

Finding ourselves in the world: emotion, orientation, place

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ABSTRACT: Emotion is central to the life of the subject, but emotion is no mere modification of subjectivity taken on its own. Rather emotion is an essential part of the structure that opens up the subject to the objective and to the world. In phenomenological terms, emotion is essentially disclosive of the world. Yet in being so, emotion is also tied to the felt bodily locatedness – the ‘being-placed’ – of the subject. Emotion thus belongs not to phenomenology alone, but to the essential *topology* of the human, and as part of that topology, emotion belongs to the externality of things no less than to the internality of the self. On this basis, we can better understand the relation of emotion to the materiality of human life (the material is always ‘felt’ and the ‘felt’ is always materialised), as well as the character of emotion as itself a mode of orientation – a finding of oneself as in the world in a certain way. Only in this latter fashion, in fact, can one find oneself in the world at all.

I. What is the role of emotions in ethical decision-making? Recent discussion of the role of intuitions in ethics, particularly as undertaken in Peter Singer’s work,¹ centres on the idea that intuitions are essentially driven by emotional responses that Singer argues are poor guides to the moral decisions at issue [SLIDE-A]. In a slightly different context, but to a similar conclusion, Paul Bloom has argued [SLIDE-B] against the role of empathy in ethical thinking. Here too, the emotional content of empathic responses often misleads us, according to Bloom, giving rise, once again, to poor ethical judgment.² In general, emotion is frequently taken not only to be a poor guide to ethical conduct, but to be subversive of genuine ethical conduct – the latter being more properly based in a purely rational and ‘objective’ assessment of decision and action.

Such views exemplify a commonplace tendency, seldom explicitly formulated, to treat reason and emotion as distinct and often opposed elements in human life and experience. This is an especially powerful idea within much ethical thinking, especially the sort of consequentialist and utilitarian approach to which thinkers like Singer and Bloom are committed. Similar views are commonplace, not just in ethics, but in many different areas of philosophy (especially English language thought).³ And this view is present outside of philosophy as well. Indeed, across many different domains and areas of human activity, there is an increasing focus on the primacy of what are often represented as purely ‘rational’ modes of engagement – whether we look to algorithmic decision-making, more generalised forms of artificial intelligence, many forms of economic thinking

(especially those that privilege the 'market'), or even some of what is termed 'evidence-based decision making' there is a widespread assumption, not only that reason and emotion are distinct such that reason can operate independently of emotion, but that our primary engagement with the world ought to be, even if it not always is, by means of reason alone, and that the primary mechanisms that should order our lives ought to stand apart from any emotional dispositions or tendencies. Reason, on this account, is itself narrowed down, so that the model for our mode of engagement with things often becomes like that depicted in Blake's image of Newton as geometer [SLIDE] – a mode of engagement based in the numerical and the quantitative.

II. To a large extent the separation of reason from emotion, and even the idea of emotion itself (the term only coming into English in the mid-sixteenth century), is something modern. In Plato, for instance, where one also finds a distinction between different parts of the soul or *psyche*, the contrast is between the appetites (*epithumia*) [SLIDE], spiritedness (*thymos*) and intellect or rational insight (*nous*). To carry this directly to the modern contrast between reason and emotion is significantly to simplify and thereby also obscure the nature of the Platonic account (similar divisions that do not map directly onto modern notions can also be found in Aristotle). Given their modern origins, it thus not surprising to find the neuro-psychologist Antonio Damasio referring to reason's prioritization over and separation from emotion as "Descartes' error" [SLIDE] – thereby also identifying this view with the sixteenth century philosopher René Descartes. Regardless of the historical accuracy of Damasio's invocation of Descartes here, this idea of the prioritization and separation of reason in relation to emotion, even though it has earlier (if sometimes arguable) precedents and is sometimes contested by movements within modernity such as Romanticism, is indeed characteristic of modernity and is itself closely tied to modernity's own progressivist agenda. The betterment of human being is thus typically associated with the escape from our emotional attachments and constraints through the liberating power of reason alone – our engagement with the world being like that of a purely abstracted intelligence.

