On emotions, thought and speech

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ON EMOTIONS, THOUGHT AND SPEECH

Jakob Bühlmann Quero

We love, we hate, we desire, and we are afraid; we have loving thoughts, hating thoughts, desiring thoughts, and fearful thoughts; we have goosebumps, racing hearts, and we smile, or yell. In other words, *we have passions*, or *emotions*, as our contemporary terminologists would put it[42]. This assertion seems clear and undeniable, but it has troubled some of the greatest scientific minds of our last two centuries. *What is the relation between the aforementioned three sets of items present in the assertion? Are emotions based on thoughts, or rather feelings?*

In the history of the study of emotions there is no clear *progression* path, but rather a bumpy road of variations, conceptual innovation, and categorical debate. To give an example, one of the very first formulations of what we could consider a theory of emotions, found in the works of Plato, avoids the usage of such a category, scattering instead its *substance* between three concepts – reason, spirit, and

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appetite[43]. In some of his views, presented in *The Republic*, Plato offers a short explanation on the subject with the aim of providing an account of the parts that conform the human soul, which would prefigure personal behavioural patterns. These patterns, Plato says, should help the philosopher predict the proper placement for each individual in an ideal and perfect society.

Further developments, found in the Roman stoicism, provide a more precise and concrete account of emotions, not still treating them as a subject of study *per se*, but using them as a central element of their moral provisions. As we know, Stoicism portraits the external and material world as something detached from our will and desires, having its own rules and patterns, that have nothing to do with our own interests. This way, caring for external things, our bodies, our fate, our luck, or our possessions – namely, projecting our passions and emotions into the outer world – shall be considered unwise, for it would be a source of frustration by bonding our well-being to things that are essentially ruled by *Fortune*. Therefore, if passions (or, again, emotions) make us vulnerable by making ourselves less sovereign and more drawn to external things, self-suppression by means of silencing emotions is the key to a wise existence. As Marcus Aurelius would put it,

> "First that things cannot touch the mind: they are external and inert; anxieties can only come from your internal judgement. Second, that all these things you see will change almost as you look at them, and then will be no more. Constantly bring to mind all that you yourself have already seen changed. The universe is change: life is judgement."[44]

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[43] Solomon, Robert, (1999) "The Philosophy of Emotions", in *Handbook of Emotions*, by Lewis, M., Haviland-Jones, J. M., Feldman Barret, L. New York: The Guilford Press, 4.

[44] Aurelius, Marcus (170-180) *Meditations*. 2006. England: Penguin Classics, 24. In this quotation of his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius points to the fact that,

Virtue in life was to be found in the practice of the so-called *apatheia*, or emotional indifference as extirpation or dissolution of all emotional evaluation.

The medieval European view on emotions would be deeply tied to an ethical point of view, following the steps of its predecessors, and concretely within the Christian ethos. This point of view would produce a quasi-medical set of theories about the influence and presence of multiple substances in the human body that prompted emotions to trigger. This way, the *theory of the humors*, as we found it written by classic Greek authors, was still held as a deeply explanative thesis: Ramon Llull, in his "*Començaments de medicina*", proposes a diagnostical method based on the presence of the 4 humours in medical and emotional processes – gall, spleen, choler and blood. This theory would mark one of the first taxonomies of emotions, following the consequences of such a view; as John of la Rochelle named it (1235), it was to be called *summa de anima*[45].

Modern theories started to mark the path of what was to be developed by further theorists, with names such as Descartes (1596-1650) and Spinoza (1632-1677) leading the way. In Descartes we find one of the first contemporary-fashioned taxonomies of emotions, with a division implying the so-called "six primitive emotions": wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy, and sadness[46]. In the case of Spinoza, we find in his

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while the external world (or the Universe, as he puts it) is *change* and *transformation*, motivated by causes far away from our control, our internal world is entirely ours. This, paired with the observation that "anxieties" are internal, drives Marcus Aurelius to affirm that, in fact, we can rule our mind by detaching from our reactions and controlling our emotions and thoughts.

