

Review of Roberts, R. Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 357 pp. ISBN 0-521-52584-5 (pbk).

Anyone who has worked in the theory of emotions in the last 15 years will know the fecundity and influence of Robert Roberts' article "What an Emotion Is: a Sketch" (The Philosophical Review 1988, 97, 183-209). And good things come to those who wait, for with his recent book, Roberts fully redeems the promise of that earlier work. He presents a comprehensive development and highly persuasive defence of his theory of emotion in beautifully clear prose.

The book is intended as the first volume of two, and focuses on the analysis of what an emotion is as preparatory ground to a theory of moral psychology to be presented in the second volume. The first chapter presents the most comprehensive defence to date of the coherence of the category 'emotion' and of the methodology of conceptual analysis against the very different attacks by Amélie Rorty and Paul Griffiths. Griffiths claims that only science, in particular evolutionary biology and neuroscience, can tell us what emotions "really are" (What Emotions Really Are (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997)). Roberts argues in reply that only conceptual analysis provides an understanding of emotion at the level of the *person*, and at this level is irreplaceable. It is scientific prejudice to think that an account of emotion based on brain processes or the evolutionary history of the emotion is somehow a 'better' or 'truer' account of the nature of emotions. In fact, Roberts argues, the work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (Descartes' Error (New York: Avon Books, 1994), esp. pp. 131-9) shows that, if anything, preference should be given to conceptual analysis if we are interested in the emotions of human beings. Damasio's account supports the claim that it is impossible to understand the operation of human emotions independent of the meanings

with which they work. An account that takes in meaning is one that works at the level of the person, and conceptual analysis must therefore form the core of an account of (human) emotion. A further defence of conceptual analysis is provided indirectly by the overall success of this methodology in accounting for a variety of emotional and related phenomena.

Chapter 2 is an extended defence of Roberts' claim that emotions are concern-based construals. In the sense he intends it, a 'construal' is akin to perception: "Construals have an immediacy reminiscent of sense perception. They are impressions, ways things appear to the subject; they are experiences and not just judgements or thoughts or beliefs" (p. 75).

Although they are interpretations, the interpretation is built into the experience:

"Experientially... a construal is not an interpretation laid over a neutrally perceived object, but a characterization of the object, a way the *object* presents itself" (p. 80). Gestalt figures – such as the duck/rabbit – present simple examples of construals; one sees the figure as duck or rabbit, in neither case (unless one bends one's will to it) as a neutral arrangement of lines. Construals "involve an 'in terms of' relationship: one thing is perceived in terms of something else. Construals are 'constructive', 'synthetic', and 'organic', bringing together a variety of elements in some kind of integration" (p. 76).

Emotions are distinguished from other construals by being based on concerns (desires, aversions, attachments, interests) the subject has. The construal brings together the concern and the object, so that the perception of the object is in terms of "some kind of importance of worthiness that is lent the object by the concern on which the emotion is based. In emotions, as in sense perception, qualities are attributed to 'the world', qualities that the world may or may not have." (p. 147) For example, fear is the construal of its object as dangerous or threatening. And so "[a]s a concern-based construal the emotion makes two kinds of claims, first about what we might call the *structure* of the situation that the emotion is about [e.g. the possibility of harm], and second about its *importance* or *bearing*" (p. 317). These two claims,

which can often, but not always be, spelled out by propositions, are “inextricably intertwined” (p. 111): “the concern enters into the perception so as to characterize the appearance of the object” (p. 80).

Roberts defends his theory against its rivals, discussing with insight and subtlety the place in the analysis of emotion of judgments, propositions, causes, bodily states, and actions. He concludes that “Construals may seem to some to be cognitions, in some sense, even if they are not judgments, do not constitute knowledge, are not conscious states, and lack a propositional character... But the construals that I take to be paradigm cases of emotions are concern-based... So an emotion, in my view, is fully as ‘conative’ as it is ‘cognitive’, and these two aspects (if one wants to think of the matter this way) are fully synthesized in the emotion.” (p. 178)

Roberts presents his account as a ‘general schema’ for the analysis of emotions, one which various phenomena may fit more or less well. Chapter 3 is an extended examination of types of emotion, which seeks not just to defend the accuracy of the schema, but also to understand where and how different types of emotion diverge from it. Roberts is sensitive to the diversity of emotion types cross-culturally, and seeks to steer a path between the Scylla of reductionism, which claims that all emotions are compounds of a few basic ones, and the Charybdis of relativism, which claims that different cultural meanings undermine any commonality between emotion types cross-culturally. The chapter is a fascinating and informed discussion that demonstrates the prospects and limits of systematizing emotions.