There is, of course, considerable ambiguity around the idea of 'emotion' that is at issue here. Not only is this suggested by the example of the rather different division of the soul to be found in Plato, but it also a point that becomes evident when we ask whether, for instance, curiosity or surprise are to be counted as emotions. Whether they are or not, and how we differentiate emotions from simple attitudes, from moods, appetites, affects, or passions are perhaps best treated as questions to which there are no absolute and determinate answers [SLIDE]. The history of emotions itself shows that the way in which emotions are classified, and even what is taken to be an emotion, is not fixed, but changes with other social and cultural circumstances. This does not mean

that emotions are themselves somehow arbitrary or completely determined by convention, such that there is no underlying truth to our emotions and the judgments we make about them, but rather that the reality of emotional life is such as to support many different understandings and interpretations of it. Our emotional lives, like our lives generally, form complex landscapes that always allow of many different descriptions and depictions that are no less true for the fact that they are many.

Precisely because of the breadth as well as the indeterminacy that seems to attach to emotions and emotional life, 'emotion' will be employed in this discussion in a wide rather than narrow sense – which means that it will be used in a way that does indeed include affects, moods, passions, and the full range of felt states and attitudes by which, as the term 'emotion' itself implies, we are *moved*. That idea of 'movement' (or agitation or excitation which the etymology of 'emotion' also suggests [SLIDE] – the term comes, *via* the French, from the Latin *emovere*, meaning 'to move out from') is an important one, and I will come back to it – for it brings with it the idea of emotions as indeed what give force and direction to our lives.

Such an idea seems to stand in sharp contrast, however, to those approaches that seem to underlie the work of thinkers like Singer and Bloom and that argue that it is both possible and preferable to live one's life in a way given over to reason alone – to live in a way that sets emotion to one side. So deep-seated is this idea of the primacy of reason that it can be hard even to make plausible the suggestion that it might be erroneous. Yet like Damascio, I think it surely is erroneous, and it is the nature of the error, as well as an alternative way of thinking, that I want to explore here. What I want to suggest is that not only, as Hume declared, that reason is the slave to the passions, but that our very access to the world is possible only on the basis of our prior emotional engagement with things, and that reason is essentially secondary to this, if, indeed, we can even think of it as apart from it.

III. One of the problems with a purely 'rational' approach to the world – even were such a thing possible – is that it offers no indication of how we should engage with things or even what it might be with which we should engage. Understood in the manner in which it is set against emotion, reason is not *substantive*, but almost entirely *formal*. This is one way of understanding Hume's point – a point that underlies Hume's claim concerning reason as slave of the passions [SLIDE]– that *reason has no motivating power*. It is thus that it must serve that which does motivate, namely the passions, and it does so by, among other things, enabling the identification of the means to those ends towards which we are indeed motivated. But in doing this it concerns only the relations between ends and means, and between different objects, as those ends and objects are already

picked out in certain ways by what Hume referred to as the passions, that is to say, by our own prior emotional stances towards the world.

In this respect, part of the problem with a purely rational approach to the world is that it does not in itself offer any means by which the self can attach to things. It removes us from the source of that which motivates and engages us, and it does this precisely because of such an approach always involves a form of abstract – it removes us, in other words, from the concreteness of our situation. It is this, I would argue, that underlies the commonplace assumption that associates the attitude of pure rationality with a tendency towards indifference or even boredom. If we really were to take the form of a purely rational mode of being-in-the-world, we would also, by that very fact, be removed both from objects and from ourselves, having nothing to motivate us towards objects nor even in relation to ourselves. Put simply, we would not *care* about anything and as such would have no interest in anything either. In this respect, it is not only that reason does not motivate, as Hume argues, but that reason, as traditionally conceived, does not *orient* either.

When we first encounter things, it is typically not in some abstract or neutral fashion, but instead we find ourselves in the world in ways that already position or place us in relation to things in certain ways. In the most general sense, we may say that we always find ourselves in the world in a way shaped by prior cares and concerns. Sometimes those prior cares and concerns are themselves directly shaped by powerfully felt emotions, but they are also shaped by more moderate feelings or complexes of feeling that we may not even notice such that we separate them out as distinct feelings. In those everyday cases, our engagement derives from more long-standing and settled emotional attachments and dispositions that provide the basic frame within which our actions and decision are situated. Emotion orients in a way that reason does not.

