



HOW TO THINK ABOUT EMOTION

Mortimer Adler

Today we shall consider Emotion as one of the Great Ideas. Sometimes we speak of the emotions, calling them passions and sometimes we use other words like sentiments or feelings. In any case, when we talk about the emotions we are talking about such things as anger, fear, love, joy, and sorrow.

The approach to the study of the emotions is quite different in modern times than in ancient times. In modern times the emotions are the subject matter of psychology and physiology. The physiologists and psychologists are concerned mainly with describing the facts of the emotions of men and animals and the conditions under which the emotions are aroused and the course they follow. There is, of course, one exception here. In modern times that branch of psychology called psychoanalysis or psychiatry is concerned with the emotions more practically. It's concerned with the therapy or cure of emotional disorders.

But in the ancient world, it wasn't psychology or physiology that was concerned with the emotions, but two other disciplines: ethics and politics. Because in the ancient and medieval world, in fact,

almost until modern times the chief concern with the emotions was a moral concern, not what the facts about the emotions were so much as how to control emotions, what to do about the emotions.

EMOTIONS ARE WIDESPREAD BODILY COMMOTIONS

As we consider the emotions today, let's postpone for a while the moral problem of the control of the emotions and begin our consideration with a psychological discussion or description of the facts about the emotions. And there is no better place to begin than the one fact about which everyone, ancient and modern, every student of the subject is agreed. And that fact is that the emotions or the passions are not simple feelings like pleasure and pain but very complex, organic disturbances, widespread bodily commotions. I think, though it may sound a little queer to say that emotions are commotions, it is true that the emotions are wide-spread bodily commotions involving many changes in the deep internal organs as well as in the surface of the body.

The ancients knew this as well as the moderns. Aristotle, at the very beginning of his study of the emotions was perfectly aware that an object does not cause flight unless the heart has moved. And then in the Middle Ages, Aquinas makes it perfectly clear that he understands that the passions occur only where there is widespread bodily change. Still a little later, long before modern times, the great English physician and physiologist, Harvey, the man who did the work on the circulation of the blood says, "In almost every affection, appetite, hope, or fear our body suffers, the countenance changes and the blood appears to course hither and thither. In anger, the eyes are fiery and the pupils contracted." He was wrong about that. As a matter of fact, in anger the pupils dilate; they don't contract. "In modesty, the cheeks are suffused with blushes. In fear and under a sense of infamy and shame, the face is pale."

The ancients, knowing that the emotions were widespread organic or bodily disturbances, knew two other things as consequences of this. One of the reasons why the word *passion* is used as a synonym for emotions is because the word *passion* signifies the very opposite of action. When we are emotional we are suffering something that attacks us. In fact, an emotion is a passion in the sense of the body being passive to something affecting it from outside, some object that is causing this bodily change that we suffer. And the other fact that is a consequence of this understanding of the emotions as deep organic disturbances is that only men and animals can suffer emotions. It is wrong to attribute emotions to God. When it is said that God is angry, that statement can't possibly mean that God suffers the emotion of anger because no purely

spiritual being could have an emotion. An emotion is a bodily disturbance.

There is one twist that the moderns have put upon this fact. And that twist in the history of the subject is associated with the names of William James and a German psychologist by the name of C.G. Lange. It is called the James-Lange theory of the emotions. William James in his great work on psychology said, "We do not run away because we feel afraid. On the contrary, we feel fear because we run away." Let me read you the statement that James makes. "The emotional experience is nothing but the feeling of the bodily changes which follow directly the perception of the exciting fact." Common sense says we meet a bear, are frightened and run. But according to William James we do not run away because we are afraid, we feel afraid because we are trembling and running away.

Both James and common sense are each in a sense right. Now there is one really great addition that is made to this understanding of the emotions in modern times. In the psychological laboratory and in the physiological laboratory great efforts have been made to study very precisely by accurate measurement and recording the ways in which the body changes under emotional excitement.

