



Thought and Experience

A contemporary study of emotions

Carolyn Price

In his book Peter Goldie has many interesting things to say about how we can make progress in understanding emotions, the nature of emotions, the role of biology and culture in shaping our emotional capacities, and the relationship between emotions and rationality. I met Peter Goldie in London in March 2004 and I began by asking him why, as a philosopher, he finds the emotions so interesting.

Peter Goldie

Well, they play such a big part in our lives and at the same time they're philosophically extraordinarily intriguing. Ontologically the question of what actually they are, epistemologically how we recognise emotions in ourselves and in others and in terms of their connection to value, for example ethical value and aesthetic value. So they bring in considerations from philosophy of mind, from epistemology, from moral philosophy and from aesthetics. Furthermore maybe 10 years or so ago one could have added that they weren't much discussed philosophically and that's certainly now no longer true, I've heard them described these days as being a hot topic. But I think even though they're now a hot topic the topic is miles from being exhausted and there's still a lot more philosophically interesting to think about and talk to colleagues about.

Carolyn Price

In your book you make frequent use of examples from literature. Do you think that there's anything to be learned from discussions of emotions in novels and poetry that we can't get from science?

Peter Goldie

Yes, I do. I'd ask the question I suppose in two parts. Firstly, science is quite rightly robustly impersonal and thus with one or two exceptions its not really concerned with how things are from the point of view of a person, from the personal perspective, as I call it in my book. And literature in contrast, is of course concerned with this, with the phenomenology of lived experience, what lived experience is like. And the second part of my answer is, why I use examples from literature specifically, and the answer is simply that good examples from literature are richer than examples one might dream up just for the sake of making a philosophical point. From my own point of view for some reason or another I find myself particularly drawn to examples in Russian literature where the soul, feelings, passions, are never far away from view.

Carolyn Price

So to put the question the other way round do you think that there's anything that science can teach us about the emotions that our everyday experiences as described in novels can't?

Peter Goldie

It can certainly teach us about, for example what's going on in the brain and maybe what's going on in the rest of the body. There's an interesting question about whether that's teaching us about emotion and I guess if one has a philosophy of mind, which I do, which is materialist, such that a particular emotional experience is identical to the very same as some brain state or some part of the body, then logic would say that it is teaching us about emotion and yet when one's trying to live one's life and think about one's own emotional experience its no more helpful in a way to know that the particular toothache that you've got is identical to some brain state or other. The toothache is painful and you want it to go away, which implies of course that you want the brain state to go away but I don't think we'll ever start thinking or talking about brain states rather than emotions, do you?

Carolyn Price

The science of biology has led a lot of discussion about emotion recently and the assumption is that biology can tell us a lot about what we share with animals. Do you agree that we do share emotions, perhaps emotions of a primitive nature with other animals?

Peter Goldie

No doubt in some respects we do, particularly maybe the more primitive short-term responses, fear and anger, but of course even those emotions in us, emotions of fear and anger can in we humans be of a longer term nature and can be directed towards distant objects so you can have fear of falling prices in the Japanese stock market or anger at some injustice that's being carried out in some distant part of the world and those sorts of thoughts and feelings just aren't accessible to other animals, but even our shorter term emotional responses differ from other animals in at least three respects. Firstly, we are famously rational, or at least supposed to be, we are as Aristotle puts it a rational animal, capable of using reason to control our emotions and my dog Dougal, how many emotions he experiences, doesn't have that rational capacity. Secondly we have language, we are capable of attributing emotions to ourselves and to others, we are capable of saying and thinking I'm angry, she's afraid. And following on from those first two points we have a capacity to reflect on our own emotions, to think about them and our own emotional dispositions, our own emotional tendencies and sometimes even to feel emotions about other emotions so I could for example be ashamed of my anger. So I think in all of those respects we differ. Even with as primitive a feeling as pain, which isn't an emotion but its certainly a feeling, even there I think its really hard to imagine what it would be like to feel pain without being capable of having the thought that you're in pain, as Dougal my dog feels pain no doubt but he can't have the thought that he's in pain and even there I think there is that difference and I would say even more so in respect of emotions including the one's of a primitive nature as you put it.

Carolyn Price

So, where does that leave the relation between biological and cultural influences on human emotions?

