Can emotion-based moral disagreements be resolved?

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Outline

- What is problematic about emotion-based disagreements?
- What is the nature of emotions?
- Narrative structure of emotions
- How to resolve emotion-based disagreements?
- Real-life disagreements
Moral disagreements

- Disagreements that arise with respect to questions of morality, politics, and religion touch upon judgements concerning what personality trait or phenomenon is deemed good or bad, or what kind of act is recommended resp mandatory.

- The consequences of moral, political, and religious disagreements can be very serious—conflicts can overflow state boundaries and even lead to war.
Examples of moral disagreements

• Should the death penalty be permitted?
• Should abortion, euthanasia and surrogate motherhood be allowed?
• Should homosexual couples have the right to have children by means of in vitro fertilization?
• Should we eat animals, or is vegetarianism the only morally right choice?
• Is lying permitted in certain situations, or is it absolutely forbidden?
• Should the wearing of headscarves in school be permitted?
Are moral disagreements non-rational disagreements?

• In all these cases, the common-sense recipe seems unhelpful: taking more time for discussion, checking that no mistakes have been made in the process of argumentation, and making sure that the facts on which evaluations are based are accurate.

• Recently, several social scientists (Haidt 2012, Bartels 2008) have stated that in moral and political questions, one has to do with non-rational disagreements, which are based on emotions and intuitions, and which refuse to submit to rational arguments.
Peter Goldie’s theory of emotions…

… helps in overcoming the two opposing strands in modern philosophy of emotions. The first strand, which may be called **feeling-centred**, has conceived emotions as principally **affective states**. The second, the **thought-centred** strand, has treated emotions as **intentional states of mind**, which similarly to beliefs and desires, are directed toward some object.
Emotion as a complex process

• Peter Goldie describes emotions as complex, episodic, dynamic and structured.
• It involves many different elements: episodes of emotional experience, including perceptions, thoughts and feelings of various kinds, and bodily changes of various kinds; an emotion will also involve dispositions.
• For Goldie it is not correct to identify emotion with any kind of mental state or event, whether feeling, judgement, or perception.
• Emotions are processes and involve memoreis of general events. Some will last over a long time (love, grief, jealousy, envy etc).

Emotions have narrative structure

• Emotion is a kind of process, a complex pattern of activity and passivity which can best be understood and explained through a narrative which has one thing happening after another and a certain coherence.

• We should examine our emotional responses in the light of reason, taking into account all the other things we value. Further, if this reflection shows that our emotional responses are not appropriate, the respective emotion should recede (Goldie 2000, p. 49).
Amelie Rorty’s (1980) view

Besides socially and culturally dependent factors, our conceptions of the objects of emotions are also dependent on formative events in a person’s psychological past and constitutional inheritance, the set of his or her genetically fixed threshold sensitivities and patterns of response (Rorty 1980, p. 105).

If we could understand the narrative contained in the emotion, we would be able to see where things went wrong.

What should we do with emotion-based disagreements?

• Considering that emotions have narrative structure, one should submit these narratives to critical reflection.

• If we understand emotions as involving affect-laden axiological judgements that are based on certain ways of seeing situations (narrative structures), we can be held responsible for our emotions.
Critical reflexion of narratives

• We should be prepared to reflect on the narratives we have constructed and to critically evaluate our emotions.

• One has to ask oneself whether one has interpreted the situation appropriately. In Amélie Rorty’s words, the question is whether we have cast light on the correct aspect of the situation.
Emotions are contextual

- We see things from certain perspective, we select what we see and what we focus on.
- Our emotional reaction depends on the perspective we take and on our interpretation of the situation, as well as other people`s and our own motives and actions.
- Our emotions are interest-relative (Goldie 2012).

How can emotions be changed?

• In order to change an emotion, we must change the whole narrative structure we have created, which has been accompanied by an affective reaction.

• In order to change the narrative structure, it will be helpful to look at the same event from a different perspective or through the other person’s eyes.
The role of imagination in reading fiction

• In my book “Fiction and Imagination” (2000) I have shown that in reading fictional narratives one has two sorts of imaginings: on the one hand one imagines something being the case (propositional imagining); on the other, one represents the experiences of a character (experiential imagining), whose point of view orients the narrative perspective.
Two kinds of emotions

- With the help of simulation we may put ourselves in the shoes of the character and feel his emotions.
- Emotions develop as the result of our propositional imagination and the bringing together of different perspectives on the story. As the result of reflecting on the emotions, desires and beliefs of the characters from the perspective of our own life experience.
The role of imagination in resolving moral disagreements

• The likeliness of resolving emotional disagreements depends on our will to critically reflect on our own emotions and the interpretations of situations on which these emotions are based, as well as to regard the situation from a neutral standpoint.

• If we are able to imagine what the emotion of the neutral spectator would be in X situation then we can check whether our emotion is proper in congruence with the emotion of the neutral spectator. If it is not, we can strive to be released from our bias and regard the situation neutrally.
Why should we wish to correct our emotions?

Adam Smith (The Theory of Moral Sentiments, 1759) says that this is a fact about human nature. He believes that mutual sympathy, the awareness of sharing sentiments with others, is one of the chief pleasures of human life, whereas to be aware of the lack of sympathy (harmony of sentiments) with our own feelings is unpleasant. Therefore people strive toward emotional harmony.
Conclusions

• In cases of emotion-based disagreements one must use the help of one’s *imagination* to conceive how the other person sees the situation, and what emotion lies behind his or her opinion.

• One should try to provoke the opposite side’s powers of imagination, thus broadening the context in which the question of disagreement is being considered. One should make other person to look at the object of disagreement from a different point of view, with the hope that a *different emotion* will be evoked.
Thank you for your attention!

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