

IS EMOTIONISM A THREAT TO MORAL PHILOSOPHY?

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1. Introduction

The idea that emotions and sentiments play a necessary role in morality -for making moral judgments and/or for the development of moral conscience- has grown over the last two decades, which leads us to face some metaethical problems traditionally connected to the introduction of the emotional domain in moral philosophy. My aim is therefore to argue that the acceptance of emotionism, even if it also implies the acceptance of positions such as relativism, does not have to entail a threat to moral argumentation. That is, the idea that the acceptance of (1) and (2) does neither necessarily entail a threat to morality nor to normativity.

On the contrary, I will argue that the emotional basis of morality can be seen as an advantage or a key in order to go beyond moral disagreements. Since the emotional dimension is in the core of moral agency, a better knowledge of our emotional background as well as the development of our emotional skills can be an appealing way to connect unconnected moral frameworks. In this sense, the idea of moral damage will play a central role in the argumentation that I will develop.

2. Emotionism

The two starting theses of this paper are:

- (1) Emotions and sentiment are necessary for making moral judgments; and
- (2) Emotions and sentiment are necessary for the development of moral conscience.

In relation to them, it is worthy to make clear that they should not be understood in a linguistic sense, since they are not theses about the meaning of moral expressions, but as theses concerned about the constitution of morality. In other words, the premises

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from which the argumentation will be settled are premises about how we come to be moral agents, about the conditions *sine qua non* of moral agency. Hence, the role of emotions and sentiments defended in these theses should not be interpreted in the sense that moral judgments are expressions of our emotions, but as a necessary condition in order to be able to make moral judgments, independently of the meaning of moral judgments.

As a result of it, the initial position of this paper can be identified with the sensibilities theories and, concretely, with emotionism, rather than emotivism.

Thus, the two main theses affirm that without an emotional system moral agency would be impossible, for we would not be able to make moral judgments, and we would lack moral sense.

Secondly, these theses are referred not only to emotions, but in a wide sense, to what can be called the emotional domain, or the emotional system, which would include not only concrete emotions, but sentiments. In the same line, (1) and (2) do not imply that a concrete emotion, namely, fear, surprise, joy, etc., has to be involved in each and every judgment, but that moral judgments could not be made if we were not provided with an emotional dimension, that is, if we were only pure rational animals. In Prinz's words, "moral properties would not exist without emotions" (Prinz, 2007, 13).

In this sense, one of the obvious conclusions derivable from these premises and the current evidence in favor of them is that the moral discourse is not absolutely rational, for the emotional component is essential to it.

Finally, it is also important to make clear that for the aims of the project (1) and (2) can be accepted together or separately. Thus, someone could defend (1) or (2), or (1) and (2). In any case, the combination of these two hypotheses will not affect the line of argumentation, firstly, because the two of them are concerned about the constitute elements of morality, and secondly, because they are somehow co-implicative: if the emotional domain is necessary for making moral judgments, then it is also necessary for developing moral sense, since being able to make moral judgments means that your moral sense has been developed, and vice versa, if someone accepts that the emotional domain is necessary to develop moral sense, then, she probably would have to admit (1), since (1) is a concretion of the most general premise (2).

Needless to say that it is only defended here that the emotional domain is necessary but nothing is said with respect to the idea of sufficiency. In fact, some positions may maintain that emotions and sentiments are necessary and sufficient in order to make moral judgments and develop moral skills. However, this thesis is much more controvertible than the chosen ones. A relevant number of evidence in favor of the thesis (1) and (2) can be given², whilst the thesis that defenses necessity and sufficiency is not so widely accepted. As a result of it, given that the aim of the paper is to start by a minimum agreement from the different theories developed in the last decade about emotions and morality that confer a constitutive role to them, and given that the role of reason has not to be necessarily denied, the initial theses do not defend that the emotional component is the only constitutive component of morality. Hence, neither reason, nor emotions would be sufficient by themselves to develop moral conscience and make moral judgments.

3. The connection between emotionism and relativism

Emotionism can be seen as a risky position for morality and concretely for normativity. In fact, the inclusion of the emotional domain in the nature of morality can be interpreted as a threat to moral autonomy in relation to moral agency and responsibility in the process of making decisions. With respect to the nature of moral judgments and values, emotionism can be seen as threat to normativity, especially if it is thought as necessary connected to subjectivism and relativism. However, at this point it is important to make clear some aspects.