Orientation, moreover, always involves the body – not merely because it relates to action and bodily affect, but also because orientation depends on differentiation in oneself that can be related to differentiation in the surrounding world [SLIDE]. This is a point famously made by Kant, but one can readily see it for oneself once one reflects on the way one's acquaintance with the different parts of a space are intimately tied to the way those parts of space relate to the different parts of one's body – as the space before, behind, above and below, to the right and to the left are grasped through one's grasp of the different sides of one's body – front and back, top and bottom, left and right. Without differentiation in one's body one would be unable to grasp differentiation in space, in much the same way that a map is meaningless and useless unless it can be related back to one's own bodily position. The orientational character of emotion together with the bodily character of orientation means that emotion must itself be closely connected with bodily states and dispositions. This does not entail, however, that emotion is therefore non-cognitive in character.

This is not only because the contrast between the cognitive and the bodily involves a false dichotomy, but also because the orientational character of emotion already brings cognitive content with it (even if it is not always exhaustively characterised in any simple propositional specification). One might characterise emotion as just the felt aspect of our bodily and cognitive orientation in and towards the world. Emotion is the felt experience of finding oneself in the world – something echoed in one of the German terms sometimes used to refer to mood or emotional attitude (a term often awkwardly translated into English as ‘state of mind’), namely, *Befindlichkeit* – ‘how one finds oneself’ [SLIDE].

Within that branch of philosophy known as phenomenology (summarily characterised as the philosophical inquiry into the structure that allows things to appear), this aspect of emotion, and especially of mood, as enabling and shaping our basic engagement with the world is often put by saying that emotions or moods are *disclosive* of the world. Emotions or moods provide the means by and through which the world, and the things in it show themselves. In this respect, emotion can indeed be understood as that which moves us in and towards the world in certain specific ways such that aspects of the world stand out for us and so give direction to what we think, decide, and do. This idea of emotions as ‘disclosive’ is often associated most closely with the work of the philosopher Martin Heidegger, although Heidegger tends to focus more specifically on moods, notably anxiety and boredom, but also wonder (it is Heidegger who notably employs term *Befindlichkeit* in this context) [SLIDE]. This phenomenological way of understanding the emotions is not, however, restricted to Heidegger alone. It is taken up in a quite explicit way in the work of Otto Bollnow [SLIDE], and it is also present, even if it is often left implicit, in the work of [SLIDE] Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Bachelard, and many others. Part of what draws these thinkers together is indeed a commitment to the idea that our primary engagement with the world is not that which belongs with a merely ‘rational’ attitude to things (as this is usually understood) but is instead an engagement that belongs with affect and disposition.

IV. The sorts of claims about the role and character of the emotions that appear in the work of phenomenologists like Heidegger are *ontological* in character. And what this means is that those claims concern some of the most basic and necessary structures by means of which human being is in the world. Heidegger thus says that here [SLIDE] “it is not a matter for psychology, nor even for a psychology undergirded by physiology and biology. It is a matter of the basic modes that constitute Dasein, a matter of the ways man confronts the Da, the openness and concealment of beings, in which he stands”.⁴ What is at issue is the most basic way in which we encounter the world - in which we are *placed* in the world. One thus cannot be ‘in’ the world, responding and acting in relation to

things, without also being emotionally engaged with the world. Consequently, if we are to understand ourselves as genuinely acting in and responding to the world, then we cannot take ourselves as emotionally inert. On this basis, emotions cannot be construed as contingent properties, capacities, or affects that belong to subjects *in addition to* their other capacities as acting and responding beings. Instead emotion refers us to a basic feature of subjectivity, namely, to the way subjectivity is always *oriented* in relation to its environment and the objects around it. We might say that it is precisely this orientation that, as it is also felt, is experienced *as emotion*. What emotion is, at least in terms of the experience of emotion, is just such felt *orientation* (or even, in some cases, of *disorientation*).