[45] Knuuttila, Simo, "Medieval Theories of the Emotions", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/medieval-emotions/>.

[46] Solomon, Robert, (1999) "The Philosophy of Emotions", op. cit. 7.

writings a clear Stoic inspiration that invites us to understand emotions, as well as our own subjectivities, as part of God. By doing so, Spinoza develops a recipe for understanding emotions, and our own reactions to them, as an inevitable part of the Universe: understanding them correctly shall be our provision to a virtue-based life.

General agreement says that the systematic study of emotions begins with William James's work, a 19th century American philosopher and psychologist. Before his work, we find a broad spectrum of studies and activity around the topic of emotions, but not a specific, modern, and dedicated analysis of the structure of emotions *in itself*. As we have seen, before the *Jamesian* approach, we find a focus on the social character of emotions, its ethical implications, and its historical development. Robert Solomon, the author that will furnish the main theses of this article, outlines a clear historical picture of the development of the *emotion studies*. In his article "The Philosophy of Emotions"[47], we see a path of progression between Plato, Descartes, and William James that allows us to understand the very foundation of the category of "emotion".

One of our motivations in developing a study on emotion is discovering its fundamental structure. Seeing what the structure of emotions is should allow us, in our research, to see to what extent emotions are a mental or a physical phenomenon; to what extent they rely on our instincts, or rather on our opinions; to what extent emotions are hardwired in our brains, this is, shaped by evolution, or rather by our cultural determinations. In other words, we focus on seeing if there is a chance to modify the outcomes of our human tendencies, and see what doors are open for us to act in the specific case of *hate* and *hate speech*.

[47] Solomon, Robert, (1999) "The Philosophy of Emotions", op. cit.

In analysing how hate is associate with speech as *hate speech* we first start by looking into the definition offered by Susan Brison[48]:

> "(hate speech is a) speech that vilifies individuals or groups on the basis of such characteristics as race, sex, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation, which (1) constitutes face-to-face vilification, (2) creates a hostile or intimidating environment, or (3) is a kind of group libel"[49]

Things being so, we have a twofold aim: first of all, we want to present the first major theory of the philosophy of emotions, the *Jamesian view*[50], and one of its counterparts, Solomon's *cognitivism*; second, we want to use the findings enlightened by Solomon's cognitivism to offer a unique view, and perhaps even a resolution proposal, on hate and hate-related actions.

The Jamesian view

There is a *folk* vision of emotions that suggests, as the adage says, *first we are happy and then we smile.* Following this conception, the emotional episode would start first, being something seemingly mental, and then expand to the body in the form of a physical reaction – in the case of happiness, a smile; in the case of fear, a racing heart; in the case of sadness, a pressing feeling in the stomach and wet eyes. This view,

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[48] Brison, Susan, 1998a, "The Autonomy Defense of Free Speech," Ethics, 108(2): 312–339. See also: Anderson, Luvell and Michael Barnes, "Hate Speech", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/hate-speech/>.

[49] Brison, Susan, 1998a, "The Autonomy Defense of Free Speech," op. cit. 313. , Parenthesis non-original.

[50] As we will see, both theories would deliver completely opposite recipes in order to deal with so-called "negative emotions", such as hate and its derivates, as hate speech.

the folk view, would stress the importance of a conceptual priority of the mental part in emotions, which goes first, before the physical reaction/behavioural pattern.

It seems clear to us that this vision fits the common view on emotions, which holds two main tenets. First, the emotion is something independent of the bodily reaction, but *usually* is attached to it. Second, there is a conceptual priority of *the emotion* over the bodily reaction. By contrast, James who calls this view a *folk* vision, asks us to think closer this seemingly "natural way of thinking", directing his research to debunking the idea of a conceptual priority of the mental and intentional experience. In an article written in 1884 called "What is an emotion?" James states:

> "Our natural way of thinking about these standard emotions is that the mental perception of some fact excites the mental affection called emotion, and that this latter state of mind gives rise to the bodily expression"[51]

We see this traditional view considers the emotional episode (such as a case of hate, for example) a mental process that drives its owner's body to express it *via* feelings. For example, if John has the emotion of hate towards left-handed people, the traditional view would hold that, in presence of a left-handed person, the James's picture of mind would process it and develop the emotion of hate, driving it into our body in the form of feelings – racing heart, burning stomach, chest pressure.

