

In this session we explore two issues. Firstly, what is the place of action and motivation in understanding what emotions are? Does it make sense to say that emotions are defined in terms of motivation? For example: that to be afraid is to be motivated to avoid some danger; to be angry is to desire payback in some way? Secondly, how should we situate the motivational dimension of emotions in relation to moral life? One influential account of ethics – that of Immanuel Kant, and those influenced by him – says that moral life involves acting from duty, which is recognised by reason. Kant's approach goes along with a certain amount of suspicion of the role of emotions in moral life: we can sometimes do the right thing for the wrong reasons (for example, out of fear, or self-interest, etc.), and we often fail to do the right thing, apparently, because of our emotion-linked motivations (e.g. to hide when we should speak up).

So there is a connection between the two sets of issues, because if emotions are strongly connected with action, and therefore with responses that are not always consciously intended, then this might change our understanding of the ethical significance of our actions, but also how we understand the emotional aspect of ourselves.

Beliefs, desires, emotions, reasons

Let's begin by considering the idea of 'direction of fit'. Beliefs seem to represent how the world is. Their 'direction of fit' is mind-to-world: beliefs, held in the mind, are supposed to fit the world – how the world is. If we come across new evidence, the belief should change to fit the new evidence. And beliefs can be rationally evaluated, for this reason, but we don't – according to Hume, at least, as we will see – expect them to motivate us in the absence of a pre-existent desire, or motivation. I can believe that there are nine planets in the solar system, and that there is a tin of very out-of-date sardines in the cupboard, without these beliefs giving me any motivation to act.

We don't expect desires to have the same direction of fit, obviously. Rather, it's more the other way round: to desire something, or to desire in a particular way, is to want the world that the desire describes. If I wish it would stop raining, for example; or if we want a new job. Fulfilment of a desire comes when the world changes to fit what is desired. Desires, and various passions, can motivate us, but we don't expect to rationally evaluate desires with reference to how things are. If I want a new job, which is well paid, secure and satisfying, I want a world which fits my desire; it has a world-mind 'direction of fit'.

Hume groups desires, emotions and sentiment together, and understands them all as 'impressions' – very roughly, the things that we feel: sensations and passions (which include what he thinks of as simple things like desire or aversion, through to more complicated passions like pride or humility).

Hume insists that beliefs only give us reasons to act when they are relevant to, or connected to, a passion or desire. My belief that there is an unattended chocolate cake in the kitchen is only of any motivational relevance to me *if* I feel hungry, or if I like chocolate cake. Some who had just eaten a three course meal, and disliked the flavour of cocoa wouldn't have reason to act arising from the knowledge about the cake. So the belief that there is an unattended chocolate cake in the cupboard can give rise to an action (someone getting a plate, eating some) or to no action. It is the presence of a desire that makes the difference.

Emotions could seem to have both directions of fit, depending on what we emphasise, or perhaps which range of emotions we're interested in. In one sense, as the cognitive account stresses, it seems that emotions have their own way of being fitting, or of being intentional. We fear something *because* it is dangerous. Anger is prompted by offence, or by the perception of an offence. Grief could be seen as a recognition of the loss of a loved one, etc. In this way, emotions seem to fit the world.

Sometimes this means that emotions can change as we learn of a mistake we have made: we if learn that contrary to what I originally thought, someone has *not* been spreading rumours about me, then my anger is liable to dissipate. If I realise that there is a sturdy electric fence between me and the angry bull, my fear recedes quickly. As we've seen, we tend to think that emotions can be fitting, or, excessive, or inappropriate, or misplaced (that's one of the things that an account of emotions has to make sense of). And this suggests that they have a mind-world direction of fit, unlike desires.

But one difficulty here is that it's not obvious that we can always articulate the objects that make a given emotion a good 'fit' for the world without using that emotion in the characterisation of the object. What does it mean for fear to be fitting? Fear is fitting if there is something to be feared; something fearsome. But how can we characterise the fearsome, except with reference to the subjective state which apprehends it as fearsome? Perhaps we might say that fear is a perception of danger, and danger is an objective characteristic, based on likelihood to cause harm. We respond to the presence of danger by feeling 'towards' the world in such a way that we take it to be fearful. People *do* fear things that are not dangerous, but perhaps we can say that in these cases the fear is a mistaken appraisal, or evaluation, of the world. In this sense, we might say, the judgements implied in emotions are objective.

But how can we evaluate the fittingness of anger? Perhaps with reference to the presence of offence: anger is the recognition of offence, the evaluation of a person or action as offensive. But it seems that we're only able to characterise 'offence' with reference to anger: offence seems to be that which rightly occasions anger, just as guilt is that which rightly occasions blame.

So we're back with a puzzle: how can emotions 'intend' the world, exactly? If they are 'feelings towards' the world (Goldie), what is it that emotions target, or point to?

Alongside this is the sense that emotions have a motivational dimension which means that they don't work like judgements; they don't have the same kind of mind-world fit. If someone is in love, they are not especially responsive to neutral appraisals of their beloved's qualities. At least, that's one powerful conception of love, as articulated by Shakespeare: 'love is not love/Which alters when it alteration finds'. The steadfastness of love is often thought to mean that true love is unaffected by changes in the beloved (however often this is not true in practice!). If someone tells a young, besotted woman: "what do you care about *him* for – he's not especially attractive, and he has bad prospects' it's unlikely to change her mind.

In the case of love, this feature seems like a strength, but in the case of jealous, it's the opposite. As Iago says, in Othello:

Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmations strong
As proofs of holy writ.

