film that has been exposed to light. Such apples may be said to be "rotten" apples, though they have never undergone rotting; such films, to be "exposed" films, though they have never undergone exposure to light.)

Within this class, a further division may be made. For something may freeze, rot, congeal, or solidify (changes of state designated by intransitive verbs) without the intervention of an "agent" (or, perhaps, catalyst) that freezes, rots, congeals, or solidifies it (transitive verb). A food is salted or pickled, on the other hand, only if it has been salted or pickled, typically by a person using the appropriate substance (salt, a pickling solution, etc.): it doesn't just "salt" or "pickle." Likewise, a person is *intoxicated* only if something (an *intoxicant*) is, or at least has been, intoxicating him. One does not simply "intoxicate." *Intoxicated* is an adjective that characterizes a state as resulting from an *operation* performed by some "agent."

Emotion terms belong to the latter, "transitive" class. A person does not simply amuse, annoy, astonish, delight, depress, embarrass, frighten, horrify, overjoy, terrify, or surprise: these too are *not* changes of state designated by intransitive verbs.<sup>6</sup> For X to be, for example, embarrassed, is for X to be in a state that is produced by *something's* (or *someone's*) *embarrassing* X. In this respect,

Mary is embarrassed.

is comparable to any of the following:

The film is exposed.

The iron bar is magnetized.

The shirt is torn.

Mary is intoxicated.

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<sup>6</sup>I leave aside the special construction, "He surprises easily."

We should note that it is also comparable to any of the following:

Mary is convinced [that . . . ].

Mary is persuaded [that . . . ].

Mary is resolved [that . . .].<sup>7</sup>

The adjectives *convinced* and *persuaded* seem to pose a bit of a problem. For, even though one does not simply “convince” or “persuade” (intransitive), it is not clear that a person is convinced (that something is so) only if something (for example, a reason, or a reasoner) *convinc*es, or *has convinced*, him. For “is convinced [that . . .]” would seem at least loosely interchangeable with “is fairly certain [that . . .].” Nevertheless, “is convinced” describes one’s state or condition in terms of a type of operation that *typically* induces it. To be convinced (of something), we may say, is to be in a state that is at least typically brought on by someone’s or something’s convincing one (of something). We might compare these adjectives to what is sometimes classified as an emotion term: *depressed*. A person doesn’t just “depress”; yet it would appear that a person may just *become depressed*—that is, without being depressed by anything. Again, to describe someone as “depressed” is to describe him as in a state of a type that is at least typically brought on by someone’s or something’s depressing someone.

Some of the participial adjectives I have mentioned characterize a state as the effect of a specific type of “brute” *non-cognitive* cause.

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<sup>7</sup>These examples were brought to my attention by an anonymous reader for *The Philosophical Review*. There are some grammatical differences, it might be noted. Consider the following form of speech:

It embarrasses (or: terrifies, upsets) me that p.

which may be paraphrased,

(The fact) That p embarrasses (or: terrifies, upsets) me.

Notice that we do not have the parallel formulation,

It convinces (or: persuades, resolves) me that p,<sup>7</sup>

to be paraphrased,

The fact that p convinces (or: persuades, resolves) me.

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To speak of someone as “intoxicated,” for example, is to characterize his state as caused by the intake of alcohol (etc.), not in terms of any *beliefs* or *attitudes* that may enter into its causal history. A brute-cause state such as intoxication may strike us as a paradigm of a “passive” state. It may be enlightening, therefore, to notice what the “passivity” of *even* a brute-cause state such as intoxication is compatible with: particularly, the degree of control, freedom, and responsibility it allows.

First, although one does not simply “intoxicate,” this is not to say that one could not *cause oneself to be intoxicated*. This is something one does by way of doing something else, namely, administering (or causing someone to administer) an intoxicant. One can also prevent oneself from being intoxicated. This may be done by preventing the administration of an intoxicant; or possibly, *even after intake* of an intoxicant, by taking measures that prevent it from “taking effect.” For intoxication may depend on, among other things, the presence (or the absence) of certain *other* substances besides the intoxicant itself; thus one may be able to take, for example, the appropriate “antagonist” or “antidote.” A training regimen may also affect some of the conditions on which intoxication depends. Finally, even where the intoxicant has already *taken effect*, one may be able to curb some of the effects of intoxication, particularly effects on overt behavior.