The sort of ontological approach that can be found in phenomenological investigations of these matters is quite distinct from the more empirical type of inquiry that appears in the work, for instance, of neuropsychologists and cognitive scientists – including scientists such as Damasio. The philosopher Mathew Radcliffe points out, however, that the phenomenological view of the emotions that is found in Heidegger can be seen as convergent with, and indeed supported by, much contemporary work on the emotions in their relation to cognition and behaviour.⁵ Thus in a review article in *Science*, the neuropsychologist, R. J. Dolan writes in quite general terms of emotion as tied to the capacity to find value in the world – which is, one might say, another way of describing what I have referred to as the capacity for orientation. Dolan writes [SLIDE]:

An ability to ascribe value to events in the world, a product of evolutionary selective processes, is evident across phylogeny. Value in this sense refers to an organism's facility to sense whether events in its environment are more or less desirable...emotions represent complex psychological and physiological states that, to a greater or lesser degree, index occurrences of value...the range of emotions to which an organism is susceptible will, to a high degree, reflect on the complexity of its adaptive niche. In higher order primates, in particular humans, this involves adaptive demands of physical, socio-cultural, and interpersonal contexts.⁶

It is worth noting too, the way many contemporary neuroscientists contest the supposed separation of emotion and cognition – a separation that phenomenology also rejects as untenable. In his own discussion, Radcliffe cites Damasio's work, but he also discusses other aspects of the way emotional responses, or the lack of them, directly affect the capacity to engage with the world – Radcliffe cites certain breakdowns in cognition, Capgras' syndrome and anosognosia [SLIDE], that are linked to damage to particular neural pathways in the brain also associated with emotional response. Both involve a deficit in relation to what I referred to earlier as *cognitive* emotions – doubt, for instance and so involve a failure in the ability to recognise of the possible falsity of beliefs, and the need for their revision as well as appropriate behavioural adjustment.

Contemporary neurophysiological accounts of emotion, and of the underlying mechanisms of emotional response that connect them with specific parts of the brain [SLIDE], provide important insight into the physiological basis of emotion. But such accounts need be inconsistent with the sort of ontological account at issue here and neither should it be seen as an alternative to it. The empirical neurophysiological and the ontological operate at different levels of analysis and explanation. Moreover, phenomenological approaches to the emotions also reveal aspects of the emotions that may not be so immediately evident on a neuropsychological approach alone.

Part of what is characteristic of the sort of ontological account associated with a phenomenological approach to the emotions is indeed the way in which the emotions are connected, whether explicitly or implicitly, with orientation and so with being-placed – something given particular salience in Heidegger's use of the term *Befindlichkeit*, but evident too in Heidegger's talk, in the brief passage I quoted earlier, of what is at issue as concerning [SLIDE] "the ways man confronts the Da, the openness and concealment of beings, in which he stands". The language here, as in so much of Heidegger's thinking, is strongly *topological*, by which I mean that it connects to and invokes ideas and images of place and situation, and a similarly topological emphasis, although variously articulated, is can be found in the work of most of the key thinkers within the phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions. If the topology at issue here often goes unremarked, then that is largely because it is so absolutely basic – so much so, in fact, that it is all too readily taken for granted - taken for granted just as we typically take for granted the places in which every day we live and move.

Heidegger is notable for his attentiveness to the spatial and topological structures in play here, although the way emotion is connected with those structures often appears as only a sub-theme within Heidegger's account, and is not directly thematized. In this respect, the work of Otto Bollnow's is notable [SLIDE], even though it is much less philosophical interesting or significant overall than Heidegger's, for the way in which it does indeed focus directly on the connection between emotion – and again, like Heidegger, Bollnow gives special attention to mood – in German *Stimmung* (a term often translated as 'attunement'). Bollnow's early work, *Das Wesen der Stimmungen*, focussed specifically on moods⁷, but his later writings, notably *Mensch und Raum*, addressed the issue of lived space. However, Bollnow also drew the two themes together. In *Mensch und Raum*, he emphasises the importance of mood in the understanding of space, but he also stresses the way mood is not a property merely of the subject nor of the object [SLIDE]:

Mood is a characteristic of just about every space... Mood is itself not something subjective 'in' an individual and not something objective that could be found 'outside' in his surroundings...Mood... concerns the individual in his still undivided unity with his surroundings... One speaks of a mood of the human temperament as well as

of the mood of a landscape or a closed interior space, and both are, strictly speaking, only two aspects of the same phenomenon...”⁸.

