

# Reason and Emotion

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The question of how emotion relates to reason acquires its importance from an apparent conflict between the implicit teachings of Western philosophy and feminism. If philosophy advises that we should place our trust, if anywhere, in reason; and if feminism has learned that it is a political imperative to acknowledge, share and thereby validate the ways in which women's emotions may conflict with accepted modes of reasoning, then *feminist philosophy* is left in a compromised position, both epistemologically and politically. It has therefore been of primary importance that feminist philosophers reassess the role of emotion in relation to well accepted, and less well accepted, modes of reasoning. My understanding of this effort is as a progression towards an alignment of reason and emotion rather than an opposition. As long as a dichotomy between the two is maintained, there can be no well integrated practice of feminist philosophy according to the above characterisations:

My philosophical education taught me to follow reason wherever it went and to distrust political considerations. My experience as a feminist has taught me to stick by my political commitments even when I appear to have lost the argument. [1, p. 169]

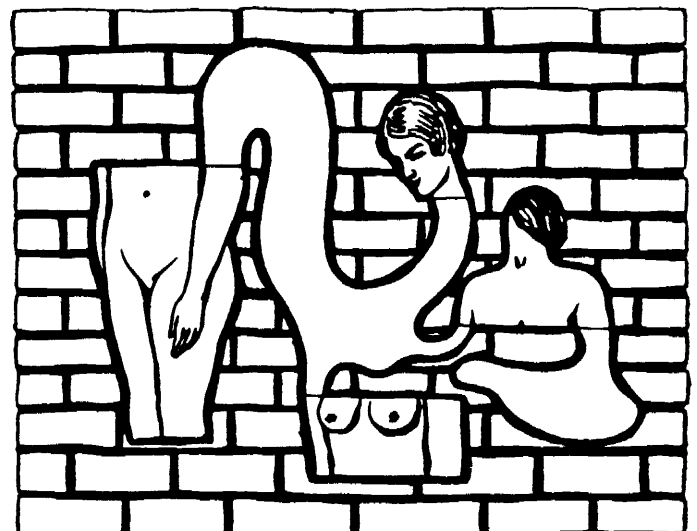
In their separation, not only philosophers but feminists too have perpetuated the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, reason and emotion, contributing to a false polarisation. It is understandable that where the dominant mode of reasoning seems to support men's interests while systematically denying how women feel about the world, women should come to distrust not just that use of reason but reason itself, asserting instead the superiority of emotion [2]. But I shall argue that this is a mistake, not least because it is based on a falsely polarised model of the two faculties. Such a polarisation should be abandoned for an interactive model in which neither partner dominates. Despite this, however, in the course of discussing emotion and reason and their interrelation, we can reassess what there is to be gained from an initial privileging of emotion as regards instigating changes of consciousness for both men and women, and thereby political change.

## ***A dichotomy within a dichotomy?***

There are many different types of emotion ranging from dispositions such as having an optimistic outlook, through emotions about particular events such as feeling pleased about something, and finally to 'knee-jerk' responses such as fright or shock. These examples suggest that some emotions are more directly related to the external world through their intentional content and/or causal

relation than others which appear to be more internally generated. It would appear therefore that emotions are variously placed on a continuum between these two extremes of external and internal. Consider the difference between receiving a piece of bad news and feeling the shadowy onslaught of depression, for instance. This idea of a continuum, however, has not been the mainstream philosophical perspective on emotions, and instead the tendency has been to create a second dichotomy *within* the initial reason-emotion opposition between internal sensation and external 'aboutness'; that is, between the sheer phenomenology of emotion and its intentional properties. Hence we are faced with either the positivist 'Dumb View' [3, pp. 132-34] or the cognitivist view, both of which effectively dichotomise our faculties of reason and (physiological) sensation.