What is far more interesting, however, is the possibility that *at moderate dosage levels* certain substances (for example, psychoactive drugs such as alcohol or marijuana) will intoxicate a person only if he *wants* them to intoxicate him, or indeed only if he actively “assents” in some way to the intoxication. Or it may be that with some substances, some subjects, and some dosage levels, a subject becomes intoxicated only if he first *believes* he is (or will become) intoxicated. If indeed such “attitudinal” or “cognitive” factors enter in, we might have an explanation of the apparent effects of suggestion and social *milieu* on degree of intoxication.

Were these points to carry over to emotions such as embarrassment, we should say the following. One does not simply *embarrass* (intransitive verb): rather, there must be something that embarrasses one. (We commonly call a source of embarrassment “an embarrassment,” but since this term is ambiguous, I shall maintain the analogy with intoxication by speaking of “an *embarrassant*.”)



But this "passivity," once again, does not preclude *causing oneself to be* embarrassed. This would be done by way of doing something else, namely, seeing to it that there is an embarrassant. One can also prevent oneself from being embarrassed. This may be done by preventing the existence of an embarrassant; or possibly, even despite the existence of an embarrassant, by taking measures that prevent it from "taking effect." Embarrassment, or at least one particular person's embarrassment on one particular occasion, may happen to depend on the availability or unavailability of certain chemicals at particular receptor sites in the brain. Thus intake of the right drug may have the effect of ridding the subject of his embarrassment altogether. Similarly, a training regimen may also affect some of the conditions on which such a state depends. Finally, even where the embarrassant has already *taken effect*, one may be able to curb some of the effects of embarrassment, particularly effects on behavior.

But as with intoxication, what is particularly interesting is the possibility that the embarrassant, at least for some subjects under some conditions, will embarrass only if the subject *wants* it to, or indeed only if he actively "assents" in some way to being embarrassed by it. Or it may be that a subject actually becomes embarrassed only if he first *believes* he is (or will become) embarrassed. If indeed such "attitudinal" or "cognitive" factors enter in, we might have an explanation of the apparent effects of suggestion and social *milieu*.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, if the frequency and severity of "physical" pain depends to a significant degree on cultural variables, as some studies indicate, it should not be surprising that the felt "awfulness" of the object or content of embarrassment, envy, or jealousy might also depend on such variables.

I have been assuming thus far a perfect analogy between being intoxicated and being embarrassed. Their belonging to a common grammatical category does not assure us of this, of course. And there surely are some important disanalogies. For one thing, *embarrassants* are not ingested substances but perceived (or otherwise

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<sup>8</sup>Here, I believe, we have the possible grain of truth in theories of emotions, such as that of Stanley Schachter, which take the actual identity of a person's emotion to be a function, in part, of social suggestion.

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“cognized”) states of affairs, and the effects of such cognitions notoriously depend on what *other* cognitive and attitudinal states a person is in. My suggestion, therefore, is *not* that the answers to such questions are just the same for embarrassment and other emotions as those for being intoxicated. The comparison is useful, I think, only in showing that the *grammatically* passive character of *being intoxicated* is compatible with the subject’s having a *wide range of active roles* to play in controlling his state. Any of the points of possible intervention I have mentioned should be taken into consideration, it would seem, in an adequate treatment of *responsibility* for being intoxicated or for being embarrassed. Attributions of responsibility may depend on the particulars of the situation in ways far more complex than most discussions have indicated.

### II. TWO FALLACIES

That emotions are ways, or products of ways, of being acted on warrants the conclusion that we are passive with respect to (that is, acted on by) something. But it does not tell us *what* acts on us, what the “agent” is. It plainly does not imply that the agent is *the emotion*: the fear, the embarrassment, or whatever.