I hope you'll permit me to speak of my own work in this connection. As a young man I spent a great deal of time in the psychological laboratory doing experimental work in psychology and physiology. And one of the things I worked on was the physiology of the emotions. Let me just briefly describe the kind of experiment we performed. During emotional change, emotional excitement, there is a change in the speed of the heart beat, in the speed and depth of breathing, in blood pressure, in the way that the blood is distributed throughout the body, a change in the size of the pupil, a change in all of the internal and external secretions. The sweat glands, for example, start acting up. And blood sugar is poured into the blood, and adrenaline is poured into the blood from the internal glands. All these changes happen during emotional excitement, and in a laboratory experiment it is possible to take a subject and attach various instruments to him so that when as we did in this case, fire a revolver off behind his head, or wind a boa constrictor around his neck, or kick him the shins to make him angry, you get an emotional reaction and all these various bodily changes are registered at once so you can see them all taking place.

The amazing thing that we discovered—and it's been verified many times since, is that in all the emotions, whether it's fear or anger or love or shock, any intense emotional excitement, all the

bodily changes are exactly the same. When emotional excitement takes place these bodily reverberations take place. Well then you may say to me, "Well, why do we feel anger differently from the way that we feel fear or love?" And the answer is that it isn't in the feeling of the bodily change, but a difference in the object we're reacting to, a difference in the direction of the emotion, the bodily move we make away from or toward the object, and the accompanying feelings of pleasure and pain. It is these three things, not the actual internal physiological change, that makes us feel emotional excitement as being of a different sort, of anger or fear or love or joy or sorrow.

EMOTIONS ARE INSTINCTIVE

What I have just said becomes more intelligible when the emotions are understood as parts of a more complex psychological process. The emotions are the middle phase of a threefold instinctive pattern of response, a pattern of response that always originates with the perception of some object and terminates with some kind of bodily movement or overt action.

A man perceives some object in the field of his vision, that object excites, let's say, the emotion of anger, and it terminates when his arms and legs make the movements which are involved in fighting. But in between, the beginning of that distinctive reaction which begins with the perception of the hateful object and the termination of it in the actual acts of fighting, there is an emotional response inside the man. This emotional response has two aspects: one is the aspect of impulse, the emotion of anger that is aroused in him by this object tends to motivate his body and to make him want to fight; and at the same time, the response of anger is the feeling that results from those movements themselves.

Now, when I say that emotions are instinctive, that they are parts of a complex, instinctive process, what I'd like to have you understand is the meaning of that word *instinct*. The things which are instinctive in us are unlearned. And emotions are as unlearned as sensations are. For example, you don't have to teach a child, an infant, to see blue. The child's eye is open, has normal vision, in the presence of that color the child sees blue. There is no need to teach the child how to fear. Given certain objects to which the child instinctively reacts, the child immediately feels fear. There is no learning involved.

In animals these instinctive patterns which involve emotions are often fairly complex. Think for a moment of the cat's instinctive reaction to a mouse, no learning involved. That's a very elaborate

pattern of response. Similarly the sheep's reaction to a wolf, the reaction of fear and running away. Given the perception of the wolf, the smell of the wolf, the sheep starts to get afraid, and starts to run away.

But in human beings the instinctive responses are reduced to a very few things and they are extremely simple. For example, in the human infant, the instinctive response in emotional content of anger *may* be produced by the child being held. The restraint of the child's body causes the child to feel rage and to thrash about furiously. Or the human infant feels fear under two stimulations. A very loud noise and the child will cry and be afraid. And the other thing is a loss of support. These are the only two instinctive reactions in the human infant that are accompanied by the emotion of fear.

Though the emotions are instinctive in man in the sense of being unlearned, they are not free from acquired modifications. Human emotions are subject to many acquired modification. Unlike the lower animals, where there is very little emotional training or learning possible-very little modification of the emotions in the course of an individual animal's growth and experience-unlike animals humans learn a great deal in the field of the emotions.