The positivist view [4] makes an analytical distinction between emotion and rational processes, and so it tends to construe emotions as mere sensations 'such as pangs or qualms, flushes or tremors' [5, p. 132] leaving any intentionality to quite separate rational processes. But here positivism encounters four major stumbling blocks. Firstly, this view cannot account for dispositional emotions. For example, an ongoing fear of nuclear war is obviously not constantly manifested by a cold sweat or by any sensation of fear per se, yet it is nonetheless an emotion. Secondly, it cannot explain how we can ever fail to be aware that we are in a given emotional state. One could invoke the unconscious to justify placing this exigency on the theory of emotion, but there are also more commonly accepted forms of our failure to ac-



knowledge our own emotional states readily available. Stress, for example, is one such emotional condition which can often remain unacknowledged by the sufferer until stomach ulcers and the like make it painfully and belatedly evident. Thirdly, having postulated emotion as raw physiological sensation, the positivist view cannot explain why sheer sensation should require interpretation before it can be registered as a particular emotion. A rush of adrenalin may register either as fright or excitement, for example. Finally, 'The Dumb View' of emotion fails to acknowledge that sensations themselves, not just thoughts, are not merely caused by the external world but they are also *about* that external world. If one feels outrage at an unjust act, then the feeling of outrage cannot be analytically separated from the act in the way positivism requires, because the feeling of outrage itself actually expresses something about that act. Even where emotions are understood as mere sensations, therefore, they are nonetheless both causally and intentionally linked to the external world; they depend upon that world both for their existence and for their definition. It is this notion of definition which is prioritised in the cognitivist approach.

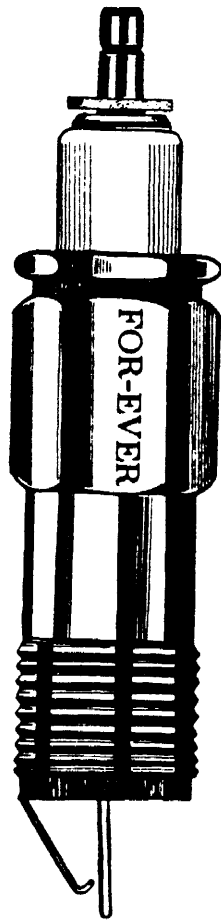
Without actually denying the physiology of emotion, the cognitivist view [6] defines emotions according to their intentional content, as expressed in the associated judgement about the external world [3, pp. 265–66; 5, pp. 133–34]. On this view, two rushes of adrenalin can be differentiated as distinct emotions according to whether the subject interprets them as excitement or fear. This presents a problem, since it entails that every individual is an infallible interpreter of her own emotional states. In everyday life, however, it is commonplace that one blames a bad mood on, say, not getting enough sleep, when the real reason might be quite different – that one is miserable at work, for example. Despite this drawback, the cognitivist view is nonetheless a clear improvement on positivism, firstly because it affirms the essential intentional content of emotion, and secondly because, with the exception of the final one, it overcomes the above problems with the positivist account. If our emotions are accompanied by correlative judgements, then the cognitivist theory can explain dispositional emotions as simply lacking their physiological accompaniment. Thus, living with a general fear of nuclear war (where that fear is accompanied by no physiological sensation) can be theorised simply as the belief that nuclear war is a real possibility and that this is a hypothetically terrifying prospect, or some belief to that effect. A similar explanation can be given for a person's failure to be aware that she is in a given emotional state (as in the example of stress) and for why sensations require judgemental interpretation since, without a correlative judgement, a sensation remains undefined and perhaps barely recognised at all.