It is common to assume otherwise. Consider the following appositions from the passage quoted at the beginning of this paper:

passions with respect to which we are passive,  
phenomena which are not under the control of those who feel  
them,  
phenomena which happen to us rather than . . . phenomena  
we may bring into being somehow.<sup>9</sup>

The first of these implies that if emotions are passions then we are passive *with respect to them*. But “x is passive with respect to y” *seems* to entail “y is active with respect to x,” which is naturally understood to mean “y *acts on* x.”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps we may gloss “passive with respect to” differently. But in any case, it is important to note

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<sup>9</sup>See the Sankowski quote above.

<sup>10</sup>Corner quotes understood where needed.

that y may be a way, or a product of a way, in which x is acted on, even though all of the following are true:

- y does not act on x;
- y is under the control of x;
- y does not just "happen" to x but is on the contrary invariably brought on by x.

It must be said that some philosophers who have *defended* the thesis that the emotions are ways of being acted upon have been prone to draw the unhappy conclusion that we are victims of our own emotions. R.S. Peters, for one, quite rightly insists that the emotions are not simply judgments or "appraisals" of an object or situation, as E. Bedford's "Emotions" had suggested.<sup>11</sup> For such a sanitized view overlooks the fact that a judgment or appraisal may be "the reason for or the cause of our being *affected* or *acted on*"; and only then would our state be described as an "emotion." So far, so good. But Peters implies that when we are thus acted upon, it is *our emotion* that acts on us. Not only do emotions, "like the weather, come over us": sometimes they even "overcome" us. Therein, Peters believes, lies the *passivity* that Bedford's appraisal theory overlooks. The passivity of emotions is a matter

of judgments being disturbed, clouded, or warped by emotion, of people not being properly in control of their emotions, being subject to gusts of emotion. . . .<sup>12</sup>

Here Peters has made a wrong turn. Whether or not it is true that emotions often seem to come over a person like a change of weather, whether or not emotions sometimes seem to toss us about like ships in a storm, and so on, none of this is a consequence of the supposition that emotions are passions or ways of being acted on. The same error underlies the protest of other writers that fear, embarrassment, and the like must *not* be regarded as passions, lest we see ourselves as their helpless and blameless victims. It is an error worth setting right.

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<sup>11</sup>R.S. Peters, "Emotions and the Category of Passivity," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 62 (1961-62), pp. 117-142.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 119.

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To say that emotions are types of states in which *something* acts on us is not to say that *emotions* act on us—much less, that they are liable to *overcome* us. Embarrassment (to take a representative example) is a way of being acted upon, in that, if we are embarrassed, then *something* *embarrasses us*: typically, some (putative) *state of affairs*, such as our having revealed to the audience our unpreparedness, or our being asked a question that threatens to reveal our unpreparedness. But it is one thing to say that some *state of affairs S* acts on us, and quite another to say that *our being embarrassed (by S)* acts on us. It is a fallacy to infer, from the assumption that the term “embarrassment” characterizes a person’s state as a product of something’s having acted on him, that *the resulting state*—embarrassment—also acts on (much less “comes over” or “overcomes”) the person. It is similarly fallacious to infer that a *second* state of affairs, namely that of his *being embarrassed by S*, also acts on or comes over him. One cannot properly draw the conclusion,

x is a state that acts on (a person)

from either,

x is a state of being acted on in a certain way,

or,

x is a state produced by being acted on in a certain way.

It is incumbent on me to raise the following objection: that to speak of a person as embarrassed “by” some state of affairs *S* is to indicate the *object* of their embarrassment, which is distinct from the *cause* or *source* of the embarrassment. Both sides of this distinction, unfortunately, are highly problematical. Once the problems are cleared away, it becomes evident that what a person is embarrassed *about*—which is at least *one* of the things philosophers seem to mean when they speak of the “object” of embarrassment—is a function of the type of *causal conditions* that underlie his embarrassment. Emotions resemble intentional actions in their causal dependence on certain cognitive and attitudinal “components”—roughly, our beliefs and our desires or wishes. These are the “sustaining causes” that keep a person embarrassed, joyful, or fearful. What

the resulting emotion is said to be “about” is wholly a function of what the particular causal “components” are about. Although I have treated these points at considerable length elsewhere,<sup>13</sup> I shall offer a few general remarks on the way we “decide” what state of affairs a person is embarrassed by or about.

