

---

*Amélie Oksenberg Rorty*

## Varieties of rationality, varieties of emotion

---

**We have been asked** to discuss rationality and the emotions: To what extent and in what sense can the emotions themselves be rational or irrational? To what extent does rationality interfere with the emotions?

Although these questions have a ring of familiarity, their presuppositions are dubious. I would like to convince you that these questions are ill-formed: they rest on assumptions that block our understanding of the phenomena. Psychological activities do not form neatly defined classes (emotions, desires, beliefs). By complicating the description of the phenomena we are attempting to understand, I want to incite you to share my bafflement.

Anything can interfere with anything. Where was rationality going, that the emotions might interfere with the journey? Where might the emotions have been going, that rationality might have interfered with their getting there? Does jet lag interfere with rationality? Is rationality threatened by a delicious dinner with delicious wine? Does rationality interfere with a person's believing  $p$ , when he has strong evidence against  $p$ ?

In any case, there is no natural class of psychological events, states, or attitudes, "The Emotions", distinguishable from needs, wants, desires, wishes. The intentional structure of some emotion-types is closer to that of some psychological conditions standardly identified as desires or wishes than to that of other emotions; and the intentional structure of particular instances of the same emotion-type can differ. Distinctive conditions were introduced into the class of emotions for different reasons at different historical periods. The

---

This is an extended version of a "position paper" presented at the Colloquium on Rationality and the Emotions held in Paris from March 23–25, 1984 (cf. above "Rationality and the emotions: report on a colloquium").

*Social Science Information* (SAGE, London, Beverly Hills and New Delhi), 24, 2 (1985) pp. 343–353.

artificial class *emotions* intersects with other equally artificial classes: passions, feelings, sentiments, affects, motives, evaluations, passing thoughts, wishes, and penchants.

Like other psychological activities or attitudes, conditions presently classified as emotions are intentional, (or at least, quasi-intentional). To the extent that the intentionality of an emotion can be formulated propositionally, it can be evaluated as rational or irrational, as the intentions are true, warranted, and well-grounded. (But even when the intentionality of an emotion can be reconstructed in propositional form, it does not always function in that form.) Though they are rarely identical with perceptions and beliefs, emotions are standardly identifiable and, in some cases, individuated by them. But the perceptions and beliefs that form “the intentional components” of emotions, themselves form a heterogeneous class. The intentional components of emotions can be: (1) beliefs that can be articulated in propositional form; (2) vague beliefs whose truth conditions can be roughly, but not fully specified; (3) patterns of intentional categorizing, salience and focusing that can be formulated as general beliefs (for instance, seeing certain types of behavior as hostile or threatening); (4) patterns of categorizing, salience and focusing that cannot so easily be formulated as beliefs (for instance, seeing a landscape as a terrain to be defended against attack, rather than as land to be cultivated or a landscape to be painted); (5) quasi-intentional sensations, such as irritation or pain, that carry no further description of their targets or their objects.

Like other psychological activities, emotions can be intentional; but the relation between the intention and the emotion can vary: (1) the intention can be an individuating component of the emotion; (2) the intention can be the cause that also individuates the emotion; (3) the intention can specify the object of the emotion without being its cause. The evaluation of the rationality of an emotion varies with the character of the intention, and with its relation to the emotion.

Yet emotions are not, *as such*, rational or irrational, nor are specific emotion-types in themselves rational or irrational. Rather, a person can in a particular situation be rational or irrational in being frightened, grieving, jealous, just as he can be rational or irrational in what he wants or what he does. (Though not being irrational does not guarantee being rational, and still less does it guarantee being reasonable.) In any case, the rational reconstruction of a person’s emotion does not — and was never intended to — represent its

formation or its functioning. That an emotion is well-grounded does not, of course, assure that the person holds it on those grounds, or because of those grounds. The intentionality of emotions and the evaluation of their rationality, suffers from the same sorts of problems that the evaluation of beliefs does: the problem of deviant causal chains. On the one hand, an emotion cannot be evaluated as rational or irrational *tout court*, but only relative to the rest of a person's propositional and psychological attitudes. On the other hand, showing that an emotion is consistent with the rest of a person's attitudes does not specify the aetiology of the emotion. A person may have all the appropriate rationalizing beliefs and desires, and yet the emotion be anomalously or deviantly formed.