² See Damasio, Antonio (2005): *En busca de Spinoza. Neurobiología de la emoción y los sentimientos*, Barcelona, Drakontos; Damasio, Antonio, (2006): *El error de Descartes. La emoción, la razón y el cerebro humano*, Barcelona, Drakontos; Greene, Joshua, (2004): "The neural bases of cognitive conflict and control in moral judgment" in *Neuron*, 44: 389–400; Greene, Joshua & Haidt, Jonathan, (2002), "How (and where) does moral judgment work?" in *TRENDS in Cognitive Sciences*, 16 (12): 517-523; LeDoux, Joseph (1999): *El cerebro emocional*, Barcelona, Ariel/ Planeta; Manstead, Antony; Fischer, Agneta y Fridja, Nico, 2004. *Feeling and emotions. The Amsterdam symposium* (eds.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Prinz, Jesse J.(2006): "The emotional basis of moral judgements" in *Philosophical explorations*, 9 (1), pp. 29-43; Prinz, Jesse J. (2010): "The moral emotions" in P. Goldie, *The Oxford handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.519-238; Nichols, Shaun, (2004), *Sentimental rules. On the natural foundations of moral judgement*, Oxford, Oxford University Press; Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter, (2008), *Moral Psychology. The neuroscience of morality: Emotion, brain disorders, and development* (ed.), The MIT Press, Cambridge.

Firstly, the relation between emotionism and relativism does not have to be interpreted as a co-implicative one. The fact that emotionism can lead to relativism does not mean that all kind of relativisms are achieved or maintained through an emotinist basis. In fact, one might come to defend relativism for other reasons. However, this would not be remarkable for the aim of this paper, but I will focus on the link from emotionism to relativism, since I am interested in this position as long as it can be connected to emotionism.

Secondly, I will not address the question of whether relativism is true or false, weak or refutable itself. Given its impact and relevant in moral philosophy, given its possible connection to emotionism, and given the fact that some people might refrain to accept emotionism for its connection to relativism, I consider relevant to take into consideration the challenges that it may entail in relation to emotionism. In this sense, I will argue that the acceptance of emotionism, and even its most risky consequences, such as relativism, does not have to imply pessimistic results for normativity as one could think at first sight, especially if one defends an absolutistic account of morality.

Thirdly, the election of relativism as one of the most representative risks for moral philosophy connected to emotionism is due to the fact that it can exemplify two different positions resulting from the introduction of the emotional domain in morality. Once it is accepted that the emotional domain is necessary for moral judgments, then one can conclude that moral judgments are essentially subjective and, therefore, one could defend that the truth of moral terms is not absolute, but relative to some reference framework, i.e. culture, social context, or even personal backgrounds.

Relativism can therefore be linked to a risk to normativity since it questions an absolute or universal sense of moral knowledge. This can be seen as a risk because, as Harman points out, “if we decide a dispute is not rationally resolvable in this way, we will stop trying to resolve it, and, if we are wrong and the dispute could have been rationally resolvable, e.g., through the consideration of more evidence, we will have missed an opportunity to resolve it” (Harman, 1996, 20).

Finally, it is important to clarify that the line of argumentation that I will follow will be the one that assumes that emotionism and relativism can be linked. Another possibility to surpass the normativity challenges of relativism would be the denial of its link to emotionism. However, that line of argumentation would not face the problem by

denying the link. Therefore, the interesting point of this paper is to argue that even if relativism is taken to be true and even if it is necessarily linked to emotionism, this does not mean that the introduction of the emotional domain in morality leads to either a self-destructive position or the denial of normativity.

4. Moral Relativism

Moral relativism can be defined as the position that defends that moral argumentation and justification is relative to a group, a context, a culture or a society. It is commonly based on an empirical statement, that is, that morality varies across cultures, groups and individuals, what explains the moral disagreements. Given that the truth of moral judgments is relative to some context, relativism leads to the paradoxical claim that something can be simultaneously right and wrong. As Harman states, “a given act can be right with respect to one system of moral coordinates and wrong with respect to another system of moral coordinates” (Harman, 1996, 13).

For the purpose of this argumentation I will take the two main theses of relativism as true, since if they were denied the threat to normativity would be diminished. In this sense, I will accept the descriptive version of relativism and the metaethical one. The first version points out the moral diversity and disagreements across cultures, and even between members of the same context.

The metaethical thesis can be seen as a consequence of the empirical one and would defend that the disagreements are rationally unsolvable since we cannot find a universal or absolute normative criteria in order to discern who is right or wrong.

In this sense, the metaethical thesis is not a thesis about what the subject thinks about her moral judgments and values, since they are self-affirming and a moral agent will always see her values as if they were true. On the contrary, it is a thesis about the nature and roots of moral terms and moral disagreements.