With few exceptions, the various emotions are readily classified as “negative” emotions, such as fear, embarrassment, and anger, or “positive” emotions, such as pride and gladness. The most plausible way to explain this natural division is that the negative and positive emotions are caused, respectively, by a negative or a positive *attitude* toward something that is (believed to be) the case, or toward some epistemic possibility—something that might (for all one knows) be the case. For example, if Mary is embarrassed by (or about) the publicity about her wedding, then what is keeping her that way is (among other things) a negative attitude toward there being publicity about it<sup>14</sup>—roughly, a wishing there not be such publicity<sup>15</sup>—and a belief that there is or has been such publicity. If she is *glad* that there is publicity, then she is being kept that way by a *positive* attitude toward there being publicity about it, etc. When embarrassment is sustained by a negative attitude toward a possible state of affairs S and a belief that S actually obtains, it is S that is said to “embarrass” her: in this case, there being publicity about her wedding.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Particularly, in “The Aboutness of Emotions,” *op. cit.*; and “Fear,” *op. cit.* For a discussion of the causal structure of the “forward-looking” emotions, which seem to have inspired the distinction between “object” and “cause” of emotion, see “Fear,” *op. cit.* Other relevant papers are my “Emotions and Knowledge,” *op. cit.*; “Judgmental Emotions,” *Analysis* 34 (1973), pp. 40–48; and “Emotion Labeling and Cognition,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 8 (1978), pp. 125–135.

<sup>14</sup>Or: publicity of the particular sort she believes it to have been.

<sup>15</sup>These pro- or con- attitudes are *prima facie*, not “all things considered,” attitudes. That is one reason why the term “wish” seems particularly apt as a description of the attitude. See “The Aboutness of Emotions,” *op. cit.*, pp. 31–32; and Donald Davidson, “Hume’s Cognitive Theory of Pride,” *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976), reprinted in Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

<sup>16</sup>Fear and its close relatives are a somewhat different matter. Where A is terrified that p, we sometimes say that “the possibility that p” terrifies A. Sometimes it is the evidence that p (what I call the “epistemic reason” for being terrified that p) that we cite as terrifying A. Sometimes it is the “stakes” (what I call the “attitudinal reason” for being terrified that p) that we cite as terrifying A. See “Fear,” *op. cit.*

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(One must understand “among other things” to qualify each of these causal statements. The attitudinal and cognitive states indicated only make a person “ripe” for sustaining a particular emotion. The right side-conditions must obtain as well. *That* offers a possible point of entry for *voluntary control*, a matter to be discussed below. Even though emotions are passions, we may very well have control, or be capable of gaining control, of the side-conditions without which the emotion may not occur.)

In some cases, a person claims to be embarrassed by (and “about”) a state of affairs that we believe not actually to obtain. There we must suppose the relevant causal conditions to lie within the person’s beliefs or other cognitive states, rather than in the designated state of affairs. In a *strict* way of speaking, the deluded individual is embarrassed by *nothing*. But we allow ourselves a more *empathetic* way of speaking, in which a person may be said to be embarrassed by (or about) a state of affairs S, though we ourselves believe S not to obtain—with the *understanding* that we are speaking in an empathetic way.

There is a second type of fallacy that clouds the issue of the passivity of emotions. It involves the unwarranted inference from,

x is a state of (or: produced by) being acted on in a certain way,

to,

x is an *involuntary* state.

Such an inference, as I have noted, seems to underlie Solomon’s assumption that the only way to avoid regarding emotions as involuntary is to suppose that they are not passions but actions.

