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Commentary on “The Emotional Life of Reason: Exploring Conceptions of Objectivity”

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Robert Pinto and Laura Pinto advance a non-binary account of the role of reason and emotion in the reasoning process on the grounds that reasons are integral to emotional states, and emotions are integral to reasoning. One problem arising from the non-binary account of reason and emotion, however, concerns how to evaluate the “reasonableness and appropriateness” of emotions at play in the reasoning process. Pinto and Pinto argue that traditional accounts of objectivity cannot help us to assess the reasonableness of emotions, for such accounts typically presume that emotions interfere with objective reasoning. Traditional accounts of objectivity also promote ideals of detachment and neutrality that exclude emotions and value-judgments from rationality.

Given this, Pinto and Pinto seek to align advances in our understanding of emotions as vital for good reasoning with advances in our understanding of objectivity. Contemporary non-traditional accounts of objectivity, such as strong objectivity, embodied objectivity, and naturalistic objectivity, allow for evaluation of emotions as reasonable for they reject simplistic reason/emotion and subject/object binaries and offer more empirically accurate accounts of these relationships. These non-traditional accounts of objectivity are also better able to address the complexity of emotions in reasoning as it occurs in practice, for they emphasize reflexive awareness and interpretive community dialogue. Pinto and Pinto thus recommend that we make diverse interpretive communities, inter-subjective dialogue, and reflexive awareness an explicit component of academic work. Moreover, we should include analyses of the emotions that arise in the course of academic work together with our analyses of evidence and reasoning. We should also work explicitly with intellectual virtues in the evaluation of emotions and reasons, for intellectual virtues help to regulate emotion and inquiry in general. Such efforts, Pinto and Pinto argue, put us in a better position to distinguish between “reasonable and unreasonable emotional responses” in the reasoning process.

In the following, I would like to expand upon three points in Pinto and Pinto’s persuasive argument. The first concerns the potential role of equanimity in accounts of reasoning where emotions are integral to reasoning and can be assessed for their reasonableness. Building upon feminist critiques of the desirability of ideals of impartiality in ethics, Emily McRae (2013) argues that equanimity—which is both cognitive and emotional in nature—stands a better chance of eliminating bias than the traditional Western conception of impartiality. She argues further that equanimity provides important support for methods of reducing bias advocated in non-traditional accounts of objectivity, such as the kind of interpretive community dialogue and reflexive awareness found in Pinto and Pinto’s account. McRae looks to Buddhist ethics to develop this point. In Buddhist ethics, equanimity, compassion, love, and joy—the “four immeasurables” or “boundless qualities”—are the key moral emotions. We experience these emotions as immeasurable or boundless, and thus distinct from more local and particular

emotional experiences of desire and aversion. When we cultivate equanimity, we do not eliminate the experience of having desires and aversions. The point, rather, is not to attach to them, follow them carelessly, or give them more weight than they are due. This is similar to the point that Pinto and Pinto (and Reger, 2001) make that reflexivity “requires the knower to distinguish between having an emotion, and acting in accordance with that emotion.” In equanimity, we reflect on and regulate our experiences of desire and aversion, choose how we act in relation to emotion, and also open ourselves to the feeling of boundlessness. Emotions with broader reach are thus chosen over those that are partial to our own interests, disinterests, likes, and dislikes. The key is to recognize that biases are, at root, desires and aversions. Thus, McRae (2013) argues that equanimity reduces bias because in this state we manage our desires and aversions rather than allow them to manage us.

To achieve equanimity and the other boundless qualities we must, of course, train the mind and our responses to others. This involves increasing our awareness of, and reducing our attachment to, desires and aversions—biases—and nurturing our ability to feel equanimity, compassion, love, and joy. And unlike traditional Western ideals of impartiality that require the elimination of emotional states, this training is realistic and achievable. Equanimity also supports Pinto and Pinto’s account of the emotional nature of reasoning, and the call for reflexivity and socially situated practices that enhance objectivity. This is in part because they argue that intellectual virtues are important for increasing objectivity: intellectual virtues regulate emotions and reasons, and they are expressed and learned socially in dialogue with others. In addition to being affective, equanimity is also generally regarded as a moral and intellectual virtue. Given these dimensions of equanimity, an analysis of equanimity might thus provide further support for Pinto and Pinto’s argument that we assess the reasonableness of emotion in the context of more realistic accounts of objectivity.

The second point I would like to explore concerns ideals associated with objectivity, such as the ideals of impartiality and detachment. Such ideals are rightly criticized in feminist accounts of objectivity, and Pinto and Pinto’s more realistic and practical account is welcome indeed. But I have a question about the value of ideals of objectivity, in part because ideals, or at least worthy goals, arguably exist in the Buddhist understandings of equanimity I refer to above. One aspires to equanimity and the other immeasurable or boundless qualities. So is the problem idealization itself, or the particular ideals we have created?

I am inclined to think the latter, for epistemic goals have a useful purpose: they direct our attention to the discovery of knowledge. They also alert us to the fact that we are not free to believe whatever we want and that we are morally and epistemically accountable for our inquiry. While I’m skeptical that we can achieve truly objective knowledge, in Peircean fashion I still like to think of objectivity as a worthy point on which to converge. This is why I focus on faithfulness to objective knowledge of reality (a virtue), rather than the question of whether I have acquired truly objective knowledge. This said, we need to be cautious about ideals, for as Ilya Farber (2005) points out, “we will always be vulnerable to metaphorical arguments which take practical truths of human experience and inflate them unanalyzed into conceptual truths of metaphysics” (p. 552). Moreover, it is not possible for us to know whether we are converging upon objective knowledge, or some lesser, more local objectivity.

Buddhist accounts of equanimity are also cautious in this respect. While it is helpful to remain faithful to the cultivation of equanimity, it is not helpful to attach to an ideal, even of equanimity, or deceive oneself that equanimity has been perfectly realized. So although equanimity has something of a metaphysical status by virtue of its “boundless” feel, it would be

a mistake to attach to it this feeling or associated metaphysical claims. Equanimity is good primarily because it helps us to reason and emote with less bias and suffering. Moreover, in Buddhist accounts, attention is drawn to the boundless quality of equanimity without reference to a “God’s eye-view” or an idealistic detachment from emotion. It is an interesting question, then, whether there might be new and improved ideals of objectivity suitable to guide post-binary accounts of reasoning. Equanimity is one example of a virtue or quality that could serve in this capacity.

My final point concerns the practical argument that we should bring emotion and virtue-based analyses into academic work alongside more typical methodologies intended to enhance objectivity. It will be important to create models of such analyses. Part of the reason that Buddhist (and Stoic) philosophies focus on the sage is arguably that we have traditionally learned equanimity and other intellectual virtues by example and often tacitly. The processes involved are sufficiently complex and context-dependent that it is difficult to learn to regulate emotions and act virtuously in the abstract. But we also have not worked to create virtue-based and emotional methodologies for academic inquiry; and certainly nowhere near the extent that we have with scientific methodologies. We also teach little about intellectual emotions and virtues, or moral emotions and virtues, as part of the scientific process. It is time to do this explicitly and methodically and see where it leads.

In sum, Pinto and Pinto’s promising account generates important and productive lines of inquiry. I have suggested a few such lines of inquiry, including the idea that it may be important to support reflexivity and interpretive community with equanimity; that we should further examine the potential of new ideals of objectivity that explicitly incorporate emotion and virtue; and finally, that we should craft methodologies to deepen our understanding of emotion in objective reasoning and fully realize its benefits.

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