To show just how heterogeneous the class of emotions is, let us list some clear cases of emotions: fear, nostalgia, joy, indignation, anger, remorse, envy, resentment, and *Schadenfreude*. If these are clear cases, what do we do with a sense of competitive ambition? With a sense of frustration? Or pique? Is a particular sexual desire for a particular person an emotion? Is being lusty without having a particular person in mind (though not just anyone would do)? A sense of justice or injustice? A passion for justice? A passion for revenge? The sentiment of benevolence? Is feeling bereft of affection? What about wanting affection without feeling bereft? What about hope, hopelessness or hopefulness? Boredom? A sense of stress? Being distressed? A sense of lassitude? What about feeling restless? Being dismayed? And what about being restless without being aware of feeling so? Sunday melancholy? *Wanderlust* and its nervous cousin *Reisefieber*? Being, or feeling feisty? A fit of petulance? Is zeal a passion or a way of performing an action, zealously? A sudden feeling of friendliness? A disposition to friendly, helpful behavior that is never experienced as a feeling? What about feeling vengeful? Being vengeful? And what about the exhilaration of hearing Vivaldi in the Sainte Chapelle? The bittersweet delight of reading harsh truths in subtle prose? The recognition of one's parents' kindness with the pain of knowing that recognition has come too late? The surfeit of reading too much Proust at one sitting, eating too many "pains au chocolat" at one breakfast? Being amused?

The prime examples themselves form a heterogeneous group. Being reluctant to accept a class of emotions is not parallel to being touchy about whether trees form a proper class, because some are deciduous and others evergreens, and because some trees are

difficult to distinguish from vines, bushes, or weeds. The intentional structures of these emotions — the ways that their characteristic perceptions and beliefs cause or identify them — vary significantly. Some emotions are characteristically caused by perceptions and beliefs; and the emotion is rational if its clustered beliefs are true, warranted, *and* if the causes of the emotion (fear) stand in an appropriate relation to the emotion. But the intentional objects of other emotions are not presumed to be strongly linked to their causes (nostalgia, some kinds of envy or jealousy). Yet others (melancholy, anxiety) do not have specific objects at all. Sometimes the occurrence of an emotion is explained primarily by a person's dispositions, and the intentional object is adventitious. The object of an irascible person's anger bears no strong connection to its cause. If the person hadn't been angry at *that*, he'd have been angry at something else. In any case, the relevant perceptions and beliefs can be accurate and truthful, and even warranted, and yet the emotion be unreasonable, or even irrational.

Some emotions are non-voluntary or involuntary, in such a way as to make the question of whether the person could have chosen not to have the emotions an idle question; a question with such a tangle of counterfactual hypotheses that we need to reconstruct the person's entire history and constitution to make sense of it. Could Prometheus have avoided his anguish, bound as he was to his rock? Could Priam have avoided his grief at the death of Hector? Perhaps they could sometimes be empowered to take a series of steps to free themselves from the emotion, but it does not follow from that, that its first appearance was voluntary. Yet sometimes we hold people responsible not only for what they do from and with their emotions, but also for having or not having them. The hard-hearted are not only despised but condemned; the generous are not only admired but praised. And sometimes a person's susceptibility to certain sorts of emotions arises from policies he has adopted voluntarily: we blame him for emotional self-indulgence.

Some emotional conditions (certain forms of depression, certain forms of elation) are strongly correlated with physiological conditions. In such cases, the cognitive or intentional components of the emotion are fortuitously or contingently connected to the person's emotion, even when there is an adequate psychological explanation for the person's focusing on the *particular* intentional object as the target of his emotions. (That the person is presently angry is a function of his physiological condition; that he objectifies

his anger by directing it at a specific sort of target is a function of his psychological history.) Such emotions can be controlled — produced or eliminated — chemically. Other emotions (nostalgia) are rarely correlated with specific typical physiological conditions.

Some emotions (fear) are characteristically motivational, and the beliefs and perceptions ingredient in the emotions are just those that direct the action. (Fear of a charging lion fixes the direction of flight.) In such cases, the evaluation of the rationality of the emotion is often an evaluation of the appropriateness and effectiveness of the action-component of the emotion. But other emotions (envy) have a muted or very general motivating force; the intentionality of the emotion does not direct whatever actions might follow upon them. Yet others (Sunday melancholy, *Schadenfreude*) are not presumptively motivational at all.