This way of proceeding would be deemed as incorrect by James, who favoured a rather physical interpretation of the core element of emotions. Following James's research, first, we should not consider bodily reaction as something different from our emotions, but rather as its essential part. Let's recall that, in the previous case, feelings are a

[51] James, W. 1884. What is an emotion? In: Robert C. Solomon (Ed.), *What is an emotion?* Texas: University of Texas, 2003, 67.

secondary part of emotions, only aroused by the action of mind, the core element of the emotional episode. Second, the priority should not be placed on the emotional episode, but rather on the bodily reaction, that would be in its turn the core causal element of the emotion.

James's argument is simple, but convincing. In a phenomenological exercise, James invites us to consider the elements that we feel as a part of an emotional episode. Once there, the experiment consists in taking these elements out one by one up until the point we can no more talk about an emotion. Following James, this point is reached when we try to erase the feelings of any emotional episode. In his own words:

> "If we fancy some strong emotion, and then try to abstract from our consciousness of it all the feelings of its characteristic bodily symptoms, we find we have nothing left behind, no 'mind-stuff" out of which the emotion can be constituted, and that a cold and neutral state of intellectual perception is all that remains"[52]

The fact that, once we subtract the feelings out of the emotional episode, we seem to be left with an empty element, would mean for James that emotions are essentially bodily reactions, having its starting point, and core element, in the feelings we have when we experience our emotions. In other words, bodily changes are *necessary* to trigger emotional episodes. Contrary to the case of John in the *natural way of thinking*, a Jamesian would hold that the emotion of hate in John's case is, first, the bodily reaction to seeing a left-handed person, then, the act of perception that makes him realise he is experiencing hate. As we see, there is no cognitive element involved in the process of developing an emotion in James's theory, and the emotion of hate happens to be, solely and entirely, a physical matter – racing heart, burning stomach, chest pressure.

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[52] James, W.1884. What is an emotion?, op. cit. 69-70.

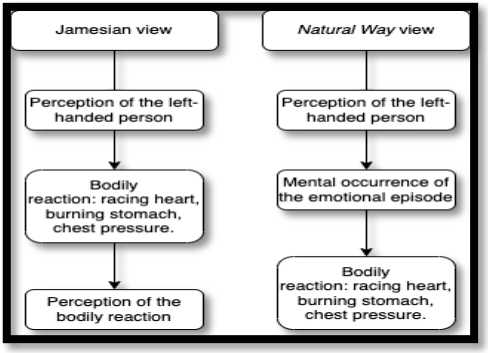

Table 1: Jamesian vs. Natural Way comparison

The Jamesian approach to emotions has among its virtues the capacity to take account of the centrality of feelings in emotional episodes, defining emotions as processes of feeling and bodily changes. In fact, the same William James offers a second argument, the argument of suggestion, rooted in this assumption: if emotions are in essence bodily changes, and the former do precede the latter, consequentially it is possible to autosuggest emotions by recreating bodily changes. In James's words: "sit all day in a moping posture, sigh, and reply to everything with a dismal voice, and your melancholy lingers"[53]. This argument, still taken in consideration nowadays in some trends of the philosophy of emotions, aims to show how bodily changes are *sufficient* to trigger an emotional episode.

As stated in the introduction, our aim in this article is to explore the possibility to understand in a nuanced way the mechanisms and processes of hate, and hate speech, as standard human emotions. Having analysed the Jamesian approach, though, it seems to us it falls short when analysing the case of hate and hate speech, having the classical problem of the Jamesian view and all of its derivates: the problem of intentionality – further explained in next section of our chapter.

[53] What is an emotion?, op. cit. 73.