It is worth noting that Bollnow’s insistence on the way emotions are “two aspects of the same phenomenon” can be interpreted in terms of what Dolan identifies as the way emotion connects with value – the values at issue arising precisely out of the complex of agent and world, being determined neither by one nor the other alone. Together with Hermann Schmitz, in whom one also finds a connection between emotion, or mood, and the bodily and the spatial, Bollnow has been influential in the development of recent thinking around the notion of *atmosphere* – a notion that has been particularly influential in architecture and the arts, and is developed further in the work of writers such as [SLIDE] Gernot Böhme, Tonino Griffero, and Peter Zumthor. The atmosphere of a space is the felt quality that belongs to that space as that is determined by the physical, and more specifically the sensory, qualities of the space. In the work of many of these writers, however, and sometimes in Bollnow too, it can be ambiguous as to whether the idea of atmosphere, or of the mood of a space, refers only to a quality of any and every space, or only of some spaces. If one follows the argument that I have sketched, however, then every space, or better every *place* (since space in this sense is always the space of a place), is always infused with mood and atmosphere. Atmosphere, or emotional affect, is part of the orienting and oriented character of a place, so that to be in it is already to be affected, to some degree or other, by its atmosphere. The atmosphere of a place is thus precisely tied to the character of a place as having its own oriented and orienting character.

In being tied to the felt bodily locatedness – the ‘being-placed’ – of the subject, and so also to place itself, emotion can be said to belong not to phenomenology alone, but to an essential *topology* - and as part of that topology, emotion belongs to the externality of things no less than to the internality of the self. We readily overlook the character of human being, and indeed of being itself, as always tied to place. That there is no being that is not placed – that to be is to be somewhere – is an idea already present in the work of Greek thinkers, including Aristotle. The argument for this claim is not one that I have time to develop here – on that point I have to refer you to some of my own work elsewhere, as well as to the work of others – notably Heidegger [SLIDE], and also thinkers like Bachelard, as well as my contemporary Edward Casey. Part of what the investigation into the emotions shows, however, is not only the way the emotions are tied to place and being-placed, but also the extent to which place and being-placed are indeed essential to the possibility of cognition and action. If to be capable of thinking and acting requires emotional responsiveness (as empirical neuroscience and phenomenological ontology both indicate), because emotions are indeed orienting as well as motivating, then what this shows is the way cognition and

action, and so also rationality as such, themselves depend upon place and being-placed. The contrast between the rational and cognitive and the emotional is thus a false one – dependent upon a false and narrowed-down conception of reason and cognition, no less than of the emotions themselves.

Two important points follow from consideration of the way emotion and place, but also emotion and reason, are tied so intimately to place. The first point follows from the sort of refusal of the identification of emotion as subjective and reason as objective that we find exemplified in Bollnow. Both emotion and reason are best understood as founded in the inter-relation of agents with the world that occurs in and through place and being-placed. What this brings with it, in ontological terms, is a relational understanding of the nature of the self and the world – neither stand entirely apart from one another, and both are to be understood only in their mutual inter-relation [SLIDE]. This topological relationalism – a relationalism that involves a tri-partite relationality of and to the self, of and to others, and of and to things – has the consequence that the usual dichotomies that are so often employed between, for instance, the subjective and objective, but also between the mental and the material, can no longer function in any absolute fashion. Those dichotomies, if they are to be retained, have to be understood as themselves operating within a similarly relational ontology (one that I have referred to elsewhere as a ‘romantic materialism’), so that the material is understood as material only inasmuch as it stands in an essential relation to the felt, the thought, and the remembered, inasmuch as it is suffused with these; in their own turn, the felt, the thought, the remembered are shaped and formed through being embodied in the material and only thus – not only the materiality of the body, in its movement and its rest, in its activity and affectivity, but also in the materiality of things, whether made or unmade, and in the materiality of land, water, and air, of earth and of sky. It is only in the midst of such materiality, a materiality that is felt, thought, imagined, and remembered, that we find ourselves in the world at all, and to find ourselves in that way is always to find ourselves in a place - a place that encompasses both a space and a time.

