

Psychoanalysis, emotions and living a good life

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The central question of ethics is ‘How should I live?’. It covers not only actions (‘what should I do?’), but more broadly, our reactions and our characters, questions of what we should feel and how we should be as people. This has been the central concern of theories of virtue. Aristotle claimed that a virtue is a character trait that enables us to ‘stand well’ in relation to our desires and emotions. To be virtuous with regard to a type of emotion – anger, sadness, joy, fear, etc. – is to feel that type of emotion ‘at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way’ (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 2, Ch. 6, 1106b).

My question here is not this question, ‘How should I live?’, but a question about this question: ‘How should we think about this question in trying to answer it in practical life?’. How should we *deliberate* about living a good life?

§1. Ratiocentrism and akrasia

John Cottingham, in his book *Philosophy and the Good Life*, coined the term ‘ratiocentrism’ for the view that the good life can be understood in terms of, and attained by, reason and strength of will. The thought, which has been very widespread among philosophers since Plato, is that we discover a ‘rational plan’ for how we should live through rational reflection and deliberation. We then act accordingly. However, the psychoanalytic model of human beings challenges this approach. There are two fundamental obstacles: a lack of knowledge, particularly knowledge of ourselves, and a lack of control. We can see the importance of these challenges through considering the phenomenon of *akrasia*.

Akrasia, or weakness of will, is a matter of doing what you believe is not best. Popular philosophical accounts have suggested one of two things is going on when someone acts akratically. The first is that one’s reason has been ‘clouded’ by one’s emotions (using the term broadly to include one’s desires): the person temporarily believes that what they do *is* best. The second is that reason is being ‘dragged around’ by one’s emotions. But we can question whether the metaphor of force is really appropriate. When emotions are particularly irrationally powerful, it is as plausible that there is something about the emotions that is not comprehended by reason. In either case, akrasia is diagnosed by ratiocentrism to be a *cognitive* defect.

The solution is this: Reason – that is to say, we – must come to understand our emotions. There are two ways this can go. We can either come to understand the image of ‘goodness’ the emotion presents (e.g. the pleasure of eating the cake, the power in achieving revenge) and then evaluate this claim rationally; or we can come to understand that the emotion is inherently confused – there is no coherent ‘good’ that it presents to us. Either way, once we understand our emotions rationally, then they will fall into line.

§2. Transparency and opacity

The problem is that this diagnosis assumes that our emotions are ‘transparent’ to us. This idea needs clarification. When we respond emotionally, we seek to understand ourselves; above all, to understand the vision of the world the emotion presents. To what are we responding, and how is that object presented? What are the reasons for the response? What explains the emotion’s intensity, or its being caused now rather than on another, similar occasion? And so on. We look for a ‘sufficient explanation’, either showing how our response and the way in which it

represents the world is appropriate, timely, proportionate, and so on; or explaining why it was inappropriate or disproportionate, e.g. as a result of a particular bad mood, or a sequence of events that finally proved too much to bear. With our desires, we seek to identify the good they seek and the reasons for thinking it is good. We may seek to explain an inappropriate desire on the basis of confused thinking about what satisfaction its fulfilment would actually bring us. Now if we were able, simply upon self-reflection, to provide such a sufficient explanation that correctly identified the meaning of the emotion, the emotions would be transparent.

Furthermore, we believe, often rightly, that if we understand why we react as we do, this gives us some control over the emotion. Our emotions clearly respond to reasons; a reasoned account of the object and reasons for the emotion should therefore alter it if necessary.

The psychoanalytic model of the mind challenges this model of the emotions. We are unable to supply complete and accurate accounts of the meaning of our emotions – their object, content, intensity, cause, timing, or vision of the good – simply through self-reflection. Emotions are therefore not transparent, but *opaque*. And because they are opaque, there are also *recalcitrant*. They cannot be brought into line, by reason, with a plan for the good life that reason has devised or discovered simply by rational reflection upon them. The cause – or at least one important cause – of the opacity of emotions is the presence of unconscious influence on our emotions.

§3. Examples and development

The psychoanalyst Karen Horney provides an example of the problem ratiocentrism faces in her book *Self-Analysis*:

Let us assume that a wife is deeply disturbed at learning that her husband has had a transient affair with another woman. Even months later she cannot get over it, although she knows it is a matter of the past and although the husband does everything to re-establish a good relationship. She makes herself and him miserable, and now and then goes on a spree of bitter reproaches against him. There are a number of reasons that might explain why she feels and acts in this way, *quite apart from a genuine hurt about the breach of confidence*. It may have hurt her pride that the husband could be attached to anyone but herself. It may be intolerable to her that the husband could slip out from her control and domination. The incident may have touched off a dread of desertion . . . She may be discontented with the marriage for reasons of which she is not aware, and she may use this conspicuous occurrence as an excuse for expressing all her repressed grievances . . . She may have felt attracted toward another man and resent the fact that her husband indulged in a freedom that she had not allowed herself. (283-4; italics added)

I italicised the short phrase to indicate that psychoanalysis does not dismiss our usual reasons or explanations for our emotions. These can be perfectly valid as far as they go, but they are only part of the story.