Despite these virtues, however, the cognitivist view has the serious drawback that it further emphasizes a division between physiological sensation and reasonable judgement, and thereby between the body and the mind. In fact this separation of sensation from judgement as two distinct components within emotion is the very reason it manages to overcome the above difficulties. As a result, the cognitivist view cannot overcome the fourth objection to the positivist account, which was that one cannot use intentionality to make a sharp distinction between 'internal' sensations and judgements about externals, since not only judgements but also sensations have a degree of intentional content. This is not to say that all emotions have the same level of expressive power, but it is to reassert that feelings are causally and intentionally connected to the external world. If I am made angry by something, then I feel angry about it. Once this is acknowledged, then it becomes virtually impossible to maintain a reason-emotion dichotomy, since the key distinction in terms of intentional content is undermined. We have beliefs about the world; but we also have

emotions or even sensations about the world, depending on one's analysis. We must therefore resist the temptation to reduce emotion to a meaningless, physicalist brand of sensation, especially since this would be to participate in a certain tradition of contempt for the body which has contributed to women's subordination [7]. Instead we may affirm the expressive power of emotions themselves, since they do indeed express responses to the external world. Furthermore, the language of emotion is not reducible to the language of words, since I have argued that emotions do not express things solely in virtue of 'associated' beliefs or interpretations. Such rational, linguistic processes no doubt perform an important task in their *articulation* of those nebulous or 'subterranean' meanings which emotions already possess, but this should not be used to deny that it *means* something in itself to feel angry, hurt or frightened. One expresses a very different response to the world if a judgement is declared with anger, than if one speaks without apparent emotion. The



change is not just cosmetic or a mere matter of nuance, since what one actually communicates is now seen to depend on the emotions that are conveyed. Furthermore, I would like to broaden this claim by arguing that this is because judgement *in general* presupposes emotion, since even our very perceptions depend in part upon our emotions: 'Observation is not simply a passive process of absorbing impressions or recording stimuli; instead, it is an activity of selection and interpretation' [5, p. 138]. With the realisation that one of more must trusted methods of acquiring 'facts' about the world – perception – depends partly upon value [8, pp. 363–65] comes the corollary that perception must also presuppose emotions, since feelings of approval and disapproval and so on form the building blocks of value. In this way, the judgement-emotion distinction breaks down as a special case of the disintegrating fact-value distinction. We may reaffirm, then, that even reasoning from observation presupposes emotions to some extent. Conversely, emotions also presuppose judgements, such as my pride about my friend's winning a prize depending on my belief that s/he has indeed won it and my judgement that it is a worthy prize. Emotion and reason, then, are interdependent and mutually constitutive. This argument grows out of the first, which was that, even where emotions are seen as sensations, they are still expressive in themselves and not solely in virtue of some 'associated' judgement. The result of this is that it is no longer tenable to dissect emotion into sensation and judgement on the grounds that one is merely a bunch of raw internal psychological phenomena, while the other is a rational judgement about the external world. Having witnessed the initial positivist dichotomy between reason



and emotion be displaced to a new cognitivist dichotomy within emotion itself, between sensation and judgement, we have now been able to kill two birds with one stone by arguing firstly that emotion or 'sensation' has some intentional content; and secondly that reason and emotion, or judgement and sensation, are mutually constitutive, since each presupposes the other. If these arguments are right, then both dichotomies tumble in parallel.

In order to avoid further dichotomy, we need a view of emotions which does not dissect them, but which leaves them whole, thus giving due credit to their expressive capacity as *emotions*. One way of doing this is to prioritise the context in which we learn to recognise and interpret our emotions. It is a mistake to take even physiological phenomena as entirely asocial or natural:

Although it is probably true that the physiological disturbances characterizing emotions ... are continuous with the instinctive responses of our prehuman ancestors, ... mature human emotions are neither instinctive nor biologically determined. Instead, they are socially constructed on several levels. [5, p. 134]

Emotions are socially conditioned not only to influence which responses are deemed appropriate for a given situation, but also with reference to how those different responses are to be expressed. Grief is a salient example, especially where it concerns mourning, since different cultures vary so visibly. But even relatively non-ritualised emotions such as anger can vary enormously from place to place. In effect, all emotions are ritualised to some extent. Society, as the learning place of the when and how of emotions, reminds us that both sensation and judgement acquire their form from the same mould. If physiological phenomena are partly trained responses to external conditions, then once again we can

see those responses as intentional, since they are understood as part of a social communication system of emotions. Furthermore, the associated belief emerges not so much as 'accompanying' the sensation but partially forming it, or combining irreversibly with it as they pass together through the cultural filter. This is how reason unites with emotion, thereby articulating the original emotional expression. They are interdependent in that they are formed and acquired simultaneously through a social system, each presupposing the other:

The process of coming to have human feelings comes about as a result of the interactions of those not yet quite human feelings inherent in human babies with the knowledge, understanding, perceptions and beliefs that people develop as a result of growing up and living in the world. [9, pp. 143-44]

Given this, it would now appear impossible to make a sharp distinction between emotion and reason, sensation and judgement, since in each case the partners are mutually constitutive and interdependent to the extent that it is not possible to analyse one without the other.

The socialisation of our emotional faculty therefore produces an interdependence between what the cognitivist views as the separate components of sensation and judgement comprising an emotion, and this interdependence allows us, indeed obliges us, to theorise emotions not dissected but whole. But by the same token it also opens up difficult questions about the 'freedom' of our emotions. How far have feminists been right to lay their trust in emotions – reason being suspect as a possible tool of oppression – if like reason, those very emotions are produced and interpreted in the terms of the patriarchy? This question becomes all the more vexed if we consider that emotions are inextricably linked to beliefs, beliefs which presuppose linguistic concepts and rational structures. This being so, perhaps emotions are as deeply entrenched in patriarchal conceptual organisation as are the reasoning processes which structure belief. I will return to this question after a discussion of reason and its closer relation to the dubiously conditioned concepts organising language and reason itself.

### **Reason and Interests**

The standard, supposedly all-embracing criticism made against anyone, especially women, who upholds an emotional conviction against some apparently reasoned argument is that she is being 'illogical'. This is a misuse of the word. Logic demands relatively little of us; only that we do not contradict ourselves. The bounds of logical possibility are a far cry from actual possibility. Hence it is logically possible that this article will vaporise in thirty seconds, even though it would be irrational to believe this would happen, since the empirical evidence is overwhelmingly to the contrary. Logic pays no heed to evidence, only to consistency. Given this, women have no reason to distrust logic itself, since it bears no relation to the facts of patriarchy. (Many people may be justifiably wary of *logocentrism*, but that is a different matter.) Nor does it deny the validity of any means of understanding, provided those means do not result in contradiction:

Being illogical is not having strong feelings or mixed feelings, or changing your mind, or being unable to express things and prove things, or anything of the sort. It is maintaining *nothing*, since to make an illogical statement is to make no statement at all. [10, p. 37]

(Of course, this is only true where language is being used literally. In metaphorical use, contradiction can take on great expressive power, and many feminists have used it in this way.) Reason or

rationality, on the other hand – I take these to mean the same thing – are a cause for concern, since they suppose much more than the strictures of logic. What is perceived as rational depends not only on consistency, but on what is perceived as evidence, and what is seen as a ‘good’ reason for doing or believing something. While consistency may sometimes be difficult to prove, what counts as adequate evidence for a belief is inevitably more contentious and culture bound. What counts as a good reason for something is clearly not only a matter of practicality but also ideology. For example, while it may appear to be relatively simple to decide upon good and bad (practical) reasons to build a bridge in a certain place, the waters become instantly muddied with ideology and with the politics of vested interest when we consider that the bridge in question would probably bring an intense traffic of lorries through the little town on the other side. It is therefore in the realm of rationality that women and other subordinated groups must be on guard against the partisan use of the term and the self-righteous claim to reasonableness. What it is rational to want or think or do depends on one’s priorities, aims, interests, values and, of course, emotions. What may count as rational, therefore, even within one culture, is fairly flexible. Unlike logic, then, rationality is the kind of thing which can be moulded to serve interests and (as in the case of language [11]) it will inevitably serve the interests of the dominant class.