Many things are acquired through experience and thought that change the character of an adult's emotional responses from what it was in infancy or childhood. For example, as we grow up we acquire the fear of certain objects, a fear which was not instinctive in us at birth. The fear that people have of high places, the fear that they have of certain smells, the fear that is aroused by certain sights, these are not instinctive but learned. They come from experience, so that there is some modification of the emotions on the side of perception.

As we grow up and undergo various types of social training in the home, in our communities, and in school, we learn to control our emotional response-we change the direction of our action. We, in fact, often inhibit the action, don't let it come out as easily as a child would. We don't cry, for example, the way children cry or get into the kind of temper tantrum that children display. This is the control of an emotional response that comes with growth and training. And in these two ways, on the side of perception and on the side of action, the adult's emotions differ from those of the child and there is a great deal of individual difference among adults according to their experience and training. The amazing thing about human adults as opposed to the adult of any other ani-

mal is how much individual difference there is from one person to another in the character, the intensity, the general pattern of their emotional life. Some of these changes or modifications result from training and some are merely the actions of experience.

TWO OPPOSED VIEWS OF HUMAN EMOTIONS

This fact, that human beings have an emotional life that is subject to education or training, to being modified by experience, raises a fundamental moral problem, and from the point of view of psychoanalysis, a fundamental medical problem. And that problem is simply, what should be done about the emotions in the course of training human beings? As human beings grow up what should be done about their emotions? How should they be trained or controlled? Let's now turn to that problem.

Here there are two fundamentally opposed views about what man should do with his emotions. What is common to both of them is this, both views look upon man as having in him a fundamental conflict between reason and the passions, or as is some-times said, between the higher and the lower natures of man, between his rationality and his animality. But one view regards the emotions, because they are the animal aspect of man—the bodily aspect of man—as wholly bad, and recommends that the emotions be purged, eliminated, extirpated, expunged from human life; whereas the other view regards the emotions as natural, being part of human nature and as such neither good nor bad, but able to be either, capable of being either good or bad according to the way in which they are controlled or used, put to use shall we say, in the moral life.

Now this first point of view, the one that looks upon the emotions as bad, has as its basic principle the conviction that the good human life is the purely—and I emphasize the word purely—the purely rational life. And to be a purely rational life, life must involve the elimination or avoidance of emotion. This view is extremely prevalent among certain mystical religions in the East. It is not so frequent or prevalent in the West. In fact, there are only three great examples or exponents of this view in the West: the Roman Stoics, Benedict Spinoza, and Immanuel Kant.

Let me read you what they have to say on the subject. The Stoics urge us, “Not to yield to the persuasions of the body and never to be overpowered by the motion of the senses or of the appetite. For to live well is to do one's duty and to set aside all contrary desires or emotional inclinations.”

And then many centuries later the philosopher Spinoza said, “When a man is governed by his passions he is in bondage.” That’s what Spinoza means by human bondage, that famous phrase “human bondage” comes from Spinoza’s *Ethics*, where he explains that bondage is enslavement—enslavement to the passions. He said, “When a man is governed by his passions he is in bondage. For a man under their control is not his own master, but is mastered by fortune in whose power he is, so that he is often forced to follow the worst course though he sees the better before him. A free man is one who lives according to the dictates of reason alone. Human freedom, human freedom insists then in the life of reason and as purely a rational life as possible for a man to live.”

Finally, Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher, says, “An action done from duty must totally exclude the influence of every bodily or emotional inclination. Duty consists in obeying the moral law which I must follow even to the thwarting of all my inclinations.”

Now let me summarize this. These three, the Stoics, Spinoza, and Kant, all of them recommend a policy of attrition toward the passions. Their force, the force of the passions, must be attenuated or even destroyed in human life in order to emancipate reason from their influence and to protect the will from their seduction. And according to these thinkers nothing is lost even if as a result of this the emotions completely atrophy and dry up.