The final chapter is an analysis of what it is to feel an emotion. As concern-based construal, emotion is not logically connected to consciousness, and so there can be, and are, emotions that we have but do not feel, i.e. ways we construe the world in relation to our concerns, but of which we are unaware. To feel an emotion is an “immediate and quasi-perceptual grasp of oneself as in a certain emotional state” (p. 318); i.e. it is to construe

oneself as performing or undergoing a particular concern-based construal (pp. 319-20). As such “feelings of emotions can be true or false representations of the emotions they are of” (p. 317). When true, they are an important form of self-knowledge. Such awareness of oneself comes in degrees, both of extent and accuracy, and is influenced by the one’s motives to have or deny having particular emotions. Despite this separation of emotion and feeling, Roberts argues that “because emotions are self-involving in being based on some concern of the subject, conscious of the object of the emotion powerfully *predisposes* the subject to be conscious of himself as in the emotional state” (p. 320), and that “when one *does* feel an emotion, the feeling and the emotion are two aspects of one mental state, rather than two separate ones.” (p. 322)

There are two aspects of Roberts’ theory that I feel he has presented less than clearly, and to which cogent objections may still be raised. The first relates to the place of feeling in emotion. The term ‘feeling’ has verb (to feel an emotion) and noun senses (the feeling – or affect – of an emotion). Roberts is quite right to distinguish having an emotion from feeling it. Our emotional engagement with the world does not entail our reflective awareness of the nature of this engagement (see Goldie, P. The Emotions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 63-70). But Roberts is unclear on how ‘to feel’ relates to ‘feeling’ (affect). He describes the affect of an emotion as its ‘mood’, and says that “an important part of the ‘feel’ of an emotion is its mood” (p. 114). But first, when one undergoes an emotion that one does not feel, is there nevertheless ‘something it is like’, some affect, attached to the experience? Or does an emotion have a mood only when we feel the emotion in Roberts’ sense? Second, the idea of degrees of awareness of an emotion is difficult to understand in terms of construal, for how does one construe oneself to a certain degree as undergoing an emotion? A vague feeling of an emotion one wants to suppress is not equivalent to a fully conscious construal with a vague content. It is rather that this construal, of oneself as undergoing an emotion, is

not fully conscious either. But if so, the link between feeling an emotion in Roberts' sense and consciousness of self is broken. Roberts' attempt to collapse the presence of an emotion in consciousness into a construal of the self makes unclear an important category of 'feeling', viz. the phenomenology of an experience of emotion that one does not reflectively construe oneself as undergoing at the time, but can later recall.

Roberts is also unclear on the exact place of propositions in the intentional content of an emotion. "For many human emotions, a propositional expression of the character of the construal is compelling" (p. 109), but he concludes that construals "lack a propositional character" (p. 178). They need not be present in the subject's mind in a propositional or linguistic form (p. 110), and "the construal constitutive of many emotions is determined in part nonpropositionally" (p. 117).

So how do the propositional and nonpropositional aspects of the intentional content of the construal combine? And what form of representation does an emotion that a subject cannot articulate take? Roberts' arguments for the propositional nature of human emotion actually turn out to be arguments for its conceptual nature (pp. 110-1), for even inarticulate or primitive emotions have a structure that displays the object, grounds, and concern, either inherent in the emotional experience itself (as in adult emotion) or articulable in terms of concepts (for infants and animals). Questions about the nature of emotional content are similar to those regarding the nature of perceptual content, which similarly appears to combine conceptual and non-conceptual elements. This analogy is highly sympathetic to Roberts' analysis of emotion as concern-based construal, but the work developing the analogy into a comprehensive theory of the nature of emotional representation is still to be done.

The clarity, subtlety, breadth, and depth of Roberts' book are richly rewarding and make it essential reading. It is no exaggeration to say that it is a milestone in the development of the philosophical analysis of emotions.

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