As a result of it, moral right and wrong are relative to a moral framework or to different moral sensibilities which imply different set of values, relevant beings and criteria. For this reason the standards of justification in different groups, cultures, or societies may

deeply differ, so that they can be seen as moral universes where no one “is objectively privileged as the one true morality” (Harman, 1996, 3).

Given the emotional and subjective base of moral concepts, the metaethical relativism can lead us to conclude that the disagreements cannot be rationally solvable, since it seems that there is no way of showing that the values of one culture are better than those of another one, for the disagreements do not have a logical or empirical base, but an affective one, given the fact that the disagreement are rooted in what is taken as relevant in each framework.

5. Some possible lines of argumentation

With respect to moral relativism, and once that it has been admitted that the descriptive disagreement is a reflection of a deeper disagreement, that is, a disagreement about moral standards, three positions can be maintained.

Firstly, one might say that the disagreements can rationally be solved, or that there is no such disagreement, since in fact it can be rationally solved. However, this position is doubtful since the disagreements are not only bases on rational problems, logical errors, or empirical data that haven't been taken into account, but on different moral standards and criteria concerning what morally relevant is, what indifferent is to us, or what we mean by moral damage, so that the disagreement about judgments is based on disagreements concerning moral sensibilities. Even in cases where two subjects from the same culture or society disagree, i.e. in discussion about hard cases as abortion, the disagreement is based on what each subject considers morally relevant and what not, which is not a rational or logical issue.

Secondly one might maintain that the discrepancies are not rationally solvable, given its subjective nature, since there is no rational way of showing that the values of one position are better than those of another. This position entails the common fears associate to relativism, such as that everything goes or that we should tolerate everything, as well as it seems that it leads to give up any try to overcome differences. As Harman points out, “if we decide a dispute is not rationally resolvable in this way, we will stop trying to resolve it” (1996, 20).

The principle of tolerance could be seen as a solution, however, it can also be problematic since it does not seem to solve the disagreement, but it is rather a reaction to it. In fact, moral relativism is normally associated with this normative position that defends that we ought not to try to change or convince subjects from another moral framework since that would be acting as if our framework were the privileged one. Nevertheless, this position is paradoxical. On the one hand, it demands not to interfere in other frameworks, but, on the other hand, it claims that we should only interfere if we could justify that something unjustifiable is done from those frameworks, but that is exactly the root of disagreement: what we consider justifiable and acceptable is what makes each framework different.

In other words, accepting that one thing and the contrary can be both correct when it is about esthetical judgments can be tolerable, for it does not entail vital consequences, but evaluating whether torturing a baby is right or wrong is crucial, for in moral judgments there is much more at stake. At the same time, if you decide what to tolerate, where the limit is, and when you should interfere, then you are already deciding what criteria are right, which seems to hide an absolutist position.

Thirdly, and this is the position I will defend, one might maintain that the discrepancies are not rationally resolvable since there is no rational basis for them, but emotionally resolvable, or at least diminishable. That is, there is no rational basis, but an emotional one for the moral disagreements. In this sense, the line of argumentation in order to overcome disagreements does not have to be focused on the logical or rational validity of the arguments, but on that element that causes the different evaluations, which has an emotional basis. Since the disagreements are a consequence of different limits and standards of sensibilities, we can find the emotional discrepancies in order to diminish the distance between contrary positions.

Moral concepts such as right and wrong depend on the idea of damage and moral status, which are concepts emotionally constructed. As a result of it, it seems sensible to try to find a way to diminish moral discrepancies through emotional means.

Someone might say that in following this line of argumentation there is a risk of creating an empty idea of damage, or a universal principle lacking any concrete content.

In fact, the content of these concepts depends on the moral framework from which they are shaped. As Harman points out: “ any universally accepted principle in this area must verge on triviality, saying, for example, that one must not kill or harm members of a certain group, namely the group of people one must not kill or harm!” (Harman, 1996, 9). However, the problem is not only that some group might question why life is morally relevant, for instance, but that even if we could agree in that point, whose life should be protected is unclear. Thus the problem arises every time we try to identify the general content of damage without choosing one framework as a privileged one. As a result of it, the solution will not only come from what damage is, but from who relevant is.

