

**PUZZLING ABOUT THE PLACE OF THE EMOTIONS
IN MORAL BEHAVIOUR AND SOME IMPLICATIONS
FOR EDUCATION**

**Revised version of an unpublished keynote lecture given to the
Biennial Conference of the
European Affective Education Network (EAEN)**

University of the West of Scotland

5-8 July, 2009

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Puzzling about the Place of the Emotions in Moral Behaviour and some Implications for Education¹

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Abstract

Drawing on my work as a counsellor and my research interests in recent years - spiritual, moral, social & cultural education (SMSC) and deliberate self harm among school and university students - this paper explores the place of the emotions in behaviour and their implications for moral and emotional education. The analysis is primarily philosophical.

The paper starts with a description of a violent encounter between a teacher and pupil. This encounter raises questions of motivation, interpretation and explanation of moral behaviour and the episode is returned to throughout the paper as the connections between the emotions and moral actions are explored. Underlying the presentation are three propositions:

- that the idea of moral education is too often pre-occupied with the conscious as though moral behaviour is an entirely rational business;
- that emotion is the most important factor in initiating (at least some forms of) moral behaviour;
- that emotions often operate at a sub-conscious level.

The argument is informed by Justin Oakley's account of emotions as having three components: *cognition*, *desire* and *affect*, and considers the problems posed for such an account by the operation of emotion at a *subconscious* level.

I argue that a proper education for morality will not only accept the importance of *emotional* education and in doing so, must address the sub-conscious. The importance of imagination and creativity (or 'playfulness') in counselling and in aspects of SMSC is noted. The doubtful morality of teaching emotions through experiential learning is discussed, and the idea is offered that what is required for some aspects of moral education is an approach which is more akin to counselling than teaching.

Introduction

Over the years I have had a number of more-or-less discrete, more-or-less related areas of interest, all of which have contributed to my puzzlement about the emotions and morality. These include:

- a long-standing interest in spiritual, moral, social and cultural development - 'SMSC', the basis for what currently is offered as PSHE and Citizenship Education in the English National Curriculum;
- my recent research on deliberate self-harm amongst school and university students (see my paper presented earlier to this conference);
- my work as a counsellor seeking to support clients who have problems of an emotional nature.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Roehampton Educational Research Conference in October 2008. I am grateful to Dr Roger Marples for suggesting I read the work of Oakley and White in the preparation of that paper.

More recently, following some lively arguments with a Roehampton colleague (Roger Marples)², I have begun to examine the treatment given by philosophers to spirituality, morality and the emotions. My attention has also been caught on several occasions in the last few years, by what neuroscience tells us about the structure of the brain and what goes on within it when we have experiences of several kinds.

My puzzlement is largely about how one is to reconcile these different accounts of the reality of emotional experience and moral behaviour. My attempts at such a reconciliation are at a very early stage, so what I share today is largely my puzzlement rather than the resolution of differences in such accounts. In short, I am trying to analyse the nature of *descriptions* given of episodes of moral (and not-so-moral) behaviour, including descriptions which contain moral evaluations, in order better to *understand* and *explain* them, and to identify the function of the emotions in morally-charged experiences. Given the theme for this conference, I will attempt to say something towards the end about the importance of creativity and imagination for all this.

Although my presentation is almost entirely philosophical, it is very much influenced by the sociological approach associated with social phenomenology (often identified with the ‘interpretive paradigm’) in which a premium is placed on understanding reasons and purposes rather than causes, and therefore on the subjective meanings which social actors attach to their circumstances and their actions.

An Episode

I begin with an episode from a classroom.

The year is 1969. Imagine, if you will, a young teacher, recently arrived from Australia and teaching in a tough secondary modern school in the East End of London. He enters his classroom a little after the class of 30 or so 15-16 year-old boys have arrived. He sees one of the bigger boys (let’s call him ‘Whiteman’) standing over a smaller one (who is seated at his desk – let’s call him ‘Brown’), and shaking his fist at him. The teacher walks to the scene of the encounter, puts his hand on Whiteman’s shoulder and says: “Don’t threaten people in *my* class!” Whiteman makes a play of straightening the shoulder of his jacket, saying to the teacher: “Don’t you ruffle *my* clothes!”. The teacher ruffles the boy’s hair and says: “I’ll ruffle more than your clothes in a minute, Sport!”. As the teacher turns to go he receives a hard punch on his upper arm. He returns the punch, catching Whiteman in the mouth. The boy’s lip swells alarmingly. Afterwards, the teacher says that a greater injury would have been done to Whiteman had something in his mind not caused him to “pull” the punch. It was, he said, as though between beginning to swing the punch and contact being made with Whiteman’s jaw, a little voice had whispered in his ear: “Not *that* hard!”