Despite the fact that logic is quite a different thing from rationality, the two are often confused. For example, a woman may be told she is illogical for getting angry with a man who takes over when she is busy mending her car. She may be called illogical on the grounds (which may or may not be true) that he will be able to mend it more quickly. It does not take much to prove that there is no logical contradiction involved here, since she can simply assert that she did not want him to butt in, and thus there is no contradiction in her getting annoyed. But more awkwardly she may be accused of irrationality, and the question of whether it is rational for her not to want him to take over depends on the specifics of their relationship, gender relations in general, what mending cars signifies socially and so on. It is easy to see, then, how claims about rationality can readily, often unintentionally, be used to deny the validity of women’s emotions. But how does this happen? If emotions are culturally learned, then how is it possible to have emotions which are not recognised and codified by the rational model, the interpretive codes of that culture? We must now return to the question raised at the end of the last section. Just how far are emotions conditioned by cultural ‘rationality’ and how far do they preserve an autonomy of their own?

### **Challenging Domination**

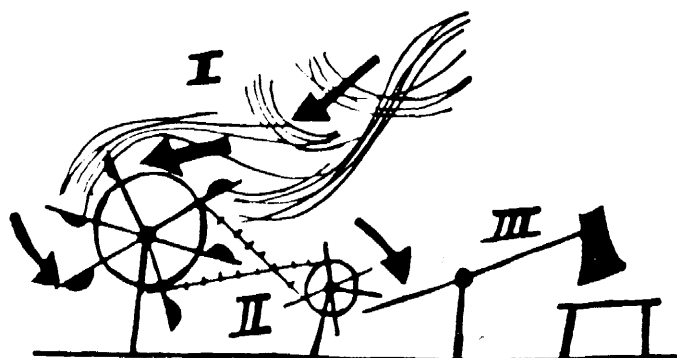
Our emotional faculty, as I have said, is highly conditioned by cultural norms. If emotional responses are going to have meaning, if they are going to express anything about the external world, then they must be communally codified to some extent. In this sense, the fact that emotions presuppose common concepts for their meaning can only enrich our communal and individual emotional lives. But what does this imply about the possibilities for political change? It now seems that the status quo shapes even the most nebulous and autonomous recess of our consciousness: ‘Race, class and gender shape every aspect of our lives and our emotional constitution is not excluded’ [5, p. 141] and

Within a capitalist, white-supremacist, and male-dominant society, the predominant values will tend to be those that serve the interests of rich white men. Consequently, we are all likely to develop an emotional constitution that is quite inappropriate for feminism. [5, p. 143]

Emotions are not just functions of any old concepts, but rather they are likely to be functions of those concepts which help the dominant class maintain its power. This is how what is accepted as rationality can serve the interests of the dominant group in its preservation of the status quo. Humour provides a classic example, since what people find funny and/or what is presented as funny so often presupposes oppressive social attitudes towards the group which is supposedly represented by the mother-in-law, the old biddy, the black momma, the fat woman, the ‘busty’ woman, the Irishman, the ugly woman, the old nag... These stereotypes become the institutions of a culture’s humour but, unlike the banana skin, they are politically relevant institutions. Bananas do not stand to lose much in the maintenance of the status quo, but people who are discriminated against for their race, sex, and a multitude of other labels, most certainly do.

Lorraine Code makes the important distinction between an inevitable level of conditioned generalisations and unnecessary stereotyping in her concept of ‘epistemological responsibility’. She concludes that: ‘Experience is always mediated by the location of experiencing subjects within a certain time, place, culture and environment, and it is always shaped as much by unconscious considerations and motivations’ [12, p. 160]. But this does not mean we have to resort to stereotype, since we also have access to diverse personal stories. It is these we must listen to if we are to be epistemically responsible, since a reliance upon stereotype amounts to an *idée fixe*, the wilful guarding of some precious set of beliefs and their protection from possible refutation. In a word, prejudice.