Some authors have focused on the idea of what can be generally accepted as good, as Bok (2002), and suggest that the basic general necessities can be found in order to develop and flourish as human beings. However, I think the solution must be focused on whose damage is morally relevant, since this is the essential root of moral discrepancies. Besides, it is easy to see what we could all need to survive, but how to concrete these needs is problematic. In any case, whose necessities are we going to take into consideration is more important than what the content of a shared idea of good would be. We may all agree that torture, cruelty, and violence are morally refutable, but whether an act comes to be so defined depends on how we evaluate the being who is receiving that action.

In this sense, the strategy can follow two paths. One would focus on achieving a minimum shared idea on what beings deserve moral consideration. The second one would focus on the improvement of our skills to surpass indifference so that we could be more flexible and open in order to take into account those beings that at first sight we would have considered morally irrelevant from our moral framework.

Thus, if one follows the first line of argumentation, we may not be able to know whether a position is correct, true or false compared to the other one, but we could know which one would let a bigger amount of relevant beings unprotected, or which one would produce unhappiness to the biggest amount of beings, if we defend a consequentialist position, so that if we defended a too narrow moral framework, where moral beings were excluded, we could be motivated to abandon it. We cannot say what framework is better but we can say which one the narrowest one is, and this is already

important. An excess with respect to who are relevant, that is, a too wide sensibility, can only entail the risk of protecting too many beings or not to motivate subjects in doing something positive, since this kind of framework could be overwhelming. However, an excess in this sense would not imply causing moral damage to some beings, whereas a too narrow sensibility can imply irreversible damage to beings that have been left outside of the circle of moral relevance, even though they could be proven to be moral subjects as it occurs in positions such as androcentrism, chauvinism, or xenophobia.

In the same line, a way of guaranteeing that a change in our sensibility is an improvement and not an involution would be to check if damage and abuses are diminished from that moral position that we would be questioning. Thus, the initial symmetry between points of view could be solved if we test them by checking the potential abuses or damage that these views could involve.

Indeed, in relation to tolerance and if we come to a minimum agreement about the moral relevance of all moral subjects- independently of their circumstances-, we can point out as unacceptable cases where the right *to* have (and abandon) a culture becomes the right *of* a culture. Thus, we can condemn cases where someone or some group tries to oblige another one to do something against her will or impose his own moral values to another one, not just because this group would be acting as if their moral view were universal and the good one, but because in doing so, they would be disrespecting some other beings that are considered moral relevant subjects.

In other words, someone may maintain, with Prinz, that “when it comes to grounding norms, rational debate is impossible. If two people have different grounding norms, they must resort to other means of persuasion” (Prinz, 2007, 125), but the fact that we all see by definition that damage and abuse is wrong provides us with a minimum idea of good that we all share, which could be useful to build some minimum agreements, so that the solution to the problem of “everything goes” would have an emotional basis, whose content we will not be able to recognize without an emotional system. In the same line, a way of guaranteeing that a change in our sensibility is an improvement and not an involution would be to check if damage and abuses are diminished from that moral position that we would be questioning.

Thus, the initial symmetry between points of view can be solved if we test them seeing the abuses or damage that the defense of A or B could involve. As a result, one could

say that torturing babies is morally acceptable because they will not remember; they have not yet developed their moral sense, etc. However, if we accept that damage - which implies physical and/or psychological suffering-, and abuse is morally wrong, and I think every moral agent could agree with it, then this action should be condemned as morally wrong. At this point it is important for the defense of emotionism to bear in mind that we are able to agree about the general principle that damage and abuse is morally wrong thanks to our moral sense and therefore thanks to our emotional system that allows us to make the exercise of imagining how would it be to live those situations so that we could see that we would not like to suffer any of those as well as it allows us to see that there would be no end that could justify the use of those means.

For that reason, the fact that we all judge damage, abuse and cruelty as morally wrong is not just an intersubjective agreement that we have achieved after a rational debate - which we could abandon if we found new reasons- but the keystone to moral evaluations, so that the fact that we all link damage to wrongness, as well as being able to understand what damage is, depends on our emotional dimension.

In relation to the second line of argumentation, this one would try to improve our skills and dispositions to take someone else into account, to surpass indifference and to self-criticism, since if you are not motivated to make a change in your moral framework, if your motivational set is not permeable, or if you do not feel motivated to internalize that minimum agreement, then it is pointless to make an effort in finding some sharable minimum idea of good, damage, or moral relevance.

In other words, even though we could find a universal idea of what is good or who is relevant, it is unlike that we all come to internalize it, since this would mean giving up our previous framework, which is deeply interiorized. For this reason the last type of solutions or ways of overcoming the disagreement that I would like to suggest are focused on the improvement of our ability to question the emotional basis of our framework and our standards, as well as on the ability to improve our flexibility and permeability to internalize different values if we come to the conclusion that we should do it.

