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Emotion as permeative: Attempting to model the unidentifiable

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ABSTRACT: The question of emotion in argumentation has received considerable attention in recent years. But there is a tension between the traditional normative role of informal logic, and the inclusion of emotion which is viewed as notoriously unstable. Here I argue that that, a] there is always emotion in an argument; b] that the presence of emotion is a good thing; and c] that we can and ought model and teach the use of emotion in Argumentation Theory.

KEYWORDS: Biro-Siegel, emotion , gender and emotion, reason

The concepts of “cognition” and “emotion” are, after all, simply abstractions for two aspects of one brain in the service of action.
(Storbeck & Clore, 2007, p. 3)

1. INTRODUCTION

This essay will focus on a question: What is it about emotions that we find so frightening? Why do we tremble at the thought of feelings? Why is “being emotional” something to avoid, and inimical to “clear-thinking”? Warranted or not, this view is old, as witness Shakespeare, “Give me that man that is not passion’s slave, and I will wear him in my heart’s core” (Hamlet, Act III, [ODQ] 1955) And, Pope adds, “The ruling passion, be what it will, the ruling passion conquers reason still,” *To Lord Bathurst* (ODQ). Burke is more specific in, *On the sublime and the Beautiful*: “No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear” (ODQ). More recently, the well known philosopher, Mr. Spock of the Starship *Enterprise*, states, “May I say that I have not enjoyed serving under Humans. I find their illogic and foolish emotions a constant irritant” (Star Trek, 1966).

While the Burke quote refers to a negative emotion, it is worth noting that the others do not. This raises the question of whether or not positive emotions are also to be feared. Can there be too much pleasure? An overabundance of love or joy? I want to suggest that our views of emotion do include the caution of too much of any emotion, not just the negative ones. Thus, one can be “blinded by love,” and “blissfully ignorant,” and so on. It strikes me that the key to all this is a question of control, i.e., of self-control. We have the idea that we can control our thoughts, but not our emotions, and this makes emotions more frightening than our allegedly pure

cognitive processes. Elster points out that some emotions can occur out of our control (1999, pp. 28-29), and cites Montaigne as suggesting that anger can overcome us before we realize it. In addition, emotions are often involuntary, which is another way of our being out of control.

There are a number of issues at play here, and I would like to raise several with the purpose of understanding our approach to emotions. These issues concern the question of control and why we have no fear of losing cognitive control; how emotion is essential to decision-making and choice; and, finally, how the emotion/reason dichotomy mirrors and supports a feminine/masculine division that is, at its heart, patriarchal.

2. A QUESTION OF CONTROL

I want to say first that we do sometimes, most or all of us, lose control or, perhaps, come close to that. I know that I certainly do. We may be overcome by emotion and, occasionally, act in ways that we would otherwise not or would later regret, as a result of our actions. The degree, frequency, and vehemence with which this happens will vary greatly from person to person, and from culture to culture. But anger, sadness, love, among other feelings, can result in a short circuiting of our usual self-censorship and control. This view resonates but is, I suggest, simplistic in a number of ways that are worth examining.

The first problem with blaming emotions for our outbursts, is that virtually all of them are based to one degree or another on beliefs that are a result of a straightforward cognitive process. Carl becomes enraged because he believes that Alex broke his guitar out of carelessness. David becomes wracked with sobs and flooded with tears because he believes that his dog has been killed. Susan commits herself to buying a house she cannot possibly afford because Beth has agreed to marry her. All these reactions, which we might say are emotionally driven, rely on the acceptance of certain beliefs without which they would not occur in the first place. David's belief concerning the demise of his pet may be completely rational, relying on evidence and other perfectly straightforward information. Susan's joy at Beth's acceptance of her marriage proposal is absolutely correct – Beth did, indeed, accept. Her overwhelming happiness and her desire to make Beth happy by providing her with the house of her dreams leads Susan to throw caution to the wind. Each of these incidents involving a loss of control requires a cognitive trigger, a grounding without which they would not occur. Someone who, without any reason at all, becomes wildly enraged has a mental defect, just as someone who is desperately sad without reason does as well, viz., clinical depression.