We can see from the comparison with intoxication that this is a faulty inference: although *intoxicated* is an adjective that characterizes a state as resulting from an *operation* performed by some “agent,” such a characterization rules out none of the following:

that a person may *cause himself to be* intoxicated;  
that a person may prevent himself from being intoxicated, by preventing the administration of an intoxicant; by taking measures that prevent an intoxicant, once present, from

“taking effect”; or perhaps simply by refusing to “assent” to being intoxicated.

The passivity of embarrassment, similarly, rules out none of these options. To dramatize the point, imagine all human beings to have come into the world equipped with a toggle switch that made embarrassment *wholly optional*. Only when the switch is in the “on” position can any state of affairs embarrass a person. Imagine also a backup button with the function of “erasing” any embarrassment that may be caused when the toggle is “on.” Imagine even a second backup button with the function of causing any unerased embarrassment to sit idle until the button is pushed a second time: leaving, in the meanwhile, not even a disposition to the feelings and behavior typical of embarrassment, but a second-order disposition—to have such a disposition when the button is pressed again. For human beings thus equipped, embarrassment would be at least doubly optional, its manifestations triply so. Yet embarrassment would remain, for them as for us, a way of being acted on, a passion. These people, when they are embarrassed, are embarrassed by something.

Let me propose a further image: a new race of human beings comes into the world with all of these controls *internalized*. *Desire* toggles on or off the possibility of embarrassment: when you *want* embarrassing situations to embarrass, they may do so; when you do not want them to, they won't. Similarly for the “erase” button: the onset of a desire not to have the embarrassment one presently is disposed to feel and act from erases the present embarrassment. And so on. Still, when these people are embarrassed, they are embarrassed, acted on, by something. In short, the grammatically passive character of *embarrassed*—the fact that it is an adjective that characterizes a state as resulting from an operation performed by some “agent”—is compatible with the subject's having a wide range of active roles to play in controlling his state.

The question of control over emotions must be distinguished from another: that of control over the states of affairs that are the “agents” of our emotions. There is some evidence that most if not all of the states commonly classified as “emotions” are about states of affairs not presently under the subject's control. Not only are we acted on by something: we are acted on by something over which

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we have, at the time, no control. For example, there is nothing Mary may do now to prevent the publicity that she is embarrassed by (or about)—for it is publicity that has already occurred. It may indeed be true that an embarrassing state of affairs *S*, being in general a *fait accompli*, properly evokes an attitude of helplessness, of being unable to bring it about presently *that S does not obtain*. Even our fears, though they concern matters that are uncertain, appear to be restricted to uncertainties that are not matters to be resolved by our own decision or *fiat*: roughly, to awful possibilities that are beyond our control.<sup>17</sup> None of this entails, however, that we are similarly helpless with regard to whether some state of affairs over which we have no control *embarrasses* us, or whether some awful possibility that is beyond our control shall be *feared true*. Although in emotions generally we are acted on by something over which we have, at the time, no control, we may very well have control over whether we are thus acted on.

Let me run quickly over the ground we have covered thus far. States such as embarrassment are states characterized as resulting from an *operation* performed by some “agent.” In general the “agent” is identical with the state of affairs one is embarrassed about. (Matters are more complicated where the “forward-looking” emotions are concerned.) Although I find it useless to generalize about “the emotions,” it appears that most of the states commonly so designated are states characterized in this way. But to characterize a state as resulting from an operation performed by some “agent” is not to characterize it as a *state with respect to which we are passive*: neither as a *state that acts on us* nor as an *involuntary state*, a state that is not “up to us.”

### III. THE CAUSAL STRUCTURE OF A PASSION

Given the similarities between the causal components of emotions and those of actions, why are emotions categorized, in our grammar and in our common thought, as passions? Putting the point more perspicuously, why do we characterize certain states as products of a person’s being acted on by a state of affairs *S*, rather

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<sup>17</sup>See “Fear,” *op. cit.*, pp. 572–578.



than as an action performed by the person because of S, that is, where S, or the fact that S obtains, is characterized as *a reason for which the person acted*? For example, why do we not say that the publicizing of the wedding was *Mary's reason for "embarrassing"*?

