

The Beguiling Serpent

A Re-evaluation of
Emotions and Values

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2. Shifting Emotions

🌿 So far we have presented a brief sketch of each of the first four basic emotions—desire, fear, anger, sadness—as if that emotion existed in isolation. This was a useful fiction, one that allowed us to focus on one emotion at a time, but far from an accurate description of human affairs. In actuality, we pass rapidly from one basic emotion to another and, even though they are all hypothesized to be biochemically distinct, they are still highly interrelated.

It is true that people very often develop a decided preference for one emotion over another. In a family, the oldest child may have barely controllable desires, up to or over the edge of some kind of serious addiction, and the next child may be fearful and withdrawn to the point of complete social isolation. But no matter how dominant a particular emotion may seem at a given moment or in a particular context or relationship, all the basic emotions will be in play to some degree, because they continually and inevitably interact with one another. In real life, an individual may simultaneously exhibit a demanding bossiness or angry sadism with an employee, a sadly spiritless and childish dependence with a parent, a trembling terror with an authority figure such as the police, and a greedy acquisitiveness with respect to money or power.

Even if one's emotional life is seemingly stable and consistent, it is difficult to stay in any one basic emotion for an extended period of time. A man may long for a particular automobile, which longing exemplifies desire. If he fails to get it, he may become angry that he is unable to afford it, or depressed that he is unable to afford it, or fearful that he will never be able to afford it, or he may feel all four emotions over and over in succession. Even if the man is able to make the purchase, he may still respond angrily that it cost so much, sadly that he will now have to give up some other purchase, or fearfully that it may cost too much to replace in the future. Moreover, people move between emotions so rapidly that the edges become blurred and responses garbled. As psychologist William James correctly observed at the beginning of the twentieth century, "Most cases are mixed cases."¹

Confusion caused by shifting emotions

Precisely because we are always shifting emotional gears, sometimes quite rapidly, it is very easy to become confused about what is happening. It may seem that emotions are indistinguishable or interchangeable (e.g., Shakespeare's "To be furious is to be frightened out of fear").² Or it may seem that all emotions are really one, either because one emotion is more vivid (e.g. the angry bully) or because of the recurring human tendency to want to simplify. Thus some psychoanalysts have argued that depression should be viewed simply as repressed anger or anger against the self (according to

this interpretation, anger is the key, underlying, unifying emotion).

Therapist John Bradshaw has suggested that all emotional problems may be reduced to shame (an emotion we have viewed as one aspect—although a particularly painful one—of sadness, because of its ability to rob us of energy and shut us down) and that we can regain emotional health by learning not to be ashamed of ourselves. Albert Ellis, the inventor of rational emotive therapy, teaches that virtually all feelings of what we call emotional disturbance stem from “musturbation,”³ that is, allowing our desires to convince us that everything should, ought, or must be a certain way. Similarly, therapist Ken Keyes, following the Buddhist tradition, suggested that most emotional discomfort could be overcome by redefining personal demands (desires) as preferences.

Ironically, there is a sense in which Bradshaw, Ellis, Keyes, and others are entirely correct. The basic emotions are so closely connected that people may free themselves from a chronic involvement in one emotion by working on a different one. Hence, even if individual X appears to be, most of all, chronically angry, if X works on the accompanying demanding, fear, or shame, he or she will probably reduce the chronic anger. This is not unlike the approach that a physical therapist may take with a tensed or spasmodic back muscle. The therapist may not start working or kneading the muscle spasm, but instead try to massage and relax other body muscles first, after which the muscle spasm will

usually relax more readily. On the other hand, just because an approach of trying to turn demands into preferences works well in reducing fear and anger and shame as well as demands, this does not mean that all emotional disturbance can be reduced to demanding. Indeed, one can just as easily start the other way, by reducing one's anger or fear, and in the process one's demands will be quieted as well.

