

## CONSEQUENCES OF THE RATIONALITY OF THE EMOTIONS

**Marion Ledwig**

*(University of California, Santa Cruz, USA)*

Which kind of consequences does being rational have on emotions? Is the "sadder but wiser"-idiom true? Not necessarily. For according to Rescher<sup>i</sup>, rationality has a positive influence on judgmental contentment of mind, whereas it doesn't have any bearing on emotive pleasure; yet rationality can "diminish — via science and technology — the affective unhappiness of pain and suffering in life." Moreover, the reason why rationality is supportive of happiness in the reflective mode is simply that rationality is a matter of intelligence. Furthermore, for humans it is rational not to be rational all the time<sup>ii</sup>. For humans are not only rational beings, they are rational animals, too, and nothing prevents reason from recognizing that this is the case.<sup>iii</sup>

An example for such a rational irrationality is the following: suppose you have a deadly sick grandmother who thinks she is Cleopatra. In one sense your grandmother is rational. For it is much better for her to think that she is Cleopatra than that she is deadly sick. Yet in another sense your grandmother is irrational. For it simply isn't true that she is Cleopatra. Moreover, there is no evidence supporting her belief. Quite to the contrary.

CONSEQUENCES OF  
THE RATIONALITY OF THE EMOTIONS

Lots of evidence speaks against it. Which kind of conclusions can one draw from this example? Are two senses of rationality here at work? In my opinion not, for a minimal condition for being rational is consistency. Moreover, your grandmother could be consistent in her beliefs by ignoring any evidence to the contrary. Furthermore, your grandmother becomes more rational the more evidence is taken into account. Hence a full-blown rationality is to a certain extent grounded in reality.

There is another twist to the Cleopatra example. For one might want to argue that from the first-person perspective your grandmother is rational, whereas from the third-person perspective your grandmother is irrational. For from the first-person perspective your grandmother just takes into account all the evidence which speaks in favor of her being Cleopatra, while from the third-person perspective your grandmother sees that it is simply not true that she is Cleopatra. That is, she sees that there is lots of evidence against her view that she is Cleopatra. Nevertheless even from the third-person perspective she might want to say that it is much better for her to think that she is Cleopatra than that she is deadly sick. For then life becomes more enjoyable for her.

Yet there is another side of the "sadder but wiser"-idiom, which I find more interesting (pace Rescher). Elster reports experimental findings, which show that the only persons who are able to take an objective view of the world are the depressed<sup>iv</sup> 4. What kind of conclusions can we draw from these results: (1) as it is not rational to be depressed, it is not rational to take an objective view of the world, too. For if one takes an objective view of the world, the obstacles which stand in one's way become so massive that

life itself just becomes a burden. Moreover, looking through pink glasses, like in the case of falling in love, seems to be necessary for the survival of our species. For otherwise humans wouldn't multiply enough. Furthermore, in lots of cases one - in hindsight - wouldn't pursue certain goals, like getting a job, building a house, planning a workshop, etc., anymore because of the many obstacles that one encountered. So taking a positively biased view of the world seems to be rational. For otherwise humans wouldn't get anything done. (2) As taking an objective view of the world is rational, being depressed is rational, too. One might want to argue for this position by claiming that being depressed is in so far rational that it has the function of enhancing help by means of empathy and by this means improving the state of the world and thereby also the state of the depressed person. Yet whether all emotions have the function to enhance help by means of empathy is doubtful. For instance, my happiness doesn't have the function to enhance help by means of empathy. I am already happy, so that I don't need any kind of help anymore.

One can object to the last whole paragraph that it doesn't say anything about the rationality of emotions, because a depression is commonly not classified as an emotion, but as an illness. Although this is true, how can one distinguish then between being sad and being depressed? Depression just takes longer time, that is, several months, and in general is more intense than sadness, that is, very depressed people become totally inactive. So there is not a qualitative difference, but a quantitative difference between being sad and being depressed. Moreover, what is commonly classified as true doesn't have to be true. Furthermore, nothing speaks against classifying a

CONSEQUENCES OF  
THE RATIONALITY OF THE EMOTIONS

phenomenon into two categories, like being an emotion and being an illness.

Does the rationality of the emotions have any bearing on the morality of the emotions? That is, can one hold people rationally accountable for their emotions? There is, after all, a conflicting tradition going all the way back to Plato that sees emotions as senseless, passive irruptions that interfere with reasoning<sup>v</sup>. Yet having certain emotions doesn't necessarily mean also showing and/or acting on these emotions. Furthermore, we have also been trained as small children when to show and when not to show certain kinds of emotions.