I am not concerned to show that there is *no* sense of the term *action* in which emotions are classifiable as "actions." It is true that actions are (or at least, essentially involve) a species of *events*, whereas emotions are *states*. But if we focus on *changes* of state or *onsets* of states (*becoming* angry, embarrassed, grateful, etc.) we can say that these are indeed "actions" in some very broad sense: to grow angry is to "do something," in the sense in which a melon does something when it grows ripe, a cloud does something when it changes shape, or a lock does something when it opens. My concern, however, is not with just any sense of "acting" or "doing something" but with a sense that bears on the issues of *control* and *responsibility* that were of concern to the authors cited at the beginning of my paper. Although I have argued that for something x to be a *passion* I undergo does not require that x be outside my control or my domain of responsibility, neither does it require that x be *within* my control or my domain of responsibility. On the other hand, for something x to be an action that I have performed intentionally or for a reason *does* seem to carry a *presumption* that x was at least to some degree within my control and that I am at least to some degree responsible for having done it. The question to be addressed is, why are emotions, given their dependence on our desires or attitudes as well as on our beliefs, not actions in *this* sense?

My answer is that, although emotions and actions are each causally dependent on both cognitive and attitudinal states, there is a systematic difference in the *contents* of these states and the *logical relationships* that obtain among them when they produce emotional states, as distinct from intentional behavior. Very roughly, the difference is that when one *acts for a reason* one's action is caused by attitudes and beliefs that are related in the following way: *given* the attitude, what is believed (the content of the belief) "says something in favor of," or "argues for" so acting.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the attitudes and beliefs that underlie, say, embarrassment, are not so

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<sup>18</sup>Leaving aside cases where one's action is not as one had intended.

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related: it is not true that, given the attitude, what is believed “says something in favor of,” “argues for” *being embarrassed*. For the underlying attitudes and beliefs concern the “object” or “content” of the embarrassment, that is, that which one is embarrassed about—not, the state of being embarrassed. Corresponding to this difference is a difference in the *forms of argument* appropriate to talking a person out of (or into) actions and emotions, respectively. I shall take up these points in order: first, the difference between the causal structures of emotions and rational actions; then, the difference in forms of argument.

As I said above, the negative and positive emotions are caused, respectively, by a negative or a positive *attitude* toward something that is (believed to be) the case, or toward some epistemic possibility—something that might (for all one knows) be the case. If Mary is embarrassed by the publicity about her wedding, then among the “sustaining causes” of her embarrassment is her wishing there not to be such publicity and her believing that there is or has been such publicity.

Contrast this with acting for a reason. Suppose that Mary actually undertakes certain measures to gain or to avoid publicity about her wedding: she decides to get married in Mexico, say. In that case, among the causes of her behavior would be, as with the emotions, a positive or a negative attitude toward there being publicity about it, for example, a wish or a desire that there (not) be such publicity. But in a fully explicit statement of Mary’s reason for acting, this attitude would be *connected up* with some type of behavior, for example, her having the wedding in Mexico. A *cognitive* state, typically, would provide the bridge. Instead of a belief that there is, has been, or might be publicity, the relevant belief would be (typically) an *instrumental* or *means-end* belief: viz., that *by* acting this way—by holding the wedding in Mexico—one will or at least might gain (avoid) publicity. This belief functions as an instruction for gaining, or at least possibly helping to gain, the *satisfaction* of the wish or desire. There are other ways in which beliefs may rationally “connect up” attitudes and behavior. For example, I may have a desire to act a certain way if (or when) a certain condition is satisfied: for example, if someone has done me a great favor, or when someone has violated a regulation I am entrusted to enforce. In such cases the belief serves, not to tell me what type of action to

perform, but *whether* (or *when*) and *to whom* I am to perform a stipulated type of action: for example, to do a favor for another, or to punish another.