How is the wife to discover which of the possibilities Horney proposes is true? Psychoanalysis argues that our minds have an in-built tendency to keep painful mental states and what becomes associated with them out of consciousness. Faced with such states, we are liable to *unconsciously* pervert our experience of reality – both ‘external’ reality, including what other people think and feel, and our own psychological reality – by imagining it to be different. But a misrepresentation of reality will lead to a misrepresentation of what is good and how to live. So we need a new model, one that leaves ratiocentrism behind, of how to address the influence of unconscious meanings on our judgements of how to live.

A second example. Anna Freud, in *The Ego and its Mechanisms of Defence*, discusses a form of ‘false altruism’. A woman represses her own wishes, and projects them onto others. She then strongly identifies with other people. She therefore expresses great concern for them, but not for herself. She believes it is acceptable to fulfil their desires, and works to do so, but not to fulfil her own. However, she also becomes annoyed if their desires are frustrated, as if wishes should be fulfilled without hindrance; and she becomes angry with people who are not similarly altruistic, as though this were some personal affront to her. Nietzsche also comments on false altruism: ‘In helpful and benevolent people one nearly always finds a clumsy cunning that first rearranges the person who is to be helped so that, for example, he ‘deserves’ their help, needs *their* help in particular, and will prove to be deeply grateful, dependent, subservient for all their help. With fantasies such as these they control the needy like a piece of property’ (*Beyond Good and Evil*, §194).

The point here is not only that having this complexity of emotions leads to unvirtuous actions – though it does. For our discussion, what is more important is that it leads to an inaccurate or distorted view of the moral situation and one’s reasons for acting. Horney’s example raises the question, ‘What is the appropriate response, in this particular relationship, to infidelity?’. Cases of false altruism raise the question, ‘What is the appropriate understanding of the needs of others, the nature of suffering, and our responsibility to alleviate it?’. The emotions described in the examples prevent the people involved from being able to get a clear moral understanding of their situation.

§4. The psychology

The psychology involved is complex. In his book, *The Spiritual Dimension*, John Cottingham lists the following as distorting factors: pride, vanity, self-importance, fear, embarrassment, self-defensiveness, envy, greed, self-absorption, and fantasies of power. All these can trigger ‘defence mechanisms’. Defence mechanisms utilize mental processes that, using the imagination, change what we think so as to reduce or eliminate anxiety or the other painful feelings just mentioned. This barring of certain states from consciousness affects what we understand of ourselves, of others, of the situations in which we find ourselves, in other words, the world as we experience it, and therefore of course, our deliberations about how to live a good life in the here and now.

A brief aside: psychoanalysis argues that much of the unconscious influence on our emotions stems from the past. Our emotions have a long psychic history, with the current objects of our love, hate, fear, joy, and so on, being ‘layered’ on top of previous objects. There are relationships of symbolism between the present and the past. A powerful recent empirically-grounded theory of child development, attachment theory, suggests that our early relationships with others create a ‘working model’ of relationships (how they are, how they should be). This model then affects our perception, cognition and motivation in myriad ways.

Distortions in our emotions, then, need not be isolated events; our emotions, rather, present us with an entire world-view. A further example, from Jonathan Lear’s *Therapeutic Action*:

A patient of mine inhabited a disappointing world. Although she was quite successful at work, had friends, and so on, there was no success in the social world that would not be interpreted by her under an aura of disappointment. If she got a raise at work, it was because the boss was shamed into it – he really wanted to give someone else in the office a raise, but he felt he had to give her one to appear fair. If she was invited out for a date, the person had already tried to go out with others and had failed. If someone congratulated her on some accomplishment, they were just being polite. And so on. From a distance it is clear to us, as it was not clear to her, how active she was in understanding her world in ways that were bound

to disappoint. And, of course, much of the analysis was spent working through these repetitive attempts at disappointment. (48-9)

To assure ourselves of reliability in our judgements about how to live, we need to be able to discover the meaning of our emotions. In the light of the argument so far, we can see that neither the resolve to weigh up reasons better nor to act more consistently on the reasons we perceive is sufficient to overcome the difficulty the opacity of our passions presents to a ratiocentric vision of living the good life. We need to go beyond purely rational self-reflection, as this is usually understood, to a 'deeper' process of self-enquiry that can reveal the unconscious elements of our emotional life.