Therefore, the idea is that, although something may not be morally relevant for us, if we improve our emotional skills, we can imagine that from another moral framework it

could be so. As a result of it, through an exercise of imagination and empathy we could come to self-criticism, as well as we could be opener to discuss and change.

In other words, if we improve our emotional skill we may be open to do an exercise of empathy for beings that would previously be out of our circle of relevance. Otherwise, if we do not train our flexibility in this area, we would probably reject any kind of conversation with beings from another framework or at least the understanding with them would be really difficult to achieve. For instance, if we defend an anthropocentric view while discussing about animal rights with someone from a pathocentric view, we would probably reject the only idea of trying to empathize with the animals involved, for we would consider them morally irrelevant.

To sum up, the central aim of this line of argumentation is to make others' point of view not indifference to us. "Moral judgments are anything but indifferent" (Prinz, 2007, 13). Therefore, in order to make things count as moral evidences for people from other moral frameworks, one has to make them see that facts and beings that were indifferent for them can and maybe should be relevant.

6. Emotional education

Given the fact that there are deep moral disagreements, that they have an emotional basis and that "cultures, subcultures, fragments of cultures constantly meet one another and exchange and modify practices and attitudes" (Williams, 158, 1985) it is praiseworthy that we are provided with the best tools to manage and face these moral challenges. In this sense, the improvement, not only of our rational or cognitive skills, but of our emotional ones can be decisive.

Thus, given that to say that someone has moral standing or that he deserves respect means to be concerned about him, and given that this is an affective issue, emotional education seems to be the practical key to change, broaden and improve our moral sensibility.

Once we have learnt that emotions and sentiments are crucial to morality, we could and should develop our ability to adjust and tune our emotional capacities the best way possible, since the better knowledge we have about our emotional dimension, the better

we will know ourselves as moral agents; the better we could do an exercise of self-criticism about our values, prejudices, beliefs, desires and reactions; the better we would know the assumptions of our own moral framework and the better prepared we would be to make an exercise of imagination – which is necessary to put ourselves in someone else’s situation-, so that our skills to think about concrete moral dilemmas could be highly improved. A training of our emotional skills, hence, can become a good tool to reshape our emotional background and our motivational set.

Since emotional education (Berrocal & Ramos, 2005; Cabezas, 2009) implies the development of our own abilities (a) to recognize and identify our emotional reactions when they occur, (b) to recognize other people’s emotional reactions and expressions, and (c) to regulate and manage them, an emotional education can become a moral education. This can be useful in order to face our own moral prejudices, to identify the limits and deficits of our moral outlook. Although values are self-affirming, we are able to analyze the emotional core of them and see what is behind them, so that the acceptance of emotionism is not an obstacle to normativity but a way to surpass moral disagreements, as well as it can become a condition to eventual improvement, since it allows flexibility.

Secondly, improving our skill in recognizing other people’s emotional attitudes opens a gate to communication, intersubjectivity and sociability, which can facilitate the understanding between agents from different moral universes. Thus, the improvement of this second emotional skill could be useful in our ability to recognize and be concerned about somebody else’s moral damage. As Foot points out, “much depends on experience and imagination” (Foot, 1978a, 109). However, this does not mean that empathy is necessary in order to be a moral agent or to develop moral sense, but that empathy is a useful tool in order to surpass indifference as well as to understand someone else’s moral framework.

At this point it is relevant to indicate that some coldness and indifference toward discriminated beings are commonly based on a suppression of emotions, so that the emotional component of morality would not be the cause of irrationality as it could be assumed. On the contrary, the improvement of our knowledge about the emotional component can be a good tool to question our own set of values. As Dawes states in relation to the declarations of Nazi officers, “instead of indicating that they have been

overcome by their emotions, the defendants generally indicated that they had suppressed their emotions to pursue what they believed on “rational” bases to be policies that benefited their country and the world” (Dawes, 2001,36).

Thirdly, through the information taken from our emotions, we could regulate and manage our emotional and moral reactions, so that we could better know what our conditions, beliefs, aims and values are and, as a result, we could finally improve our ability in moral decision making.

Finally, an emotional education could make us internalize that, although we may never reach an agreement about the moral status of some beings, this does not imply that they should be unprotected, or that a violent treat towards them is justified. Therefore emotional education seems to be a perfect way to unlock some communication between contrary moral outlooks as well as to improve everyone’s moral sensibilities against indifference.

7. References

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