Emotion in balance: counteracting emotion’s distorting power

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Emotion’s epistemic value

A relatively optimistic view?

- Döring (2007), Pelsner (2014): emotions are an important source of evaluative knowledge
- Brady (2013): emotions help to generate evaluative understanding
Two objections

1. Unreliability
2. Narrow-mindedness
   - The narrow-mindedness objection should be taken seriously
   - But there is a kind of emotional response – a *balanced* emotional response – that escapes the objection
What might emotions help us to learn?

1. Emotional evaluations often have a rich content
2. They concern features of the situation that are important – personally, morally etc.
3. They may be concerned, in part, with subtle, relational features – not easily tracked by other means
How might emotions help us to learn?

1. The perceptual model: emotions provide non-inferential justification for evaluative judgements (Johnston, 2001; Döring, 2007; Pelsner, 2014; Tappolet, 2016)

2. The indicator model: emotions provide inferential justification for evaluative judgements

3. The attentional model: emotions direct the subject’s attention to evaluatively significant features of the situation

4. The exploratory model: emotions motivate and guide further inquiry (Brady, 2013)
Unreliability

Emotional responses are often disproportionate or misplaced; hence they are not sufficiently reliable to constitute sources of evaluative knowledge or understanding.

Response:

It’s true that emotional responses aren’t as reliable as, say, visual or auditory experiences.

But this suggests only that we should treat them with caution.
Emotion’s narrow-mindedness

Emotion narrows the subject’s focus of attention, fixing it on features congruent with the subject’s emotion.

This seems to be a functional feature of emotion – one that may have epistemic value.
Dangers of narrow-mindedness

1. The subject is less likely to question an emotion that is misplaced or disproportionate:

   ... one’s emotions tend to skew the epistemic landscape to make it cohere with the emotional experience: ... when we are afraid, we tend unknowingly to seek out features of the object of our fear that will justify the fear – features that would otherwise (that is, if we were not already afraid) seem relatively harmless. (Goldie, 2004: 99-100)

2. The subject will tend to give greater evidential weight to the emotional response than it deserves (perceptual and indicator models).

3. The subject will find it harder to reach a balanced assessment of the situation.

Moreover, these dangers are likely to be among the facts obscured.
What is an episode of emotion?

• A relatively sustained and developed emotional response – might last for minutes or hours.

• A complex, evolving process, involving a number of interweaving components, characteristically underpinned by an evaluation of the situation.

• Might include a number of emotional reactions – possibly of different types.

• Unified by:
  – A common focus;
  – Tight psychological links between emotional reactions.
Introducing ambivalence

An ambivalent emotional response involves:

1. Emotions that imply contrasting evaluative perspectives on the situation (e.g. positive/negative)

2. Experience of emotional conflict

The conflict involved is not evaluative, but rather:

(a) practical/motivational

(b) attentional
Ambivalence to the rescue?

An ambivalent response presents two contrasting pictures of the situation → counteracts the narrow-mindedness of emotion?

Problem: ambivalent emotions are experienced as competing alternatives – the subject’s priority is to decide between them. Hence, the epistemic value of ambivalent emotion is likely to arise only because we can reflect on them:

Conflicted emotions in response to art are valuable... because they remind us of our epistemic limitations and of the messiness of moral and social life. People are hard to understand and moral problems are very hard to resolve.’ (Harold 2010: 293)
From ambivalence to balance

Like ambivalence, but without the conflict?
Need to assume that the emotional reactions involved are cases of offline/contemplative emotion.

‘Contemplative’/ ‘offline’ emotional responses:
- Are induced by hypothetical/fictional/distant scenarios
- Lack motivational effects
An objection?

Is this really a single emotional episode?

Response:

As with Emma, Lance’s various emotional reactions are unified by:

• A common focus
• Tight psychological links

(It’s these claims that are really key to the argument)
Epistemic value?

Lance’s various emotional reactions:

- will be informationally rich
- will concern personally/morally important features of the situation
- may well pick up on subtle, relational features, not easily tracked in other ways

But also: his emotional response embodies more than one evaluative perspective on the situation – experienced as offering different but compatible viewpoints
Balanced emotion vs. judgement

- Lance’s emotional response does not constitute an assessment of the situation overall.
- It is unlikely to offer a complete picture.
- But it is likely to be informationally richer than any set of evaluative judgements he makes.
Does balanced mean less content?

Objection:
Lance’s emotional reactions, being offline, will lack practical content. Hence they will not be as informationally rich as other emotional responses.

Response:
The suppression of motivational effect need not imply the absence of practical content.
Does balanced mean watered down?

Objection:
A balanced emotional response will need to be less intense than other emotional responses: hence, it can arise only in situations of only minor importance, or where the subject has underestimated the importance of the situation.

Response:
Loss of intensity arises from lack of motivational and attentional *urgency* – not from lowered sense of the significance of the situation.
Does balanced mean shallow?

Objection:
A balanced response will lack profundity.

Response:
Breadth is not incompatible with depth; indeed, it can promote it.
Summary

- Emotional responses might well be thought to have epistemic value – by providing grounds for evaluative judgements and/or by promoting evaluative understanding.

- But emotion’s narrowmindedness severely qualifies that claim: in particular, emotion seems likely to hinder *balanced* judgement.

- But this is not the end of the story: balanced emotional responses lack the one-sidedness of other kinds of emotional response, while preserving their epistemic virtues.
References


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