Paradoxes related to shifting emotions

The same tendency to confuse emotional states because they are closely connected may also help explain some of the paradoxes of recent drug research. Supporters of what might be called the "unified" view of the emotions argue that if antidepressants work on anger and fear as well as on sadness, surely we are dealing with a single underlying emotion, probably one best characterized as depression. But this is only one way to interpret the physical evidence and not necessarily the most likely one. The alternative explanation is that because the patient is continually passing through all four emotions, and because the four emotions are so highly interrelated, drugs that help relieve any of the four principal symptoms (unrestrained desire, fear, anger, or sadness) will help all of the symptoms, and thus help the patient, no matter what the principal symptom may be.

The rapidity with which we shift from one mood to another has created a second confusion as well: that each observable emotion is best thought of as a mask covering up some other,

quite different, perhaps even opposite, emotion. The psychologist Karl Jung especially emphasized this idea: if someone seems very aggressive, it is to compensate for an underlying problem of timidity. If someone seems timid, it is to compensate for an underlying problem of aggressiveness. A great deal of psychological literature is full of this kind of paradoxism: patient A, suffering from disorder B, is extremely irresponsible, but this may manifest itself either in extreme irresponsibility or in extreme responsibility. Patient C, suffering from disorder D, is emotionally immobilized, but this may manifest itself either in immobility or in hyperactivity. Patient E, suffering from disorder F, is basically gentle, but there is a chance that this may manifest itself in murderous violence, etc., etc.

Even psychiatrist Karen Horney, usually so clear in her thinking, lapsed into this kind of confusing and circular analysis in her comment that "Compulsive drives are . . . born of feelings of isolation, helplessness, fear and hostility, and represent ways of coping with the world despite these feelings; they aim primarily not at satisfaction but at safety."⁴ Although it is true that all these emotions constantly overlap and intermingle, there is no evidence that compulsive drives (seen here as an aspect of and especially strong variation on desire) are "born" in sadness, fear, or anger any more than sadness, fear, or anger are "born" in compulsive drives; nor is the statement "drives for satisfaction are really drives for safety" necessarily any more true than the obverse statement "drives for safety are really drives for satisfaction."

Unscrambling confusion and paradox

Fortunately there is a way to unscramble all this confusion, paradox, and contradiction. One simply recognizes that every person, not just a psychiatric patient, goes through unrestrained desiring, fearful, angry, and sad phases and that his or her attitudes and especially his or her behavior change accordingly. Thus a person who claims that he or she is Jesus Christ or Napoleon when in the throes of a mania will undoubtedly at some point shift back into sadness and morosely complain that he or she is a nobody. Similarly, an extremely aggressive person living frequently and deeply in anger, for example a mugger or other street criminal, will undoubtedly have moments of panic or terror in which all aggression is temporarily stripped away. Although the exact timing of these shifts is difficult to predict, it is possible to say with certainty that everyone will cycle through each of the major emotions in turn, and that his or her thoughts and behavior will reflect the emotion of the moment. For example, emotion-related thoughts typically include: "I demand X, cannot live without it, and have every right to boss myself and others to get it" [desire]; "I worry that I will die if I enter this airplane and/or I will 'die' from wounded pride if people think badly of me or if I think badly of myself" [fear]; "people and/or the world are unfair to me and I have every right to blame them/it" [anger]; "I have lost something forever and/or feel guilty because I have made unforgiveable mistakes" [sadness]). Commonly, these thoughts roll in one after another.

Nor is this continual mood-shifting a matter of opposites, of moving from point A to its obverse point B, as Jung and others thought. Our tendency to think in terms of dialectically opposed pairs such as justice and injustice or black and white arises in the logical portion of our mind and is often quite useful. But this particular kind of logical thinking does not fit the emotions. Although we commonly refer to manic-depression, in which a person is thought to alternate between manic desire and an opposing deeply sad depression, mania (in which wants become elevated to wildly unrealistic levels, often followed in quick succession by frustrated anger at anyone who seems to disagree or stand in the way) and depression (lacking the energy to want anything or even to be angry) are not any more opposite than mania and fear (avoiding or fleeing). Similarly, fear is just as much an opposite of anger (attacking or fighting) as it is of mania.