Iago's words express the basic intuition that very often, emotion distorts judgement, or makes the jealous person unresponsive to evidence that would otherwise be persuasive. Part of what it is to be jealous is to see a person in a particular light, to be prone to suspicious interpretation of actions.

And often, emotions seem to have a world-mind direction of fit, as do desires. Emotions seem very often to be involved in the explanation of action. I shout at someone because I'm angry; it doesn't always need to be the person who has caused the anger. I could even be angry at myself, and take it out on someone else. I run away because I'm scared; I might even fail to do something I'm otherwise committed to as a result of the fear.

So in this sense, they seem to share the motivational character of desires: they have a world-mind direction of fit. In fact, it might seem like emotions are often constituted *by* a particular desire: for example, the desire for safety, in the case of fear; the desire for payback, in the case of anger; the desire for union with the beloved, in the case of love; the desire to alleviate suffering, in the case of compassion.

This tension has interesting consequences when it comes to the placing of emotions in the moral landscape.

Firstly, there is the general question: what's the role of emotions in moral life?

Then there is the more specific question: which emotions are important to moral action, and in what ways?

We need to turn to a familiar contrast, that between David Hume and Immanuel Kant.

Hume is well known for his account of the difference between reason and passion. We don't need to consider Hume's understanding of emotion in great detail here, because the key point can be grasped independently: that reason is motivationally inert. So roughly speaking, what Hume variously calls emotion, passion or sentiment, is the source of motivation. Hence his phrase 'it is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of half the world to the scratching of my finger'. Reason allows us to interrogate the relations of ideas, for example, to determine whether a given proposition is self-contradictory, or not. And reason can also have a pragmatic use, it can enable us to determine whether a particular action will or will not help to bring about a given end.

But according to Hume, reason does not give us ends, or goals. And assessing the desirability of a given outcome in itself is not something we do through reason; it is the passions that move us to posit aims in the first place, or evaluate them once they are posited.

Another feature of Hume's thought that is relevant here is his motto: 'no ought from an is'. This seems like an extension of the same basic thought: it seems to mean that we don't move from descriptions of how things are to a judgement about what we should or should not do. Again, reason is motivationally inert: it doesn't tell us what we should do, or what we should want. Emotion, passion, or sentiment is our only means of evaluating. We feel aversion to certain kinds of behaviours, which give us the impression of a certain kind of character or disposition; we feel a desire to punish or condemn those who act in this way. We feel a certain kind of pleasure in response to other kinds of actions – and we feel inclined to praise them. Without these feelings, we would not be moral beings at all, Hume thinks. Reason on its own could never make us moral.

What does this mean? It seems to mean that everything about our moral lives is dependent, ultimately, on nature. That is, on our nature as passionate, emotional beings. We can establish complicated legal systems that aim to reward and punish in complex ways, but ultimately the whole thing is found on how we just happen to be. If we ask 'why' in a persistent way, looking for an account of why it is we feel, say, a certain kind of aversion in response to the sight of someone being cruel to a child, we will get nowhere. We can't get below, or outside of, these kinds of responses.

Hume was content that it should be this way, because it was the same with everything else. Ask, for example, how we know that we're right to expect that the sun will rise tomorrow, and we will end up with the simple facts of how our minds work that we can't really account for: we just suppose that the future will be like the past; it's almost like an instinct. So, if all our complicated reasonings about states of affairs are ultimately based on supposition, then why should we expect to find morality based on eternal

rational truths? Morality is the product of our passions, and our passions are part of our nature.

One consequence of adopting Hume's basic framework is that it becomes very difficult to account for the thought that there are moral truths, truths that can be recognised, and responded to. That's because, the way that Hume seems to present things, passions cannot be true or false in the way that beliefs can.

But the difficulty arises, then, in knowing why we should prefer to shape our lives around certain of our passions, or emotions, rather than others. For example, the case of fear: fear is a very powerful emotion, and very obviously motivating. But it doesn't follow that our fears provide motivations that we should accept. Hume tried to show that moral cultivation is a case of one set of passions disciplining others: the 'calm passions' motivate us to control, say, our anger. The moral sentiments are calm passions: the feeling of moral approval is a pleasurable kind of feeling that we get in response to contemplating certain actions; the feeling of moral disapproval is a kind of pain in response to others.

Nietzsche took Hume's approach further, and presented a view of moral life which consists of a struggle between different 'drives'. A person might struggle, say, to control their sexual appetites, or impose a regime on their diet, out of an aspiration to cultivate their character. But this is a case of one drive 'complaining' about another; the outcome will be determined by the strength of the drives, and 'the intellect will have to take sides'.

Kant, famously, refused to accept Hume's dichotomy. He could not accept that the deepest, most important insights that we're capable of should just come down to brute facts about our nature. Instead, he thought that we should be able to discern the rational necessity of moral judgements. So, he thought, the truth expressed in the Golden Rule – to do to others as you would wish them to do to you – is actually a kind of rationally necessary principle. When we approve of those who act accordingly, we are not merely experiencing a particular kind of pleasure – a calm passion – we are recognising a truth, that couldn't be otherwise.

But where does it come from? For Kant, it comes from us. But not from our animal natures, but from our rational nature.

Kant thinks that reason *does* motivate us to act: when we recognise the moral impermissibility of certain actions (say, cheating), we legislate for ourselves. We may have inclinations that push us in other directions, and these may have emotional force. Sometimes these may push us to do things that are in accordance with what we judge the moral law to demand. But in that case, it's a happy accident. Our moral capacity comes from our capacity *to will according to reason*; and when we do this, we are genuinely autonomous, because only then are we self-governed. A person who is

sometimes motivated by their anger, sometimes by their compassion, sometimes by their laziness, is heteronomous.