§5. The proposal

Gaining knowledge of the meanings of one's emotions and choices is not knowledge one can acquire *without changing as a person*. The change that is required cannot be performed by either intellectual insight or strength of will, traditionally the two powers at reason's disposal. Instead, the transformation requires

- a) recovering and accepting, as parts of oneself, those parts of oneself that have been rejected;
- b) accepting one's vulnerability – both one's vulnerability in childhood and one's vulnerability now to the effects of childhood; this involves a form of relinquishing control, not just initially, but permanently. Because vulnerability is always potentially painful, and the parts of the self that were rejected were so because of the pain they cause or threaten to cause, accepting one's vulnerability involves the courage to endure psychic pain;
- c) undoing one's defence mechanisms;
- d) compassion for oneself, which enables the above.

§6. Recovery and vulnerability

Recovery is not just a matter of *discovery*, although this forms part of it. The self is not to be identified just with reason, but also with what comes to be known. In recovery, parts of the self that have been disowned come to be integrated into the self. Or to put it another way, what is at issue is how the self *is*, whether it is able to be itself fully, through the full extent of its emotional experience. Recovery, then, is a process of self-transformation.

A first step in the process of reclaiming parts of oneself is, as Cottingham expresses it, 'an acknowledgement of precisely the fallibility, vulnerability and dependence that is an integral part of the strange openness we experience in our emotional lives... It is only by giving up, in the first instance, our pretensions to rational control that we open the way for deeper, transformed, self-understanding' (*Philosophy and the Good Life*, 147). The sense of vulnerability deepens in the realization that it is inescapable, a realization that comes with the understanding of one's emotions, and their roots in one's childhood past. The influence of the past never ceases, even when it has been reclaimed, after which one is able to appreciate and moderate it, not eradicate it. And so openness to one's emotional life, a willingness to at least tolerate and admit into thought whatever it is one feels, is necessary for self-knowledge to continue.

This form of emotional openness is always potentially painful. After all, defence mechanisms are means by which we control emotions or parts of ourselves that threaten psychological pain. If we return for a moment to akrasia, akratic passions are not ones we are comfortable with, and the parts of the self they express are ones we find most difficult to contemplate. We may, for instance, find it quite inconceivable that we could ever want *this* or feel *this* way; it seems so childish or unreasonable. This pain is unavoidable in the process of recovery. Facing up to pain calls for courage.

§7. Defence mechanisms and the will

Now courage is often understood as steeling one's will. But it is paradoxical to think of someone 'steeling' themselves to be vulnerable, to tolerate whatever emotional experience arises. There is a *relinquishing* of the will here. The courage of vulnerability is the courage of letting go, of allowing oneself to feel that which is painful. This contrasts with courage in the face of physical pain, which does involve steeling oneself; what the two forms have in common is that both enable one to continue functioning despite the pain, to not give up on one's end. In the case of deepening self-knowledge, this is to not give up on letting go of attempts to control one's experience of one's emotion.

Furthermore, defence mechanisms are not within the remit of the will, and so an act of will is not enough to undo them. Defence mechanisms are *purposeful* in aiming to reduce psychic pain, but do not involve *choices*. They are part of the nature of the mind, and they interact with the will, but they are not within or directly under the control of the will. Rather, they may be described as the psychic equivalent to the reflex mechanism of withdrawing one's body from a painful stimulus. The psychic pain, or threat of pain, is sufficient to redirect the attention away from the passion without the intervention of the will.

Defence mechanisms are usually reinforced by a false and idealized sense of oneself; the parts of oneself defended against, even after their existence is acknowledged, are not yet one's own in the same way in which one identifies with other traits with which one is content. The pain caused lies not, or not only, in the disowned part of the self; it lies also in the gap between that part and one's self-image. On the one hand, our emotions aspire to expression and fulfilment; on the other hand, we can aspire to virtuous ideals beyond our present means, or even beyond human means. When these conflict, we pretend, on the one hand, that our emotions do not exist, or that they are adequately fulfilled, or that they are no part of our 'true self'; on the other hand, we pretend that we meet the ideals we hold for ourselves, or that we can, that they are reasonable. But these ideals can themselves be defensive reactions to our emotions. Accepting our emotions means bridging the gap between aspiration and pretence.

§8. The importance of compassion

What enables the developments described above is compassion for oneself. The ability to tolerate, to bear, suffering – anxiety, guilt, shame, anguish – without denying the reality of that which causes it is usually identified as part of compassion. Of course, we normally think of compassion as directed towards others; here I argue we need compassion for ourselves. The emotions with which we feel ourselves in conflict, as in *akrasia*, often seem intolerable because they threaten our sense of ourselves as acceptable, as *lovable*. Recovery and vulnerability involve compassion because it countermands this sense – it is possible for me to tolerate the emotion and the pain it brings, and hence to come to know and understand it, because the fact that I feel this emotion does not mean I am unlovable. Compassion for oneself and one's emotions is an attitude towards one's emotions that allows them to exist, to be felt, because it pulls the sting that leads us to distort our experience of ourselves, to deny or misunderstand the emotions we have.