In any case, actions performed for a reason are not only *caused* by our attitudes and beliefs: they are, in a sense, *prescribed, dictated*, or at least *justified* by the attitudes and beliefs that cause them.<sup>19</sup> For example: given a negative attitude toward the wedding's being publicized, the premise that having the wedding in Mexico will make publicity less likely *says something in favor of* having the wedding in Mexico. Given a favorable attitude toward reciprocating favors, the premise that Henry has done me a favor would be *an argument for* my doing Henry a favor. In general, *given* the pro/con attitude underlying the action, *what* is believed (the "content" of the belief) *counts in favor of* so acting.

Given the supposition that pro/con attitudes can be verbalized (verbally expressed) as value judgments—judgments of "desirability"—my point is essentially the same as one made several years ago by Donald Davidson:

Corresponding to the belief and attitude of a primary reason for an action, we can always construct (with a little ingenuity) the premises of a syllogism from which it follows that the action has some (as Anscombe calls it) 'desirability characteristic'.<sup>20</sup>

The logical relationship between the beliefs and attitudes that enter into the analyses of the various *emotions*, on the other hand, is quite different. Mary's negative attitude toward publicity—her wish that the wedding not be publicized—and her belief that the wedding *has been publicized* do not cause embarrassment by "saying something in favor of" being embarrassed. Her embarrassment was not "dictated" or "called for" by this belief together with her attitude toward publicity. She might, of course, have an additional belief that embarrassment *would* produce a certain beneficial result: for example, evoke such sympathy that the publicity she is embarrassed about *will not continue*. And that belief might affect the

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<sup>19</sup>More specifically, by those that constitute the reason with which one acts.

<sup>20</sup>See Donald Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," *Journal of Philosophy* 60 (1963), pp. 685–700, reprinted in Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); the quotation is from p. 9 of the latter volume.

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*side-conditions* in a way that makes it more probable that she will be embarrassed. Conceivably—in some individuals, at least—such an instrumental belief is *causally necessary* for emotions of a given type. But the belief that enters into the *analysis* of her embarrassment—the belief *in virtue of which* she is embarrassed by or about the publicity, that is, embarrassed *that the wedding received publicity*—is not a belief that her embarrassment will or might somehow do some good, much less a belief that it will, specifically, *undo* the state of affairs she is embarrassed about. It is the same with *gratitude*: One may have a favorable attitude toward feeling gratitude for great favors. But the attitude that enters into the *analysis* of gratitude—the attitude in virtue of which I can be said to be *grateful* for what Henry did, is an attitude *toward what Henry did*—not, an attitude toward my being grateful for what Henry did.

I turn now to the forms of criticism and argument to which actions and emotions are sensitive. Because they are causally dependent on one's desires, wishes, normative beliefs, and attitudes, human emotions are, like actions performed for a reason, typically responsive to *verbal reasoning* of the right sort. By "reasoning with" a person one may be able to talk him into regretting something, or being embarrassed by something, or being angry about something. Similarly, one may be able to talk someone out of such states.

There is, however, a crucial difference in the *forms of argument* used to talk a person into (or out of) actions and emotions, respectively. In the case of *actions* a fully explicit reason (for example, the premises of a practical syllogism) entails, as suggested above, a positive evaluation of *the action itself* (under some description). For example, the premises,

- (1) It would be awful if the wedding received publicity.
- (2) *Getting married in Mexico* would prevent the wedding from receiving publicity.

entail,

*Getting married in Mexico* would prevent something awful from happening.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>The positive evaluation of actions that prevent what is awful may be made explicit, if necessary.

Where emotions are concerned, the relevant verbal reasoning has a different logical structure. I said earlier that if Mary is embarrassed by the publicity about her wedding, then what is keeping her that way is (among other things) a negative attitude toward there being publicity about it and a belief that there is or has been such publicity. The relevant “premises” would be as follows. Corresponding to (and expressing) the requisite negative attitude would be a negative normative or evaluative premise such as the one given for action:

- (1) It would be awful if the wedding received publicity.

But corresponding to the belief we would have, in place of (2), the premise,

- (3) The wedding has received publicity.