² Much to the embarrassment of younger colleagues with us at the time, one such argument, in a restaurant in Geneva, was especially heated. It concerned the claim that “all emotions are either rational or irrational”, and it was this rather than anything else which started me puzzling about this issue.

What are we to make of this encounter?

Emotions in Explanations and Moral Judgements

Judgements might be made about the morality of the behaviour of both the teacher and Whiteman. The episode between Whiteman and Brown might be seen as an instance of bullying and therefore morally objectionable; the initial behaviour of the teacher might be judged to be morally desirable since it involves going to the defence of a weaker boy facing aggression from a stronger one, but his later behaviour might be judged to be immoral since it involves a physical assault by an adult on a child. It might also, of course, be judged to be illegal (“physical assault causing actual bodily harm”) and is pretty clearly a breach of professional ethics (Note, however, that legality and professional ethics are not to be confused with morality).

None of these evaluations in terms of morality offer us much by way of an accurate explanation for the sequence of events. For, like judgements about the rationality of a particular action, they are post-hoc evaluations in which the evaluator analyses and appraises the sequence of events, imputing aims, intentions, purposes or motives to the actors. Human beings, including social scientists, make such post-hoc interpretations all the time, and in professional practice, teachers and others are actually exhorted to reflect on their practice in order to identify those behaviours which bring about desirable ends and those which do not, the aim being to inform subsequent practice. But such evaluations are ones in which the emotions seem not to be much considered; if anything, they, too, are imputed by the person making the evaluation. Thus, an account of this encounter might be given in the following terms:

“Whiteman *dislikes* Brown and experiences a *thrill* of power as he stands over him, shaking his fist in his face. Brown is *frightened*. The teacher *fears* there will be a fight and is *anxious* that it should not escalate. Whiteman is *humiliated* by the teacher’s words and becomes *angry*. When the teacher is struck, he is *shocked* and retaliates”.

Such an account is more useful as an explanation, though not as a moral evaluation, than the earlier account which was purely descriptive. But it, too, seems to me to be inadequate in that it is insufficiently specific about the nature of the emotions being experienced. As an explanation it takes us only so far, because we are not told the origins of the emotions: why does Whiteman not like Brown? Why (precisely) is Brown frightened? What is it of which he is frightened? Why (precisely) is the teacher fearful or anxious? Why is he shocked? Why ‘shock’ and not ‘anger’, ‘bewilderment’ or (like Brown) ‘being frightened’? Perhaps he is all of these, but the labelling of emotions is not enough: they have to be unpacked and a great deal of contextual and background information is needed before we can begin to arrive at an account which is sufficiently nuanced to allow us to claim that we understand fully what happened and are therefore in a position to make a moral judgment of the behaviour of each of the participants.

What are 'Emotions'?

In his book *Morality and Emotions*, Justin Oakley builds a persuasive philosophical argument to the effect that emotions have three components (Oakley, 1992). In order to experience an emotion, there must be some *cognition* (that is, some awareness and understanding of the situation - thought processes); there must be some *affect* (that is, there is some psychic and/or bodily sensation or 'feeling'); and there must be some *desire* (that is, there is some wish for the experience to take a particular form and/or intensity). Thus, fear of a snake (Oakley was writing from an Australian university!) involves all three: recognising the snake for what it is and understanding that some snakes are poisonous; experiencing the heightened sensation (including heart-rate, etc but also the psychic sensation of potential panic); and desire (for it to be not a snake but an old piece of garden hose, or to not feel pain or not to die). He argues that all three are necessary conditions for something to count as an emotion: without affect, the situation is purely a logical response to a situation understood in a certain way, and therefore not an emotion; without the desire there would be no grounds for fear and therefore no emotion; and without cognition, there would be no experience at all.