Even if we agree in saying that emotions have an important physical part, which generally seems to be the case, we would easily lean towards saying that they also have a relevant cognitive element, or at least that they need some conscious consideration about the situation we are reacting to. This is essentially what intentionality means: the capacity of a mental element to be linked to an external object. In other words: having an emotion seems to require having some kind of conscious awareness of the environment we are placed in. Let's imagine the case fearing bears: if we find a bear in the middle of a dark forest, our reaction is going to be most surely of fear, giving us the impending need of fleeing the place; but what about seeing the bear in a zoo? We are going to feel the emotion of fascination, or curiosity. This kind of nuanced reactions cannot be easily explained by the Jamesian, who in fact has to recur to an unexplained reactive mechanism, for our body without our mind seems to be blind to the environment.

The same thing seems to happen if we analyse the case of hate, and hate speech. Hate in the context of hate speech presupposes a set of notions we perceive from an individual, or collective, and an active cognitive activity of analysing, considering a set of beliefs, and projecting them into the world. How are we supposed to do this within a Jamesian framework, where the body is the central subject of emotions while being *blind* to the external world? Furthermore, if we are to analyse this kind of hate from a Jamesian standpoint, how can its complexity be stressed by only appealing to bodily changes? It seems to us that, in order to properly analyse the way hate, and hate speech, work, the guiding theory must involve a stronger presence of the cognitive element.

Solomon's pure cognitivism

The label of *cognitivism*, *cognitivist* can be applied over a large spectrum of theories and theorists that span from a mild and cognitive-

sensitive Jamesian view to a pure and strong cognitive-based mental theory of emotions. In this section we will focus on one of the strongest cases of *pure cognitivism*, Robert Solomon's theory, which draws our interest as it holds an enormous explanatory potential in the case of hate speech. This potential, as we will show, is derived from its emphasis on the mental side of emotional episodes and the weight of belief and belief-projection present in said theory.

One of the motivations of the *pure cognitivist* theory of emotions comes from the need of overcoming the shortcomings of the *Jamesian theory*, which appear to be strong claims against its application and seem to undermine all serious efforts of understanding some of the parts of an emotional episode. One of its major shortcomings is hinted in the example of the bear encounter we presented at the end of the last section. What kind of relation between an emotion and its external object could a Jamesian theorist trace, given that the body without a mind seems to be blind in relation to its environment? In other words, this problem has been presented as the problem of the intentionality of emotions.

"Intentionality" is a philosophical term used to refer to the capacity our minds have to refer to external objects or situations: if I am afraid of the bear I am seeing inside the deep dark forest, my emotional episode is in fact tracing an intentional relation, the fear of this external object the bear in a deep dark forest. If I speak about "that car" I parked in front of the office, my statement of the indexical "that" is tracing an intentional relation with the car I parked in front of the office. Things being so, it may be assumed that feelings *do not have intentional capacity*, because they are simple bodily reactions and they only transfer information about the state of our own body. Therefore, the Jamesian theorist would have a difficult task explaining how emotional episodes relate to the external situations causing them, have a conceptual and intentional object distinct from the simple causal triggering of some stimulus.

As we were saying, a pure cognitivist like Robert Solomon develops such a theory to base his analysis of emotions over the blind spot of the Jamesian, by unfolding the intentional character of emotions. To do so, as we will see, emotions will become entirely thoughts and beliefs, which clearly hold intentional properties, putting aside the physical reaction of our bodies in an emotional episode. Robert Solomon introduces his theory this way:

> "[…] an emotion is neither a sensation nor a physiological occurrence, nor an occurrence of any other kind. 'Struck by jealousy', 'driven by anger', 'plagued by remorse', 'paralyzed by fear', 'felled by shame', like 'the prick of Cupid's arrow', are all symptomatic metaphors betraying a faulty philosophical analysis. […] I would like to suggest that emotions are rational and purposive, rather than irrational and disruptive […]"[54]

To say that emotions *are rational and purposive, rather than irrational and disruptive* has striking consequences. Recalling the example of the bear we presented at the end of the first section, the standard tendency for the Jamesian approach will be to divide the occurrence of my emotional episode of "fear" in two parts: my feeling of fear – the physical reaction the encounter with the bear causes –, and the object of fear – the encounter with the bear. For the pure cognitivist, as Solomon proposes, this division will be totally incorrect, for it seems to suggest that there is a connection between *my bodily feelings* and the *bear in the deep dark forest*, and we have already said that feelings do not have intentional capacity by means of which to trace an intentional link to the external world. What is, then, the division of the emotional episode a *rational and purposive* view proposes?