Some emotions are characteristically interwoven with others, in such a way that the emotion has a standard contextual and narrative scenario, that is so “natural” as to be presumptively identificatory. In such cases, the evaluation of the rationality of the emotion is often an evaluation of the appropriateness of its fit in the narrative context in which it occurs. Other emotions occur in relative isolation, without typically being associated with other thoughts or attitudes. Narratively contextual emotions are much more likely to be associated with, or to generate, ambivalent attitudes than those that occur in relative isolation.

Some emotions (joy, grief) are characteristically sensed or felt, and felt in characteristic ways: this tends to be true of such emotions as are strongly associated with pleasures and pains, in such a way that there is a presumption against the attribution of the emotion if the person is not aware of his feeling. Other emotions (hate or love) need not be consciously felt, and can sometimes just consist in the person’s having a sequence of thoughts that are characteristic of the emotion. A person’s jealousy can consist in his obsessively thinking about his exclusion and loss, without his experiencing those pangs and stabs that are characteristic of feeling jealous.

Some emotions (fear, rage, perhaps mourning) appear to be culturally invariant; at a general level, their characteristic causes and objects can be cross-culturally characterized. (What is perceived as dangerous is the object of fear; what is perceived as having caused a harm is the object of rage; what is perceived as lost is the object of mourning.) Though they can be further socialized in expression and in characteristic object-direction, they appear in earliest infancy.

Other emotions seem culturally specific, learned and developed within a cultural frame (Sunday melancholy, Japanese *amae*).

Some emotions do not presuppose a certain level of psychological or cognitive development: they are as likely to occur at any stage of a person's life as they are at any other. Other emotions appear to be more closely associated with a person's psychological development, with specific age or social roles: adolescence and sexual maturation dispose a person to a range of emotions not experienced by infants. In most societies, the transition from (what is perceived as) active to (what is perceived as) inactive economic and social roles at the onset of (what is perceived as) old age disposes a person to a set of emotions that are standardly not experienced by those (perceived as) being in their prime. Sometimes this variation appears to be a function of the processes of maturation and aging, where the physiological processes receive strong cultural direction and interpretation. Sometimes, however, such variation appears to be a function of structural role-casting. Independently of age, those suddenly cast in the position of nurturers, or those who unexpectedly and suddenly acquire positions of power experience emotions that are specific to their condition, as socially or culturally defined.

Some emotions seem to follow upon, and to express, evaluations and appraisals (fear, anger). But even those that do have appraisals and evaluations — somewhere — about them, do so in distinctly different ways. Although, characteristically, fear involves seeing something as an object to be avoided, it is neither incomprehensible nor irrational to seek out danger, even fearful danger, without having a rationalizing general belief about a good gained thereby. The delicious fears of walking on the wild side are not always rationalized by an estimation of the gains of occasionally indulging one's fantasies of freedom and invulnerability. Typically we avoid both the objects and the occasions of fear — typically we have a distaste for fear itself. But it is not even presumptively irrational to court fear. Nor do we always disprize the objects of our fears: certain kinds of religious awe carry fear with them. Other emotions — nostalgia — do not have an evaluation at their core: the nostalgic person need not have loved or prized the past more than he does the present; he need not believe it was a better time, and he a better person. In yet other cases, the relation of the evaluation to the emotion seems at best indirect: Do all prize whom they love? Must the lover attempt to seek out and hold whom he loves? Must he suffer if he does not succeed, or if for other reasons he renounces the

attempt? Did Humbert Humbert prize Lolita, as Mr Knightley prized Emma? Did Raskolnikov's prizing Sonia play the same role in his loving her as Dido's prizing Aeneas played in her love? Did their love consist in this prizing, and did it entail their attempting to secure the thriving of what they prized? And what about grief, does the grieving person prize what he lost? Does he disprize having lost it? Perhaps the formulae of prizing and disprizing can help us to identify the precise objects of our loves and griefs, so that Humbert Humbert can distinguish what he loves about Lolita from what exasperates him. And perhaps Dido can distinguish the emotions that led her to tell Aeneas to leave Carthage, leave quickly, from those that led her to plead him to stay. But even if that is so, it is not obvious that the difference between pursuit and avoidance is marked by positive and negative appraisal, or by pleasure or pain, or by favorable and unfavorable attitudes. And these are themselves all significantly distinguishable. But, of course, it may be trivial to say that where the emotions are, there is appraisal and evaluation. If this is so, it may be a function of the psychological fact that appraisal and evaluation are around the corner everywhere.