It is possible to pair off *groups* of basic emotions. Thus in general desire and fear tend to be more forward looking, more focused on the future, while in general anger and sadness tend to be more backward looking, more focused on the past. On the other hand, one could just as reasonably take the opposite tack of grouping fear and sadness together, because people living deeply in these emotions are generally aware that they are fearful or depressed, and consequently more timid, while people living deeply in desire or anger are often completely unaware that they are gripped by mania or anger, and consequently more aggressive. Similarly, one could speak of

desire and anger as generally more active and fear and sadness as generally more passive, but a particular angry or demanding type (e.g., a “passive-aggressive”) may be quite passive, while a particular fearful or sad type (e.g., an “escapist” or “martyr”) may be quite active. On balance, therefore, it is not accurate or particularly useful to speak of any one major emotion as the so-called opposite of another.

Further complications

Perhaps the most confusing aspect of emotions is that, as we experience them, we may be experiencing emotions about others or about ourselves or about others and ourselves in quick succession. For example, in the midst of arguing with a spouse, we may be angry at the spouse, but also disappointed (sad) that we are handling the conflict poorly. As previously suggested, emotions seem to be highly reactive, modulating our energy and propelling us toward some specific action such as taking (desire), fleeing (fear), fighting (anger), or lack of action such as giving up (sadness), and generally regulating our relations with other creatures. The irony of human emotion, as opposed to most animal emotion, is that our self-consciousness, our ability to look at ourselves from the outside as if we were another creature (and not just to externalize ourselves but to evaluate and rate ourselves), adds an entire new layer of complexity to our emotional lives, opens up all sorts of opportunities for emotional misfiring by making it possible to turn our desire, fear, anger, or sadness on ourselves.

Among the early Christian Church fathers, Saint Augustine held that the root of all human suffering lay in original sin, the bite of the apple by Adam and Eve that led to self-consciousness. Julian the Apostate disagreed: suffering is an inescapable part of human life with or without self-consciousness. From today's perspective, one might conclude that both were right: baboons suffer from deranged emotional systems just as humans do, but conscious and especially self-conscious humans have the potential to suffer more. Both baboons and humans must make decisions every day that will determine the future direction their lives take. Neither baboons nor humans will make the best choice every time or even much of the time. But only humans must learn to live with their past mistakes and with the likelihood that each day will bring more of them. Nor do baboons have to worry about their emotions feeding on themselves as in becoming fearful of being afraid, angry about being depressed, or just more depressed about being depressed, with all the familiar physical accompaniments of sweaty palms, rapid heart beats, and sore back muscles that cannot heal because we cannot stop thinking about them. Nor are baboons self-conscious enough to want to hide behind masks, pretend that they are happy when actually angry, be sexually responsive when desire is at low ebb, or engage in some other minor or major emotional mendacity.

But whatever the case, whether people are being emotionally open, emotionally mendacious, mendacious about being open, open about being mendacious, or mendacious but in denial

about being mendacious, the main point to keep in mind is that we always maintain an inner emotional dialogue with ourselves as if we are dealing with another person, with the result that any emotional strategy we use in our relations with others can also, and equally, be used to regulate relations with ourselves. Thus, we can be angry and abusive with others or with ourselves, demanding and manipulative with others or with ourselves, avoidant and reclusive out of fear of what others may come to think of us or out of fear of what we may come to think of ourselves, a chronically sad “defendant” in the harsh court of self-appraisal because of suffering we feel we have brought on others or because of suffering we feel we have brought on ourselves.

In thinking about this, it is easy to see that at least some of the behavioral strategies associated with the basic emotions are commonly turned on self as well as on others as we shift between emotions. For example, it is perfectly obvious that some people demandingly “boss” others while some people demandingly “boss” themselves, but for most “bosses,” this kind of behavior is such an ingrained habit that it is regularly turned on both self and others. What is less obvious, but on reflection equally true, is that all of the behavioral strategies associated with the basic emotions are used in this way, so that we are always engaged in the very complex operation of trying to integrate, at any given moment, strategies that may be intended for self, for others, or for a continually and rapidly shifting and unpredictable combination of self and others.