So far as ethical thinking is concerned, this rethought conception of emotion, and of the relation between emotion and reason, ought to lead us towards a more nuanced, and a more complex, understanding of the nature of ethics and of ethical decision and action. Part of the problem with the sorts of accounts of ethics and morality that one finds in writers such as Singer and Bloom is indeed their tendency to treat ethics as founded in a sort of de-situated view of the world – exactly the sort of abstracted and ‘objectified’ view that has been part of the traditional understanding of reason. But it should now be evident that this involves a mistaken understanding of reason itself as well as of the ethical. Ethics only arises on the basis of our embodied, oriented being in the world, and this means that ethics can only be understood, and ethical decision and

action is only possible, inasmuch as it encompasses the emotional no less than the rational. Of course it is always possible that our emotions can mislead, that we can be mis-oriented (and this is how we might understand some of the problematic elements that Bloom identifies in relation to empathy), but we do not rectify such mis-orientation by looking to remove ourselves from the very possibility of being oriented or being placed.

V. Past thinking about the emotions – as well as about reason, cognition, and the ethical – has often been hampered by a false view of the nature of the emotions. The hope is that we could arrive at a rethinking of emotion that would involve a reconceptualization of the nature of the emotions, of cognition and reason, and so also of ourselves. Yet if part of what is at issue in the thinking of the emotions is indeed the thinking of our relation to the world, and our relation to place, then it is not at all obvious that the way that relation is currently thought, if it is genuinely thought at all, is other than in terms of a relation that still privileges a certain sort of abstracted and displaced stance – a stance that we can now say is not a real privileging of the rational as such, but rather the privileging of only a certain abstracted and so disembodied and displaced mode of rationality (the mode of rationality associated with reductionism whether in its economic or scientific forms).

But the situation is even worse than that. Notwithstanding any advance in neuroscience or philosophy, what has occurred is a loss of the proper understanding of both reason and of emotion, as well as of the intimate relation between the two – and this is itself a loss of any proper sense of our place in the world and so of any proper orientation to things or to ourselves. Here we might say, the question of orientation brings with it the question of truth. To be disoriented is also to lose hold of truth or of any standard of truth. This is indeed where we find ourselves today. Curiously, our ‘post-truth’ world is one that is often characterised in terms of the privileging of emotion over reason – so the *Economist* can say [SLIDE] of the world epitomised by the current US President, that in this world: “Feelings, not facts, are what matter.”⁹ Yet the loss of any sense of truth is not about the triumph of emotion, not if what we have so far said here is correct. The loss of any sense of or respect for truth is indeed a form of disorientation, at the most general level, but that disorientation is as much a disturbance that pertains to the emotions as it is does to reason. This disturbance affects both emotion *and* reason – it involves their seeming separation, but also the taking of both to extremity. Ours is a time of extremity in which both emotion and reason have been ripped from their proper places so that both are now disoriented and disorienting. Regaining a sense of their proper place, finding again our own place in the world, is the most pressing task for the future – it is a task that is fundamental to our capacity to address all the challenges that face us, both the socio-political and the environmental, which are themselves also intimately bound up together.

¹ Singer, 'Ethics and Intuitions', *Journal of Ethics* 9 (2005), pp. 331-352.

² Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016).

³ Thus Matthew Ratcliffe argues that "despite increased interest in emotion, the structure of the debate still presupposes that theoretical, detached cognition epitomises the nature of our most basic relationship with the world. Emotions are either evaluative constituents of propositional attitudes or they are distinct from such attitudes and thus peripheral to the way we relate to the world. The terms of current philosophical debates continue to privilege theoretical perspectives and propositional attitudes" – Ratcliffe, 'Heidegger's attunement and the neuropsychology of emotion', *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 1 (2002), pp.294-5 [287–312].

⁴ Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p.45.

⁵ See Matthew Ratcliffe, 'Heidegger's attunement and the neuropsychology of emotion'.

⁶ R. J. Dolan, 'Emotion, Cognition, and Behavior', *Science* 298 (2002), pp. 1191-1194

⁷ See Bollnow, *Das Wesen der Stimmungen* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1941).

⁸ Bollnow, *Human Space*, translated by Christine Shuttleworth (London: Hyphen Press, 2011), pp.216-217. In this discussion Bollnow also refers both to Heidegger and to Binswanger.

⁹ 'Art of the Lie', *The Economist*, Sept.10, 2016