It is important that while we blame emotions, being over-emotional is but one way of losing control. A hyper-rationality can also lead to actions that dismay, if not the actor, then the observers. It is widely accepted that the Nazi Final Solution was a highly organized and rational undertaking, in at least one sense of the word. In addition, a multitude of highly intelligent and very rational people believe statements such as, $\{P \supset (Q \supset P)\}$, which is a consequence of logical thinking, and the explanation of which requires much mind bending and convoluted rationales. There are also extreme cases analogous to depression and psychotic rage, namely, various

forms of autism where emotions are not recognized, leading the afflicted into actions and situations not to be recommended. As Damasio points out, sociopaths who steal, rape and lie are, “...the very picture of the cool head we were told to keep in order to do the right thing” (Damasio, 1994, p. 178).

It is also worth noting that the kind of reasoning promulgated and honoured in Critical Thinking books and classes, is highly unemotional. We abstract from the context in order to isolate the premisses and conclusions, and model them in a linear fashion. This non-emotional, literal way of proceeding is one of Barbara O’Keefe’s method design logics, viz., the expressive MDL, which is considered the most unsophisticated method of communication as compared to the conventional MDL and the rhetorical MDL (O’Keefe, 1988). In other words, in the real world, ignoring emotion puts one at a disadvantage.

Notice that we tend to place the extremes of over emotionality and hyper-rationality in the category of mental illness, (but I do not include informal logicians in that category.) So the question becomes, for those us who behave typically, is there a separation between emotion and reason? If we are not “out of control,” are we always aware of the influences of each? Does *not* being out of control mean that we are *in* control?

I suggest not, and there is evidence to support this.

Overall, positive moods seem to have mixed effects on people’s reasoning. On the one hand, they seem to promote greater flexibility and creativity in problem solving, which appears logically desirable; on the other hand, they seem to promote a more top-down, less data-driven, and less thorough mode of processing, which appears logically less desirable. (Pham, 2007, p. 158)

So, for example, the environment can have an impact on how we reason, and even on what beliefs we hold. A nice day replete with sunshine and little birdies chirping merrily, can influence our mood, and, ergo, our behaviour. “A basic requirement of logical rationality is an accuracy of perceptions and beliefs. A large body of evidence indicates that incidental affective states tend to distort people’s perceptions and beliefs about objects in an assimilative fashion” (Pham, 159). In my work, I take the sense of the term ‘environment’ very broadly, especially as used in my visceral mode of communication (Gilbert, 1997). Thus, the setting, power relations, gender relations, and what might be considered incidental activities or factors all become potentially relevant to the interaction. We are, in fact, well aware of this. For that reason we ask for a raise on days off when the boss is in a good mood, and we don’t bring up the subject of homework when a child is in the midst of a tantrum. We look upon failure to be aware of such markers and failure to take them into account as a sign of a lack in either emotional acuity or intelligence.¹

There has been considerable debate over the question of whether cognition

¹ I must confess that I am delighted to find that there is empirical evidence for a principle of my theory and also of Willard’s. We, along with other rhetorically minded Argumentation Theorists, have been arguing that the idea of context, situation, or environment is integral to understanding argumentation and, indeed, communication. It is a relief to have some scientific basis for this.

precedes emotion, emotion precedes cognition, or whether there is any separation between them at all. I want to declare immediately that I am only a spectator in this debate, and would not know an amygdale if it was served to me with a béarnaise sauce. Nonetheless, the debate is an interesting one. Elster (1999, p. 2), says, “By and large, emotions are triggered by beliefs.” I do not have great issues with this, as the examples I used above illustrate, but I remark it to underline that, for him, there is a discernible difference between emotions and beliefs. Hume, alternatively, takes a different view: “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (Hume, 1985, Bk. II S. 3). This too, makes sense. The passions, after all, tell us what we like, and reason tells us how to achieve it. Compare these to the opening quotation, “The concepts of ‘cognition’ and ‘emotion’ are, after all, simply abstractions for two aspects of one brain in the service of action” (Storbeck & Clore, 2007, p. 1213).