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[54] Solomon, Robert. "Emotions and Choice". *The Review of Metaphysics*. (1973) 27, 20.

We see two main elements to be respected in the current analysis: first, that the relation between the emotion and the object that causes it cannot be understood as a relation between a set of feelings and its causing object; second, feelings can't hold intentionality with external objects, a central property of emotions. For Solomon, as a *pure cognitivist* philosopher, an emotion as 'anger' "is not a feeling; neither is anger a feeling plus anything else"[55]; also, as we can't separate our emotional episode from the causing event, "Neither can 'what I am angry about' be separated from my being angry"[56].

Regarding the first assertion, for the *pure cognitivist*, the physical part of the emotions *can be there*, but does not occupy a central part in the definition of the emotional episode. The reason is diverse, but actually arises from the second assertion, which stresses the importance and the weight of the intentional relation between the emotional episode and the "about" of the emotion. For Solomon, emotions are characterized *in relation* to its object, and not because of the set of bodily reactions they arouse, in the case they do:

> "[…] feelings are never sufficient to differentiate and identify emotions, and an emotion is never simply a feeling, not even a feeling plus anything. Moreover, it is clear that one can have an emotion without feeling anything. One can be angry without feeling angry: one can be angry for three days or five years and not feel anything identifiable as a feeling of anger continuously through that prolonged period"[57].

Regarding the second assertion, the brilliance of the *pure cognitivist* theory shines its brightest. The central element of Solomon's theory is that it is not that I have a bear standing in front of me what triggers my emotional episode of fear, but rather the intentional object of "A bear

[55] Solomon, "Emotions and Choice", op. cit. 22.

[56] Solomon, "Emotions and Choice", op. cit. ibid.

[57] Solomon, "Emotions and Choice", 23.

standing in front of me", that is, a concrete description or set of descriptions established by the emotion itself. This way, not only is the emotion dependent on the intentional object of "A bear standing in front of me", but the intentional object also depends on the emotion of fear.

This strange relation of mutual dependence means that, in fact, both emotional episode and intentional object define each other in a unique way, and that not all descriptions of the same phenomenon would arouse the same emotion. In Solomon's words:

> "What emotions are 'about', as in beliefs, can only be identified under certain descriptions, and those descriptions are determined by the emotion itself. […] To be angry is to be angry 'about' a peculiar sort of object, one that is distinguished by the fact that it is what I am angry 'about'. Husserl describes this peculiarity of mental acts in general by insisting that an intentional act and an intentional object are 'essentially correlated'."[58]

This relation of mutual dependence establishes a really interesting point, as it supposes that the relation between the emotion and the intentional object is conceptual and inseparable. This way, two things unfold in front of us. First, that every emotional episode will always be essentially linked to the intentional object, being *afraid-of-the-bear*, for example. Second, every instance of an emotional episode, which is rooted in a belief/description of the intentional object, will change with a change of the description of the object, and every description will also change with a change in the emotion. This means essentially the following: "A change in what I am angry 'about' demands a change in my anger; if I no longer feel wronged by John, who only bought a car that looks like mine, I cannot be angry at John (for stealing my car) any longer"[59].

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[58] Solomon, Robert, "Emotions and Choice", 22-23.

[59] Solomon, Robert, "Emotions and Choice", 23.

Following from the aforementioned properties, it seems clear that for the pure cognitivist, such as Solomon, emotions are not feelings, but contingently can have feelings attached. Regardless, these theorists establish that emotions are purely cognitive elements, shaped in the form of beliefs about the external world. What is the exact definition to be used here?