John White (2002: 166-167) argues that *action* is an important component of emotional experiences. Without at least the desire to act, we might question whether emotion had even been present. In the above example, an indication of the desire would be the action of getting away from the vicinity of the snake as fast as possible. However, it is arguable that it would be more appropriate to see the action as a *consequence* of the emotion rather than integral to it.

The components of emotional experience (as presented by Oakley and White) can be seen in a breakdown of the *teacher's* experience in the above incident. Here, the initial experience (being hit by Whiteman) has a particular meaning in the context of the power relations of the classroom, in the training and prior classroom experiences of the teacher, and his desire to control and manage classroom behaviour properly. These generate an emotion which initiates Behaviour 1 (he hits back). The intellect ("Not *that* hard!") comes into play only after the behaviour has been initiated so that the behaviour is modified (Behaviour 2: the blow is softened). In this account, it is not the intellect which is significant in initiating or motivating the original behaviour, but the *emotion*.

Now I want to stress the order in which things happen here. It is generally accepted in counselling psychology that "the primary motivating force in our lives is emotion" (Bradshaw, 1999:13). We are not motivated by the intellect or thinking as conventionally understood. On the contrary, as Oakley argues, without desire and affect as well, there would be no motivation to act at all. However, according to John White: "What differentiates one emotion from another is its characteristic thought....Thought is the key to identifying the emotion" (2002: 163). What the intellect *can* do, according to this account, is to recognize, analyse and reflect upon emotions and, maybe, alter subsequent actions motivated by emotion.

So far so good. But what if the actor does not employ thought to identify the emotion until after the emotion has been experienced and has initiated action? What if the so-called 'cognition' involved in the initial experience is not engaged at a conscious level? Is it still feasible to give to cognition such a significant place in the concept

'emotion' as Oakley and White give it? Is it reasonable to say that the behaviour of the teacher in the above example was 'rational'? If by 'rational', we mean that an observer can make sense of what happened by imputing emotions and motives to the actors such that the actions are at least understandable if not justified, the answer may be "yes". But how are we to know if the observer is correct in the emotions and motivations she attributes to the actors? Well: we could ask them. This, of course, is what social scientists do when they collect actors' accounts of their experiences and their actions through interviews and (less effectively in my view) questionnaires. But this pre-supposes that the actors themselves have made a full and accurate analysis of their experiences and have come to a full and true understanding of the emotions they have experienced and which motivate the behaviour under scrutiny.

What happens when emotions are experienced at a less-than-conscious level? Since Freud at least, the idea that the motives for action are to be found in the sub-conscious or even the un-conscious is well established, not just amongst psychoanalysts and psychotherapists, but amongst a goodly number of the general population where it has entered into common parlance. We speak of 'Freudian slips' as betraying feelings not consciously entertained by the speaker, and we often say things like "He thinks he's pleased for her success but deep down I think he's jealous!" In other words, we have little difficulty in discounting the interpretations of action as consciously viewed by the actor, with interpretations in terms of the sub-conscious.

According to White (160-161), an important aspect of cognition in emotion is *belief*. We experience emotion according to what we believe to be the case, not what *is* the case. It is also this which makes an emotion rational or irrational; if there is no monster lurking in the wardrobe, the child's fear of the dark when going to bed is irrational. A fear of snakes (in Australia) is rational but in Ireland, where there are none, is not. In some approaches to counselling, such as Rational Emotive Therapy, the main aim is to get the patient to see that some of the beliefs they hold and which inhibit appropriate behaviours or precipitate inappropriate ones are false. Once this is grasped, the dysfunctional behaviours may be replaced with functional ones.

However, emotions have powerful effects without our being aware of them. Psychodynamic counsellors will tell you, for example, that anger repressed in childhood, or the failure by the bereaved adequately to grieve for a lost loved one will surface as depression in adulthood. Apparently irrational fears may be explicable by connections made sub-consciously with anniversaries of past traumas, or when the client, or those near her, reach an age at which a loved one has died. At some level there may be cognition in that the date "registers", but this is hardly to be mistaken for cognition as *thinking*. For those researching deliberate self-harm, attacking one's own body in various ways is readily explainable in terms of emotions such as guilt (the cutter is punishing herself for not being a better person); disgust (the body being attacked is dirty because it has been defiled by sexual abuse in childhood); or revenge ("I'll teach them! They'll be sorry when they see what they have made me do!"). But the cutter may not *know* any of this; all they may know is that they feel awful and that, after cutting themselves, they feel more relaxed, less unhappy, relieved. Such behaviours seem so deeply and disturbingly rooted in affect as to deny altogether the effectiveness of a therapeutic approach which presumes the ability to reflect on and analyse one's emotions. As one client said to me recently: "If that was all there was to it I would have got it sorted long ago!"