The opposite view has a quite different character. Here the passions or the emotions are regarded as having a natural place in human life and the aim therefore should be not to get rid of the emotions or eliminate them entirely but to keep them in their place. The passions are to be made to serve reason’s purposes by restraining them from excesses and by directing their energies to good use in the course of the moral life.

This second view is one in which the same fundamental fact is recognized. There is in man a basic conflict between his reason and his passion, between his higher and his lower nature. But this second view does not think that that conflict must be resolved by completely eliminating the emotions. On the contrary, it thinks that the good life is one that can be lived not purely rationally but in accordance with reason, by which is meant a life in which the emotions so far as they play a part in human life are under control or moderated or disciplined by rational thought and rational principles, so that the emotions themselves and the energy of the emotions, have some role to play in a man’s moral life.

Let me illustrate this point of view by telling you Aristotle's theory of the moral virtues. The moral virtues are, according to Aristotle, nothing but good emotional habits. According to Aristotle, the trouble is not with fear; fear is neither good nor bad, but it is fearing the wrong things or fearing them to excess or fearing them at the wrong time and place. A man who is emotionally controlled is a person who still has fear, but fears the right things at the right time to the right amount in the right way. And the person who has fear thus under control is a man who is courageous. It is wrong to think of the courageous man as a man without fear. On the contrary, the courageous man is a man who has fear but under control. He fears the right things and fears them to the right degree and under the right circumstances.


What are the vices here? Cowardice, which is fearing the wrong things or fearing too much or foolhardiness, which is not fearing enough or not being fearful when one should be fearful. And the same thing can be said of another basic virtue, the virtue of temperance, which is a moderation of appetite or lust or desire. And again, the extremes are of not having enough desire or having an excessive desire; these are emotions out of control and therefore vicious, whereas the virtue of temperance is a proper control of appetite or desire.

Now let me say at once that this is not only a view of Aristotle's and an ancient view of the matter; it is a view that a great modern psychologist like Freud also shares, though Freud tends to speak of these things in medical rather than in moral terms. For example, where Aristotle talks about reason and passion or reason and emotion, Freud talks about the *ego* and the *id*. Where Aristotle talks about virtue and vice, Freud talks about health, the healthy person, the integrated personality and the neurotic. But for the most part Freud is saying very much the same thing that I just reported Aristotle as saying. For according to Freud, mental health, having an adult character, comes about by a control of the emotions and not by giving them completely free reign.

I said that Freud used the words *ego* and *id*. What does he mean by *ego*? He says in his own language, "Ego stands for reason and circumspection, and the ego has the task of representing the external world." And by *id*, he means the untamed passions, the source of the instinctual life. Now Freud says quite plainly and I quote him word for word, "It is out of the question that part of the psychoanalytic treatment should consist of the advice to live freely, express yourself, give your emotions free reign." He points out, "That to give vent to all the emotions without regard to the demands of so-

ciety or reality is to revert to infancy.”

Now where the moralists speak of the necessity for regulating or moderating the passions or the emotional desires, Freud has, I think, an even more striking term. He says it is necessary to domesticate the emotions. It is as if the emotions were like a beast that had to be trained or housebroken. Freud’s notion of growing up is a notion of domesticating the passions as one would train a beast to serve the ends of human life.

Now there is one further point here I should like to call your attention to. For Freud, a man acts reasonably when he uses his reason, what Freud would call his reality principle, to control his emotions. There the reason, the rational principle, is in the proper relation to the passions or the emotions. But if a man acts in an infantile fashion, and that means for Freud neurotically, if instead of controlling his emotions by reason, he lets his emotions go their own way and then rationalizes, reason comes in, but by rationalizing, giving an appearance of rationality to his conduct, such rationalization is neurotic and infantile and is not what Freud would mean by the ideal of an adult or reasonable life. 

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We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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