If Mary is *glad* that there is publicity, the second premise would remain the same, but the first premise (1) would be replaced by a positive evaluation: for example,

- (4) It would be lovely if the wedding received publicity.

If she *fears* there will be publicity, then the first premise would be (1) once again, but the second premise would be one that expressed lack of certainty that there will not be publicity: for example,

- (5) The wedding may (for all I know) have received publicity.

Here then is the crucial difference. Whereas a fully explicit reason for an *action* entails a positive evaluation of *the action itself*, for example, getting married in Mexico, a reason for an emotion such as gladness, embarrassment, or fear does *not* entail a positive (or negative) evaluation of *the emotion itself*, for example, the gladness, the embarrassment, or the fear. Instead, as noted earlier, it entails an evaluation of the “object” or “content” of the emotion.<sup>22</sup> *In*

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<sup>22</sup>If a positive emotion such as gladness were about *itself*, that is, were its own object or content, then, I submit, it might be indistinguishable from

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*virtue of its causal structure alone*, we can expect intentional actions to be responsive to reasoning concerning the goodness or badness of so acting. This does not hold for emotions. It cannot be said *in virtue of its causal structure alone*, that embarrassment will respond to reasoning concerning the goodness or badness of being embarrassed. Instead, we can expect embarrassment to be responsive to reasoning concerning the “object” or “content” of the embarrassment: where someone is embarrassed “about a certain state of affairs S,” reasoning as to whether S actually obtains, and reasoning as to whether S is bad.<sup>23</sup>

Once again, it should be emphasized that the causal components in virtue of which someone’s state counts as embarrassment, or more specifically as embarrassment about the wedding’s getting publicity, only make a person “ripe” for sustaining a particular emotion. The right side-conditions must obtain as well. That offers a possible point of entry for *voluntary control*, as I have suggested above. Our attitudes toward being in particular states, such as embarrassment or embarrassment about a given matter, may very well affect side-conditions without which the emotion would not occur. Criticism of such states may have an effect on the frequency with which they arise.<sup>24</sup>

What emerges is that intentional actions and emotions are each produced by systems that are responsive to our desires and (at least

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an intentional action: the agent would intentionally gladden. But this seems never to be so. One may, I suppose, be glad *that one is glad* about something specific, or glad that one is just *glad* (about something or other). But there is a distinction here between first- and second-order gladness, the gladness one is glad about and the gladness about it. The *second-order* gladness may be responsive to arguments regarding the goodness of *the first-order gladness*. But it does not hinge on arguments regarding the goodness of this second-order gladness itself. (And similarly for gladness of higher orders.)

<sup>23</sup>This is a simplification. Embarrassment has further cognitive and attitudinal complications, hence is sensitive to reasoning about additional “topics.”

<sup>24</sup>In addition, of course, a negative evaluation of an emotion of some type such as embarrassment, anger, envy, or jealousy can at least have a dissuasive effect on *actions* motivated by these emotions. For example, where anger causes a desire to harm the person one is angry with, which in turn would cause one to do something to harm that individual, a negative evaluation either of anger in general or of one’s particular anger may damp the *expression* of this desire.

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typically) capable of “listening to reason,” particularly to arguments, and refutations of arguments, that apply norms, standards, or values. But they respond to arguments of significantly different forms. And this difference in form accounts for our intuition that *in virtue of* intentionally X'ing we are, in general, responsible agents, answerable to norms concerning X'ing; whereas we are not answerable to norms concerning being embarrassed, angry, or jealous merely in virtue of being embarrassed, angry, or jealous.

This is a subtle difference that becomes apparent only upon comparative analysis of the causal structures of actions and passions. And yet it should be fundamental to any discussion of “responsibility for emotions.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>This last section is largely a revised extract from an unpublished longer paper entitled “Listening to Reason: A Key to Common Sense Psychology.” Several people made helpful comments on that paper. I particularly want to thank Donald Davidson for extensive criticism and reflections on his own views. The present paper owes much to the detailed comments of the anonymous readers for *The Philosophical Review*.