Meanwhile: what is going on in the *brain*?

What Neuroscience says

According to a popular model of the brain, there are, in fact, three brains within one, each corresponding to a stage in human evolution:

“The oldest and most primitive ... is the reptilian, or visceral brain. This brain contains our most primitive strategy for safety and survival: *repetition* [and] also maintains the body’s automatic physical functions, such as breathing

The next brain within our brain is the paleomammalian, or *feeling* brain. This is technically called the limbic system. When warm-blooded mammals came upon the evolutionary scene, emotional energy was born. The limbic system houses our feelings of excitement, pleasure, anger, fear [etc].

The most sophisticated brain system within our brain is the neo-cortex, or *thinking* brain. It evolved last - over the past two million years or so. It gives us our human abilities to reason, use language, plan ahead, solve complex problems, and so on”. (Bradshaw, 1999: 71)

According to this model, the emotions are not ‘housed’ in the same place as the part to do with thinking and reasoning. Moreover, it seems that the survival strategies of ‘fight or flight’ when confronted by danger are ‘housed’ at an even deeper level. I believe it to be the case that emotions can trigger such reactions before the neo-cortex has begun to amble into operation! If all this is correct, cognition in emotion and in the behaviour which emotion triggers is of a very elementary kind: no more than recognition below the level of consciousness as we understand it when talking about thinking, reasoning and rationality. In *this* sense of what it is to be ‘rational’, emotions, and, indeed the behaviours to which they give rise, are neither rational nor irrational but more akin to innate survival mechanisms. The neo-cortex may well be involved in reflecting on and analysing the emotions but it can hardly be said to be a central component of emotional experience itself.

Putting Moral Behaviour in Context

Let us now return again to the episode with which this paper began and try yet another interpretation of events. In the ’60s, Australia was a racist country. Immigration was restricted to those of European origins under what was called “The White Australia Policy”. At the same time, the killing of many of the indigenous population and the destruction of Aboriginal culture was just beginning to be accepted as a fact which could no longer be ignored or taken-for-granted as an inescapable consequence of the march of civilization. That this was the case could be seen more clearly from *outside* Australia than from within it. Our young teacher has come from such a background and, in his short time in England, these realities have begun to sink in. The East End of London was at that time characterized by racism; “paki-bashing” was at least *talked about* as what one did after school, and at worst, was something the boys actually did. It is one part of the reality over which the teacher is expected to exercise

control. This is the context in which our young teacher is working. Perhaps what is happening here is that the teacher sees a big, white boy, threatening a small Asian boy. He feels both guilty for the fact that such oppression of a minority, non-white people is an accepted feature of the country he loves and anxious that his control in the classroom will be compromised. This anxiety assumes crisis proportions when he is hit. Of the “fight or flight” options, the mechanism in the visceral brain triggers “fight” and he hits back. In this scenario, all the ingredients of moral action are present: affect, thought, desire *and* action.

This account makes the behaviour understandable, and, some might say, rational, since the action appears motivated by a desire to right a great wrong, *and* to achieve a desire for control, order and a manageable working environment. But the teacher is quite unaware of any of the motivating forces behind the action; he is not conscious of them and they cannot be said to be ‘reasons’ (in the conventional sense) for the action. They are *sub*-conscious.

What has all this to do with moral education?

According to Oakley, emotion lies at the heart of morality. In battle with Kant, Oakley argues that duty - a sense of what one *ought* to do - cannot be the only motive for moral action. If I have understood Oakley correctly, actions following from duty without emotion would hardly be moral at all, but a formulaic practice engaged in without real commitment, a course of action which would be characterized by ‘psychic disharmony’. The presence of an emotion creates psychic harmony between one’s understanding of a situation, one’s values and one’s sense of duty to perform a certain action in that situation (Oakley, 1992: 54-57). Indeed, Oakley provides good grounds for believing that emotions are a more reliable motivation to moral action than thought *or* duty. It follows, therefore, that moral education must include the education of the emotions.