In as far as it is possible to think responsibly in this way within the bounds of our dubious conditioning, I suggest this is the result of close listening to our ‘subterranean’, not yet reasoned or articulated emotions, so that we may then go on to interpret and reason them out sensitively and accurately. Furthermore, if they are expressed and acted upon, then they may be able to effect a change in what is accepted as rationality and in the conventional modes of interpretation culturally on offer. This is the extent to which our emotions in general – and particularly anger, as perhaps the most politically powerful emotion [3] – do enjoy some independence from conditioning. In Code’s terms, it is the result of listening to the first person narratives about the feelings and experiences of individual people instead of relying on generalisations which too easily become accepted as granted truths, thereby turning from valid generalisations into brutalising stereotypes. Given this possibility for the nurturance of new emotions which are not yet sanctioned and codified by accepted rationality, and given that the status quo relies on our emotional as well as



rational acquiescence, then emotions can emerge as a potentially subversive force. No wonder that it is this process of drawing subterranean emotions to the surface, sharing them, articulating them and politicising them that structures the progressive energy of feminist consciousness raising.

Elizabeth Spelman [3] explores the potentially subversive nature of anger and notices that, while many oppressed groups are associated with emotion as opposed to reason, they tend not to be associated with anger. She explains this by saying that it is in the interests of the dominant group not to make anger 'available' to the subdominant group, since the very feeling of anger is a kind of political achievement in itself. Anger signifies refusal and therefore presupposes a more fundamental kind of human equality between master and slave. Stronger still, the expression of anger actively *asserts* that equality, that right to pass judgement: 'Hence there is a politics of emotion: the systematic denial of anger can be seen as a mechanism of subordination, and the existence and expression of anger as an act of insubordination' [3, p. 270]. Susan Griffin echoes this idea when she distinguishes between the kind of anger which is politically contextualised and anger whose political significance is not understood. She describes the first as 'placed' and 'known', the second as 'displaced' and therefore 'unknown': '... this question of two types of anger is essential. For me, it is the missing link between political and psychological understanding' [13, p. 283]. The first kind of anger has the power to threaten the status quo in the way Elizabeth Spelman describes, while the second lacks any subversive power since its expressiveness is not fully realised and its significance is therefore consigned to the purely psychological. This is where we see the importance of recognising those half-formed feelings which are not yet sanctioned by the accepted form of rationality. Emotions and their interpretations certainly are conditioned to some extent, but they are not wholly *determined* as long as we do not fail to listen to each other's stories and question the suitability of the publicly available modes of interpretation. Only then may emotion become a political force for changing how we interpret the world. If we achieve this, then we can assert that our emotions – if we listen to them – are not only an expression of the world, but also active participants in how the world is shaped. Emotions can function as a partially separate language which both presupposes and is presupposed by actual linguistic concepts, but which nonetheless remain irreducible to verbal language. When gradually brought into focus by reason and words, our emotions acquire the linguistic articulation to transcend old interpretations and to form new ones. Anger, in particular, provides a classic example of this dynamism in emotion, and thus: '... anger is the 'essential political emotion', and to silence anger may be to repress political speech' [3, p. 269].

I believe this point about emotion and language is closely related to Susan Griffin's criticism of the way of all ideology. She speaks of the inevitably restrictive power of any ideology, since in its very advocacy of one mode of interpretation it effectively censors any other: '... by its own denial and blindnesses, each new ideology creates its own forbidden subterranean world of reality' [13, p. 282]. The emancipatory drive away from such censorship is to be found once again in listening to our half-formed not yet spoken, not yet wholly understood emotions, in order that they grow to be fully formed and defended by a (modified) rational understanding:

Because I was ashamed of this feeling in myself, because of the ideologist in me who *censored my own feeling and did not let it live long enough to be explored and understood*, I was in danger from the most dangerous brand of ignorance, ignorance of myself. [13, p. 281, my emphasis]