Some emotions (fear) are not only identified by their intentional objects, but are also characteristically caused by perceptions or beliefs. Others (nostalgia) presuppose, rather than are caused by, specific perceptions and beliefs. In some cases (anger), the central beliefs and perceptions are evaluations and appraisals; in others (nostalgia, certain types of restlessness), they are not. And the evaluation/appraisals/pleasure-pains enter in quite different ways. In some cases, the emotion is an appraisal or evaluation; in others it follows upon it; in others, it presupposes it, without being straightforwardly caused by it. But further: evaluations, appraisals are rarely reducible to a sharp contrast between polar attitudes of either favoring or disfavoring, pursuing or avoiding. The ways in which they appear within the intentional component of emotions is far more subtle than a yea or nay towards some aspect of an object. (Mr Knightley's evaluation of Emma is hardly captured by his approving of her insofar as she is kindly and spirited, disapproving of her rashness and occasional wilful indelicacy. Moses' awe, his terror of "The Voice" in the Burning Bush can hardly be parsed as his evaluative approval of the Divine, his appraising fear of the wrath of the Divine.) There is further, an enormous difference between "evaluating", and "appraising": consider the differences between appreciating, savoring, being enchanted by, delighting in, . . . or



between being dismayed by, disapproving, being disgusted by, and the like. The more we spell out these varieties of evaluations and appraisals, the more we see that they are themselves varieties of the artificial class, emotions. Nevertheless, many emotions do involve some evaluation or appraisal; and others are indeed connected with motivating pleasures and pains.

If evaluating the rationality of an emotion consists in evaluating the truth and grounds of the relevant intentional components, some emotions are much more hospitable to such evaluations than others. (E.g. the international structure of a person's fear that . . . is more clearly propositionalizable than that of his joy that . . . or his being awed by . . . of course some kinds of falsity identify irrationality straightaway: if the emotion rests on a presupposition that the person can readily recognize to be false, it is irrational. But such cases are rare.)

There is another reason for the heterogeneity of the class of psychological attitudes now classified as emotions. Sometimes labelling an attitude as an emotion (not to mention criticizing it as irrational) is morally and socially, even ideologically charged. Standardly, pity, resentment are classified as emotions, while a feeling of ambition, certain kinds of feistiness are classified as motives or character traits, even when they are felt. Hope and boredom are classified as attitudes, even when they are phenomenologically experienced and when the structure of their intentionality conforms to the putative paradigm cases of emotions. When loyalty and national pride are prized, they are classified as virtues. But detractors of such attitudes classify them as emotions or as sentiments, suggesting they are either irrational or that they are masks for self-serving motives. Sometimes labelling an attitude as an emotion or sentiment is itself a charge, an accusation. "Don't be so emotional" is equivalent to "Don't be so irrational". It is a signal that something has gone wrong in the person's normal motivated activity. (But significantly, the absence of emotion is rarely grounds for a charge of irrationality. Someone who fails to grieve or who shows only minimal sorrow at a grievous event is rarely charged with irrationality.)

The gerrymandering of psychological activities, their categorization as motives or emotions, as attitudes or sentiments, is — as gerrymandering generally is — often a political action. It involves rhetorical persuasive legislation, designed to direct and redirect our responses. When Nietzsche analyses humility, pity and



*ressentiment* as passions, he classifies them as the reactions of a passive person: he intends to correct (what he takes to be) the Christian misunderstanding of the origins and functions of these attitudes. The political and moral legislation that is at work in the gerrymandering categorization of psychological attitudes of course frequently rests on (what is taken to be) a neutral, often empirically based, analysis. Yet, as Nietzsche's response makes clear, such an analysis can rule out "counter-evidence" as itself a *conditioned* by-product of the very values that must be overcome. Attitudes that are to be favored or rehabilitated get reclassified as virtues, or attitudes (e.g. the Stoics classify good cheer, friendliness as *eupatheiai* instead of *pathe*: that reclassification allows those conditions to qualify as rational). While the reasons for particular psychological attitudes like humility, pity, benevolence or ambition coming to be favored or disfavored may be connected to their rational formation and their rational corrigibility, it is unlikely that it is their intentional and rational structure that best explains their detractor.