Peter Goldie

In us humans the biological and cultural isn't really separable and let me try and explain what I mean. Firstly and I think biologists would agree with this, it's meaningless to ask of any particular individual, of you or of me, how much of an emotional disposition is due to inheritance and how much to culture. How much of somebody's disposition to be aggressive for example is due to their genes and how much to their upbringing and the same applies to height, you can't say of any particular individual how much of their height is due to inheritance and how much to upbringing and the sort of food that they've had and so on, the question is simply meaningless in respect of any particular individual. One might think, and this is my second point, that the importance, the centrality even, of biology is revealed by the work of Paul Ekland and others who have over many years done brilliant work on the commonalities of emotional expression across all kinds of cultures where cross cultural transmission isn't a possibility, so that its not as though it could get passed on from culture to culture, so the smile is universal and the frown and the grimace and so on. These are the so called basic emotions and affect programmes. But even here, even these short-term responses can be educated and shaped so that even they are in part cultural, even the short-term response of the fear of the snake or the anger at the dog. In fact Ekland acknowledges this and calls his theory neurocultural, with the neuro bit so to speak responsible for what's biological and inherited and universal and cultural for what's educated and diverse. So even in those short-term responses, even the smile has got the cultural element as well as the neuro element. But this talk of elements leads me to my third point which is, and I think I disagree with Paul here, which is that it's a mistake to think that these two elements can be separated out in respect of any particular emotional response. The smile in my example. My alternative picture to that is that our emotional dispositions are developmentally plastic or developmentally open, very much in the way our linguistic capability is shaped. So rather than what I've called the avocado pear misconception of the emotions where there's the soft outer core which is the culture element and the little bit in the middle, the nut or whatever it is, that's the inherited part that's shared across all cultures, I want to say the two come together

in a way that the disposition itself is shaped, so it becomes meaningless to try to separate the two out. And here's a rather simplified analogy but just to make the point, imagine I took a round ball of plasticine and moulded it into the shape of a house and then somebody said to me but hang on a minute how much of this shape of this little piece of plasticine is due to the shape that you were given and how much of it is due to you and the answer is it's meaningless really, it just doesn't make sense.

Carolyn Price

So, if emotions can be moulded like a piece of plasticine by the experience of the individual in your view, does that imply that you accept the picture given by the social constructivists?

Peter Goldie

No, it doesn't. For the reasons I've just been hinting at. If one thinks about linguistic development, the way our languages develop, which of course are vastly different across the world are constrained by our biology, by our inheritance, the way our neurology is structured, as Chomsky has for many decades argued, is constrained. There's an idea of a language capability but the language capability is a capability for developing a particular kind of language and similarly I want to suggest there is you might say an emotional capability which is capable of being developed into various different emotional capabilities. So, I think social constructivism is really a kind of exaggeration, its as if emotions could develop any old way, there's no constraints of our biology at all and of course the piece of plasticine that gets moulded into a house is constrained by the little ball of plasticine that you're given and what colour it is and what sort of texture it is, I don't want to stretch the analogy too far but you see the point. So even though it can be incoherent to ask how much of the shape of this particular piece of plasticine after it's moulded into a house is down to the shape you inherited and how much to your moulding there's still the piece of plasticine which is to some extent a given.

Carolyn Price

We've talked about the origin of emotion, let's move on now and talk a little bit about what emotions are. Could you explain how your views relate to Robert Solomon's suggestion that emotions are evaluative judgements?

Peter Goldie

Well, about 30 years ago, I guess, Bob Solomon was the first to turn against the William James' view that emotions are perceptions of changes in the body and as an antidote to that the slogan 'emotions are judgements' was extremely effective. I guess if I were to characterise my position with a slogan, some slogan you might think, is 'emotions are complex'. It doesn't seem to get you very far but it might just be true to say that emotions are complex in that they're intentional, they involve perception, belief, desire, feelings, feelings directed towards the world (beyond the bounds of one's body) and towards one's own bodily condition and bodily changes, so emotions are complex. But really my differences with Bob aren't as great as his slogan might suggest and this emerges more and more as his work has developed over the last 30 years. Judgements aren't just a kind of $2+2=4$ judgement, by judgement Bob means a kind of state and psychological event that would include perception, desire, intention and feeling. And the second reason why we're not as far apart as his slogan might suggest is that in his recent work he's come to accept that he was too dismissive of bodily feelings as such as just mere causal side effects and he now wants to talk about these still subsumed under the notion of judgement as being judgements of the body. So behind his slogan, which he still sticks to, is really an account of emotional experience that's just as complex as mine is.

Carolyn Price

So can we move on to another kind of question now, perhaps one of the most lively parts of the recent debate about the emotions, as concerned the relationship between emotions and reason. Do you think that a particular emotional response can be described as irrational or unreasonable? To give an example, if someone's angry because someone else has quite innocently sat in their favourite chair at a restaurant, do you think that that angry response can be described as irrational or unreasonable?

Peter Goldie

Well, that's a lovely example because it brings out all kinds of possibilities. Say first you're angry at this person due to a misapprehension that he, let's make it a he, that he sat in your chair intentionally, not innocently, that he did it just to annoy you. Now, your mistake here, your anger at this person intentionally sitting in your chair, your mistake is an epistemological one, one to do with knowledge. Now, grounded on what you think is the case, namely that he sat in your chair intentionally, there's a sense in which you might think that the emotion was justified but of course there may be a question of whether it was unreasonable or irrational of you to arrive at this misapprehension, why did you think he had sat in your chair intentionally when in fact he had done it innocently. This is some story to be told there. So that's the first thought. Second possibility is that you're under no such misapprehension, you're angry at the person for doing something innocently and here it might seem that your anger is really quite unreasonable because it's directed towards a person for doing something innocently. Then there's another possibility that your anger isn't directed at the person but you're angry at not being able to have your favourite chair. Here the anger seems to, as one might say, have the right object, its directed to the right thing in the world, namely not being able to have your chair rather than the person, but it still seems unreasonable, if not irrational. If it were say to be such intense anger that it spoils your evening and perhaps spoiled his too. So there is a term here I think that's quite useful, that in such a case it seems like your anger's disproportionate. And just let me say quickly what I mean by the thought that the anger there might be unreasonable but may be not irrational.