As it is discussed by Solomon[60], emotions are not easily defined from the point of view of the pure cognitivist. The way Solomon proposes it seems to say that emotions are to be understood as normative judgments on objects and events around us. This way, my *being afraid of the bear in the deep dark forest* is a rational judgment, a *normative judgment*, on the situation I am involved in. This is so because, in fact, I think the bear is dangerous, and concretely I am convinced the bear will attack me as soon as he sees me, and I know that being attacked will mean be most likely killed, because the bear runs fast and even climbs to trees... Thus, my emotion of fear is actually a rational judgment on the danger of the situation I am involved in. The *rationale* of it is the following:

> "My anger is that judgment. If I do not believe that I have somehow been wronged, I cannot be angry […]. Similarly, if I cannot praise my lover, I cannot be in love […]. If I do not find my situation awkward, I cannot be ashamed or embarrassed. If I do not judge that I have suffered a loss, I cannot be sad or jealous"[61].

At this point, the advantage the pure cognitivist stance has in terms of explanatory power on hate, and hate speech, seems clearer. Not only pure cognitivism avoids the accusation of not being able to explain

[60] Solomon, Robert. 2003. I. Emotions, Thoughts and Feelings: What is a 'Cognitive Theory' of the Emotions and Does it Neglect Affectivity? *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 52, 1-18.

[61] Solomon, Robert, "Emotions and Choice", 27.

fundamentally intentional states, as all emotions are, and especially hatred distinct from hate speech, focusing on the concrete emotion. As hate speech is in need of a net of beliefs, projections and a correlative cognitive posture, it opens the analytical possibility of understanding the emotions as *beliefs*, and the *normative judgments* on its object. This optic denies the option that we can voluntarily change a belief from what it is, by simply deciding so. We can eventually adapt honestly and transparently on given set of beliefs our approach, trying to understand what they are and, we as person, provided that enduring emotions and therefor our personal identity, is remaining stable, over the passing of time, we end up better knowing who we are.

The explanatory power of pure cognitivism

As we explained during the introduction, our quest in developing this article was to offer a general view on the application some theories of emotion have in understanding the issue of hate, arising from hate speech. To do so, we applied the Jamesian view, one of the most standard views in the world of the philosophy of emotions, with small results, as one of its basic problems is the difficult relation it has with the very notion of intentionality, fundamental to the precise analysis of emotions.

To offer an alternative, we presented the view of the *pure cognitivists*, which holds a strong emphasis on the notion of intentionality, combining it with a deeply *rational* and cognitive approach. By doing so we open the door to understanding hate speech as a net of normative judgments and notions that are applied over collectives and human groups, and not necessarily related to a strong *feeling*, but rather a set of ideas and tendencies.

Emphasizing some characteristics of a collective, such as race, physical properties, cultural attributes, - and doing it with a derogatory and discriminatory aim, fixed on a group of people or abstract section of

a population -, implies the core judgmental element, and correlatively hate to be considered as something arising from a set of beliefs, and preconceptions, that actually shape the vision of its *intentional object*, the derogated collective – using a set of notions that shape, at the same time, the emotion itself.

As the relation of mutual dependency in the emotional process goes, we see that the *intentional* version of the collective is a concrete description of it, not the collective in itself, thus only taking into account a limited group of properties and characteristics. Therefore, the *complete* description of the collective, its properties and way of acting, are put aside in favour of the emphasised description that distorts and partiallises them. As we saw, this distorted view shapes as well the emotion of hate, creating the emotional episode of "hating-x-and-y-collective".

As things go, the optimistic turn of the events arises as well from the pure cognitivist theory: *if emotions are based on normative judgments, and if these judgments have the shape of beliefs, it is imaginable, recalling Solomon's quotation* –"My anger is that judgment. If I do not believe that I have somehow been wronged, I cannot be angry"[62]–, *that the emotion can be banished by deconstructing the beliefs upon which it is based*.

Perhaps, the question now could be the following: are we to accept public expression of hate speech to allow for its public debunking in hopes of modifying, and even erasing, its root beliefs?

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