How does the priority of either reason or emotion relate to the question of control. I have argued that we can lose control via reason or via emotion, and that attempting to determine which is prior will likely result in our concluding that they are, except in the most abstract sense, completely intertwined and frequently indistinguishable. Beliefs can lead to feelings, as when one is taught racist beliefs when young, and emotions can underscore those same beliefs. On the other hand, emotion may well lead to a rejection of false or doubtful beliefs as one begins to become uncomfortable with the way they sit. I have, for example, the strong belief that people with free earlobes, as opposed to attached earlobes, are more intelligent, honest, hardworking, reliable, creative, and generally more worthy of reward and praise. Those with attached lobes tend to the lower classes, are naturally more adept at menial labour, and are not worthy of serious education. I would, indeed, be very upset were my daughter to marry one.

Now the question is, are we dealing here with a cognitive issue, a question of beliefs, facts, and knowledge, or something based in emotion? We know that people believe the strangest things, and they often *feel* that their beliefs are correct. However, as I have argued elsewhere, (Gilbert, 2011), feelings often form the basis for many beliefs be they spiritual, scientific or mathematical. Consequently, it is the mix of both that creates the *belief set* on which many actions are based, and pointing to emotion or cognition as the sole operating factor is just mistaken.

3. THE NECESSITY OF EMOTION

A while ago (Gilbert, 2007) I discussed a question raised by Biro and Siegel (1992) regarding how one makes decisions, and how “rational” that process is. Their contention is that someone who, using their example, chose a candidate to vote for based on the candidate’s looks was obviously wrong and not rational. I called this the BS challenge, and I have given it much thought since that time. I want to say, first of all, that I truly understand their point. We want citizens to make voting choices based on such things as the issues and positions of the several candidates, and not on something we would consider frivolous or irrelevant or emotional. The problem I have is that the more I think about it, the weaker the BS position is.

Consider a reasonably intelligent person attempting to decide between candidates in a provincial election. Her riding has the usual four, Liberal, Conservative, NDP and Green. Now, on the BS model, she is supposed to carefully consider the position of each party on... Well, on what? On everything? On each issue from daycare to small business postal subsidies? What about the attitude each has toward federal transfer payments as a function of agricultural support? Indeed, each of the parties has a huge 600 page book detailing all their positions. We must assume, according to BS, that once the election is called, she must spend all her free time studying these manifestoes, comparing them, and deciding which party has the best stand on each issue.

Obviously, our voter, let's call her Sally, is not and maybe even cannot do this, certainly not in the time between parliament being prorogued and election day. Not only that, but we don't expect her to do that, simply because *we don't do that*. No one who doesn't have a job requirement to undertake those researches will do it, not least because no human being really understands federal/provincial transfer payments, and who wants to? Sally will *first and foremost, decide which issues she cares about*. She will then examine the parties on those issues, while perhaps keeping an open ear on others. Sally being a young woman who is engaged to be married, is very concerned about daycare, EI maternity benefits, and education. Her fiancé's main concerns are job creation programmes and a provincial commitment to bringing an NFL team to the province. Neither of them cares about the attractiveness of the candidates or, for that matter, their race, religion or sex, though Sally would be happier to vote for a woman.

What I want to suggest is that these base decisions, *these preferences*, are essentially emotional, and a function of one's concerns at the time. I very well remember being an expectant father, and nothing in the world seemed so pressing to me as the issues that touched upon child birth, childcare, education and so on. While I still regard them as important, they are not the only ones I take into consideration. What remains, however, is that it is virtually impossible to consider all the issues, and even if we could, we would still have to rank them in order of importance and that, in and of itself, is an emotional process. We always, in short, reason with choice, preference and feelings already in play. Regard Damasio when discussing the patient Elliot who had pre-frontal damage meaning that his affective input was inhibited: "What the experience with patients such as Elliot suggests is that the cool strategy advocated by Kant, among others, has far more to do with the way patients with prefrontal damage go about deciding than with how normals usually operate" (op. cit. 172). I.e., in the ideal, BS, model "reasoning" never stops, because the decision cannot be made by reasoning alone; emotional input is required to limit the field of choices. This is the issue I raised in (2011). Emotion or intuition or feeling is required to avoid infinite regress, simply because we have a need to have closure over information and options.