It is important to note the emboldened words, since they clarify

what is NOT being advocated here. Griffin is not claiming that one cannot or ought not be selective about one's emotions, beliefs and interpretations. She is not saying that after thorough consideration, selection is destructive or censorious. This would indeed be anti-logic since contradiction would be deemed tolerable and even desirable in the name of anti-censorship. But this is not what is being said here, since the important difference between selection and censorship is that the first happens after thorough consideration while the other outlaws it from the start. That is what can be restrictive about ideology, and linguistic concepts: their power to stop us listening to half-formed emotions and beliefs without a fair trial. The obligation to give every emotion a fair trial recalls Lorraine Code's notion of epistemic responsibility, and we should remember that such trials are the stuff of logic. Without any selection we would have an ever-expanding mass of contradictory emotions and beliefs which, if left unresolved, would neutralise itself to express nothing, change nothing. When we listen to what Alison Jaggar calls our 'outlaw emotions', therefore, it is ultimately with a view to incorporating them into our conditioned modes of response and interpretation. This is a political aim, since it is about changing consciousness. While we listen, we simultaneously revise our notion of what is rational and we make sense of those emotions with the help of newly reasoned explanations. We explain a woman's barely expressed discontent by appeal to reason when we say that she is unhappy and confused *because* her boss is sexually harrassing her, and thus we select against the old interpretation that she is irritable at work because she is 'prudish' and has no sense of fun.

In sum, our emotions bear a looser and more flexible relation to the dominant ideology than does our reason since, while rationality can be moulded to serve the interests of a certain group, emotions cannot be wholly determined by those interests. To refute this would be to fly in the face of evidence, since CR groups and other ways of listening to personal stories have brought about many changes of consciousness. One such change is the creation of the new concept and new name for what would formerly have been misconstrued as prudishness, irritability, or some such thing, and that name is 'sexual harrassment'. In addition, if emotion owes its partial autonomy to the fact that it has a period of gestation before the dominant model for rationality can take a hold, then this reasserts our inability to explain how these kinds of emotions can bear their own meanings if we are working with a model for emotion which dissects it in two. Therefore, the cognitivist view that the expressive power of emotions is exclusively located in one sector of emotion – judgement – is wholly refuted.

### **The Relation Between Emotion and Reason**

In the light of this acknowledgement of the partial autonomy of emotions and their political import, the traditional idea of emotion needing to be dominated by reason is also exposed as hopelessly biased. Of course reason must regulate wayward emotions and prejudicial feelings, but equally emotion must regulate reason in order that accepted forms of interpretation and rationality do not brutalise and deny people's emotions, forbidding them their due interpretation, their meaning, and their political significance. The relation between reason and emotion, as I have said, is one of interaction and interdependence. It is crass to mistake this for domination and submission:

'Control' does not necessarily mean 'subdue' or 'diminish'... Reasoning about a situation may result in one's ceasing to be angry; but it may just as easily result in one's *becoming* angry. [3, p. 268]

Neither reason nor emotion is independent from the other, but nor is either reducible to the other. Reason presupposes emotion, since what is rational depends on emotional preferences about different possible conclusions or outcomes; and emotion presupposes reason since our emotions require rational interpretation if they are to come above ground. The relation is a partnership in understanding:

... rather than repressing emotion in epistemology it is necessary to rethink the relation between knowledge and emotion and construct a conceptual model that demonstrates the mutually constitutive rather than oppositional relation between reason and emotion. [5, p. 141]

I hope that the recognition of how each presupposes the other, and an emphasis on how both are simultaneously learned through culture, provides such a model. In particular, the inter-relation between emotion and reason remains dynamic because the expressive power of emotion is not reducible to that of rational judgement as expressed in language. In this way, a degree of autonomy in emotion is preserved despite the cultural conditionings which mould rationality. This reminds us anew just what can be politically subversive in our half-formed emotions as yet unsanctioned by the dominant model for reason. If we give enough space to these emotions, then we can let them reform the character of rationality. The assertion that this is possible facilitates the practice of feminist philosophy, since it makes way for the conversion of reason from a political enemy into a political ally. Only then may our epistemology align itself freely with our politics.

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