Emotions are not as such, either rational or irrational. Nor are particular emotion types as such rational or irrational. Even if we know that a person has been rational or irrational in having a particular emotion, in a certain way, at a certain time, in a certain context, we only have the slenderest, and not the most significant or interesting parameter for evaluating its reasonableness, its appropriateness, its desirability.

There is usually no-one more consistently logical than the local lunatic; and the detailed content of the thoughts and actions of the local sage are not likely to be understood by an analysis of the laws of rationality. The sage knows how to make his thought, reactions and actions appropriate to the particular case; while he is rational, it is what he knows, and the role that such knowledge plays in the fine appropriate attunement of his actions, rather than how he reasons that makes him rational.

Of course we can expand our conception of rationality in an interesting and substantive way, so that the formal correctness of a person's modes of inference is understood to provide only a small part of his capacities for rationality. To be rational, he must not only have true and sound beliefs, but his thresholds with respect to evidence and counter-evidence must be appropriately adjusted to various types of contexts; he must be able to understand and appropriately interact with others around him; a sound sense of what is and what is not important, a good sense of timing. when to

speaking and when to be silent. And he'd better have a sense of humour, too, when he discovers that even substantively rational actions often go awry. But with all these abilities, we've virtually got a person of practical wisdom. If we construe rationality narrowly, as measured by conformity to relatively formal laws of inference, then those conditions commonly called emotions are usually not rationally formed. But when we construe rationality so narrowly, practically all psychological conditions — including motives, and for many people, even thoughts and beliefs — are not rationally formed, not derived from true or accepted premises by logically valid means. These psychological conditions can be reconstructed to conform to the canons of rationality, and one can persuade a person to accept them on those grounds. All the complex standardly paradigmatic cases of emotions can also be similarly reconstructed. On an unreconstructed strict interpretation of rationality, very little mental and psychological activity is rational as such. On a generous reconstructive interpretation, little is not.

Philosophical analyses of psychological and intellectual activities rarely begin with a set of theses about the emotions or passions. Characteristically a philosopher begins with a polemical argument against his predecessors' conception of rationality, or perception, or voluntary choice. Associated with his analyses of these psychological activities is a set of beliefs about primary human actions and activities. Classifying a psychological attitude as an *activity* already carries normative presuppositions. The class of passions is, with remarkable regularity, typically treated as a negatively defined contrasting (unprized) class. The assumption is that we are realized by and in and through our activities: it is these that should define our proper motives and our proper directions. The implicit contrast is the condition of being *passive*: the passions are originally defined as conditions resulting from an external, or accidental intervention. *Whatever* was regarded as an *intervention* with natural activity, was classified as a *pathos*. As the class of activities which are thought primarily human — the prime activities of a human life — change, so the class of contrastive interventions — that is the class of passions — changes.

To summarize: the questions posed for our discussion are too general to be answered. There are quite distinctive ways of evaluating what can be loosely called the rationality of an emotion.

It can be evaluated by determining:

- (1) the truth of the intentional component of the emotion or the beliefs presupposed by the emotion;
- (2) the appropriateness of the emotion to its immediate cause (is it a delayed or redirected response to an ancient set of events?);
- (3) the consistency and narrative consonance of the emotion with the rest of the person's attitudes;
- (4) the appropriateness of the emotion to its social context;
- (5) the appropriateness of the action or behavior or expressive component of the emotion;
- (6) the deficiency or excess of the emotion in relation to its cause, its context, its action or behavior consequences.

But emotions can be evaluated on many more dimensions that are at least as practically significant as their rationality. Is a person's emotional repertoire rich and varied? Is it subtle? Well-balanced? Does the person tend to respond to superficial aspects of situations? Does he have objective distance towards his emotions? Does he understand his psychological states? What are his second order attitudes: does he fear loving? does he love hating? Are the person's psychological responses relatively stable? Is the person susceptible to emotional infection by, or imitation of, the psychological states of others? How does the person react to conflicts among his psychological attitudes? If the evaluation of the rationality of an emotion is to have any significance, it needs to encompass these evaluations as well.

*Amélie Oksenberg Rorty* is Professor of Philosophy at Rutgers University and Boston University. *Author's address:* 18 Parker Street, Cambridge, Mass., 02138, USA.