The same holds for acting on one's emotions. For example, a child who laughs at a funeral or in church is usually told that this kind of behavior is inappropriate for this occasion, because it doesn't show respect. Moreover, if emotions become so overwhelming that they interfere with reasoning in such a way that one cannot think clearly anymore, I would rather call them passions to signify their extremity. Finally, people usually hold people rationally accountable for showing or acting on their emotions - the exception are emotionally sick people — as people hold people rationally accountable for their actions. Hence one can hold people rationally accountable for their emotions.

Are emotions rational and therefore moral? If one is threatened by a knife, the victim has good reasons for feeling afraid and scared, but is he morally justified to feel afraid and scared? That sounds odd to me. For in what sense could he be morally justified to feel afraid and scared? Yet in some cases emotions can be rationally and morally justified. For if someone stole my wallet, I would have good reasons to become angry. Moreover, I would be

morally justified to become angry, because there is a not-stealing norm in our society. I also would be rationally justified to become angry, because the anticipation of my anger could keep people from stealing. So - emotions can both be rational and moral.

Ben-Ze'ev<sup>vi</sup>, however, claims that "The role of emotions in the moral domain is controversial. Two central features of emotions are particularly problematic for the integration of emotions into the moral domain: (1) the nondeliberate nature of emotions, and (2) the partial nature of emotions. The nondeliberate nature has been claimed to contradict the possibility of moral responsibility, and the partial nature of emotions has been perceived to be incompatible with the impartial nature of morality."

Yet even though emotions might have a nondeliberate nature, in the sense that they are not caused by cognitions, this doesn't mean that one cannot reflect on one's emotions and this doesn't mean that one has to show or act on one's emotions. Moreover, the question arises what does the integration of emotions into the moral domain mean? Of course, one can have emotions with regard to moral matters, yet one can also have emotions with regard to non-moral matters. So this cannot be an integration of emotions into the moral domain. Furthermore, even though emotions might in many cases be good indicators for morally recommendable behavior, there are also many cases where emotions are indicators for morally not recommendable behavior, for example, if one loves a married man. One might object loving a married man is not morally bad, but acting on that love is morally bad. Moreover, having a bad conscience because one loves a married man is a good indicator for morally recom-

CONSEQUENCES OF  
THE RATIONALITY OF THE EMOTIONS

mendable behavior. So one has to take into account all of the arising emotions for judging whether they are good indicators for morally recommendable behavior. Hence emotions can be integrated into the moral domain.

With regard to the second point that emotions are partial, whereas morality is not, one can doubt the second claim. For morality would look inhumane, if it were completely impartial. That is, if one treats one's own family, friends, colleagues, fellow citizens, etc. on equal grounds with everyone else, this would look completely inhumane and therefore wouldn't be morally approved of. Besides one applies morality to each individual case and therefore takes account of the idiosyncrasies of each particular case. So in these senses morality is partial. Moreover, one can ask whether the concept of mercy is impartial. For when one acts on mercy, one in particular takes into account the individual case. Hence morality is to a certain extent partial and there is no incompatibility with regard to the partiality of the emotions.

## NOTES

---

<sup>i</sup> Rescher N. *Rationality: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Nature and the Rationale of Reason*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988. P.210.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.* pp.218-223.

<sup>iii</sup> Elster J. *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions*. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 298-301.

<sup>iv</sup> Cf.: Alloy L., Abramson L. *Judgment of Contingency in Depressed and Nondepressed Students: Sadder but Wiser?* in: *Journal of Experimental Psychology*., General 108, 1979. pp.441-485.

<sup>v</sup> Cf.: Evans D. *Emotion: The Science of Sentiment*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>vi</sup> Ben-Ze'ev A. *Emotions and Morality*, in: *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 31. 1997. p.195.

*L'étude publié ici, est une variante de l'étude paru dans ЧЕЛОВЕК В СОВРЕМЕННЫХ ФИЛОСОФСКИХ КОНЦЕПЦИЯХ / Human Being in Contemporary Philosophical Conceptions, Третью международную конференцию / 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference, 14-17 сентября 2004 года / September 14-17 2004, ВОЛГОГРАДСКИЙ ГОСУДАРСТВЕННЫЙ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ / Volgograd State University, ООО "ПРИНТ", 2004 / Editions "ООО Print", 2004*