4. WOMEN ARE SO EMOTIONAL

There is another aspect to the emotion/cognition debate that needs mentioning. This concerns the role of gender, and the way in which the genders are expected

(and frequently do) involve themselves with emotion and cognition. If we reflect back to the question I opened with, why is emotion so scary, we really have to step back and ask, scary to whom? The cultural mythology is that emotions are scarier to men than to women, and, according to the research in social psychology that's not really far off. But we should be more precise: *people with certain characteristics traditionally labelled as feminine tend to be more comfortable with being around and with expressing emotions than those who lack those characteristics*. This is more precise because it does not divide the world into two neat boxes of "Woman" and "Man." Rather, it identifies certain traits or characteristics that are not directly correlated to either sex or gender. "For example," Brody writes, "when men engage in child care, their emotional expressiveness resembles what we stereotypically associate with women. Men who take primary responsibility for raising their children express more nurturance, affection, and disclose more feelings than men who do not" (Brody, 1997, p. 376). Thus, using Spence's (Spence & Buckner, 2000) multi-dimensional traits analysis, it is not males but masculinity that abhors emotion. Of course, femininity is generally found in greater abundance in women than in men, and as many have argued, that is a function of socialization, power relations, and social role (Brody, 1997, *passim*), rather than biological factors.

If we now return to our original question, "why are we so afraid of emotion?" we need to make an adjustment to the term 'we.' Because, it turns out that the 'we' does not really include everyone, but, rather it includes predominately those with masculine characteristics, viz., men, and not only men, but men with minimal feminine aspects. The result of this is a decided favouritism toward so-called "rational" procedures, what I have identified as the "logical" mode of communication (Gilbert, 1997), which results, in turn, in a major Component of what is call The Patriarchy. The patriarchy works by excluding those who rely on, utilize, respond to, or otherwise have sympathy for emotional communication and argument. This is not the sole tool of the patriarchy, but it is a major one. It excludes many, and for many reasons (Rooney, 2010; Campbell, 1994; Jaggar, 1989). It should also be noted in passing that it is not only women who are excluded, but numerous cultural groups as well are silenced by not being able to play the logic game according to rules they may not even know, let alone understand (Reygadas, 2001).

The process is very simple. Men are conditioned not to show any emotion other than anger, while women are taught that demonstrating emotion is good.

In Western cultures women are believed to be more emotionally expressive in general than are men. Specifically, they are expected to smile more as well as to show more sadness, fear, and guilt. In contrast, men are believed to show more overt emotional displays only in terms of physically aggressive anger. (Hess et al., 2000, p. 610)

Of course, *expressing* emotion is not the same as *experiencing* emotion. The gender differences there are much less marked (Kring & Gordon, 1998). Nonetheless, the insistence on eliminating and isolating emotions precludes those women who have not trained themselves in at least the *show* of masculine traits from being taken seriously (Burrow, 2005). This is sexist and morally unacceptable, and provides a significant reason for why we need to adjust our criteria for reasonableness, as well as distinguishing the logical from the rational.

5. CONCLUSION

The problem with modelling things that aren't separate is that we invariably forget we're modelling. That is, we make a distinction for theoretical purposes, describe the paradigmatic cases we identify in order to attain a deeper understanding of the concepts, and then promptly forget they are concepts, and treat them like independent objects. Subsequently, we find ourselves in philosophical difficulties, and have to prove the two things are not separate, which is what we stipulated in the first place and then forgot. There are many examples of this including mind/brain, female/male, public/private, and, par excellence, emotion/reason.

The issue here, and one that has haunted philosophy through the ages, concerns the reintegrating of emotion and reason, or, to use my language, the re-baptizing of emotional argument and emotional decision-making as rational. I have argued that the bogeyman is not emotion, but loss of control, and that reason can be out of control as well. Certainly, we can lose control of our emotions, but that occurrence invariably involves cognitive considerations. In addition, our reason can lead us into dreadful situations as a result of beliefs we hold and the consequences that follow from them. With apologies to Churchill, we might conclude by saying that we have nothing to fear but ourselves.

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