Let me just use another example, let's see how it might go. Say, your neighbour plays his drums loudly all day, even though he knows that you don't like the noise of drums. Now is your neighbour's behaviour irrational? Not really, but you might well say it was unreasonable. So I think there's a sense of unreasonable which has got a lot of substance but doesn't necessarily involve somebody in irrationality. So that's three possibilities. The last one is you just get mildly irritated or mildly angry for a minute or two at this person sitting in your chair, that he sat in innocently, and then your irritation's forgotten, it's over. Is this reasonable; is it reasonable to be irritated to find somebody sitting in your favourite chair? Here I think we might still hesitate, perhaps there's a better term like, well it's jolly understandable, it's jolly intelligible that somebody should get irritated in such circumstances. Its characteristically human, but to call it reasonable might not ring entirely true I think, just as you get cross if you've lost your keys when you're leaving for work, is it reasonable to get cross? Well, one doesn't really want to say it's reasonable but it's very understandable and you might think somebody's rather odd who didn't. This observation is meant to bring out the fact that emotions are very human experiences.

Carolyn Price

So when you suggest that we can assess emotions for their reasonableness or perhaps their intelligibility do you think that we're judging them in quite the same way that we would judge a judgement or in a different way?

Peter Goldie

I do think it's different, although it's difficult to say quite where the difference lies and I rather suspect there are several good PhD theses to be written on this subject and I look forward to seeing them. One respect in which they differ I would say is that it's the question of duration. If you believe that somebody's behaved badly it's not as though the belief is going to phase out if you remembered it 30 years from now you'd still believe that the person had behaved badly. But say you were still angry 30 years later that somebody had sat in your favourite chair one evening in the restaurant that's surely unreasonable. So there's a question of duration which remains open to assessment and then secondly there's the question of proportionality. Of course there's a sense in which one can believe something to a degree of probability. You might believe to a degree of probability of 0.5 that the coin's going to come up heads rather than tails, something like that, but say you were completely certain that this person had behaved badly by sitting in your chair, even then there's the question of proportionality so far as the emotion and the emotional response was concerned. Say you were unbelievably angry and you threw your wine in the person's face and kicked the chair from under him and threw him out of the restaurant, surely one would want to say that that anger was disproportionate. So I think there are those two normative dimensions to emotions, duration and proportionality that don't really bear on belief. In a way a very nicely

encapsulated example might be grief. You believe that you loved one's died so grief is appropriate. How long should the grief last, what duration should it have, and how great should the grief be? And those are normative questions where you might well say somebody's grieving too long, or somebody's grieving too much perhaps over the death of their hamster or something.

Carolyn Price

Earlier you referred to Aristotle's claim, famous claim, that we're rational animals and you've also talked about the distinctively human nature of the emotions. Do you think that there could be a rational agent that was different from us, precisely in the sense that they didn't have emotions, some kind of android or robot for example?

Peter Goldie

That's a very interesting question. Let me try and address it in relation to what Kant said about what he called inclinations, which he thought were particularly human. So I would certainly include desires in the category of inclinations and I'd include emotions in that category as well. So let's when I use Kant's term 'inclinations' think of emotions as being part of that. Kant said inclinations must be burdensome to right thinking people. He said in the groundwork it must be the universal wish of every rational being to be wholly free of them. So Kant seems to be saying two things here. One is, it's possible that there could be a rational being with no inclinations and secondly we should wish to be like that, at least so far as concerns obeying Kant's categorical imperative, in other words doing what the moral law requires. Well, so far as the first point, the possibility of a rational being with no emotions, it's conceptually possible, I don't think one should deny that, but I think there are some things that are conceptually possible such that I can conceive of them but that aren't imaginable. I could imagine that there could be such a being but I can't imagine such a being. And secondly that we should wish to be like that, we should wish to be beings without inclinations, in other words without emotions and my reply to that is really, well Kant might think that but in the words of Samuel Goldwin, include me out.

Carolyn Price

Why include you out?

Peter Goldie

Why include me out? Because having emotional dispositions, being capable of feeling emotions, loving my wife and my dog and my children and getting mildly irritated that the shopper in the queue and the person who sits in my favourite chair is part of what it is to be human and I want to be human, I don't want to be a rational being without inclinations. Now, is that unreasonable, irrational? I think not. I think I'm human and there's nothing I can do about that and I think the aspiration to be an irrational being without inclinations, without emotions, is something that just utterly dissociates oneself from the way one is.

Carolyn Price

Peter Goldie, thank you very much indeed.