For John White, because they are not reducible to sensations - or, if you like, *affects* - “the idea that emotions are ineducable is a nonsense” (p.167) and, later, “the key to educating children’s emotions is their intentionality and the thought embedded in them” (p.176). Emotional education can therefore include the education of our thoughts (how we analyse a situation), our beliefs (which may or may not be correct), and our desires (are they rational, justified, morally acceptable?). If my final attempt to describe and explain the young teacher’s actions is correct, a critical examination of the beliefs, values and attitudes of the cultures in which people are socialised and living would also be a significant part of such an education. A number of components of the curriculum including history, English literature, PSHE and Citizenship might all be seen as making contributions here.

However, there seems to be a fundamental problem here which is partly to do with the nature of philosophy (or, at least, that tradition in philosophy which has most often been embraced by British philosophers of education over the last 40 or 50 years), and that is the reduction of meaning to the way we use words; i.e. the approach to philosophy known as conceptual analysis. In short (following Wittgenstein) if we want to know what we mean by a word, we must look to see how it is used; its use *is* its meaning. To ask what we mean by ‘emotion’ is to ask in what circumstances, in

the description of what experience or event, we would apply that word at all. Thus, when we distinguish between *affect* and *emotion*, we are saying that we only use the word 'emotion' if there is not only affect, but also cognition and desire. We only describe something as (for example) 'guilt' if there is not only a psycho-physical feeling of discomfort or disharmony but also an understanding that one has done some wrong and desires that it should not be so or to make restitution. Or talk of 'resentment' only if there is a feeling of disharmony but also that one understands oneself to have been badly treated and desires restitution or apology. The problem is that no amount of talking about the way we use words can create the sensation itself of emotional experience, because affect cannot be evoked by a discussion of it (other than in the trivial sense that a prolonged and pedestrian discussion of the emotion of impatience might make me impatient!). Emotions are, after all, emotional and not rational, and this raises the question of how one is to educate the non-rational (i.e. affective) bit, for otherwise, emotional education is education *about* the emotions rather than the education of the emotions *per se*.

This is not an issue only for emotional education. After all, there are serious doubts about how effective any part of the curriculum will be if we only learn *about* it rather than actually *doing* it. In maths, learning about it without doing it might constitute a superficial 'history of mathematics' (in the sense of learning the facts about Euclid, Pythagoras, Fermat and so on), or perhaps a putative 'geography of mathematics' (in which locations were particular mathematical ideas developed, and how did these ideas spread), but it would hardly allow one to claim to be *mathematically* educated. It would hardly make one a mathematician *unless one engaged with the thinking involved in the mathematics itself*; in other words, *doing* the maths. Similar arguments might be made for learning-by-doing in all other subjects, which is presumably why the more progressive teachers and educationists place such store on experiential learning, original research, problem-focused investigations and so on.

If all this is true, then it would seem to follow that emotional education must entail more than learning *about* emotions, but must involve 'doing' the emotions in the sense of having real emotional experiences. If we want children to be emotionally educated, then we must provide opportunities for them to experience the range of emotions and not just talk about them. This raises two problems.

The first is a moral one. Even if it were technically possible to arrange for children to experience genuine anger, fear, dread, loneliness, disappointment and so on, there would be serious ethical objections to doing so. Some of you may know of the experiments done by a teacher in the USA following the assassination of Martin Luther King, where children were discriminated against on the basis of the colour of their eyes. For some children, they experienced the emotions of shame, guilt, hatred and so on, if not for the first time, in a new way where the social context gave them a particular force and meaning. But is it ever right to subject children to such experiences? Does the end ever justify the means? One way out of this is to provide the experience by proxy, by providing opportunities for the child to empathise with others who are experiencing or have experienced such emotions. Stories, films, television dramas, pictures, poetry and music can all evoke empathic emotional responses in children so that *in some sense* they experience the emotion themselves, whilst participation in drama and role-play can make such experience seem very real indeed. This will not entirely satisfy some critics in the case of some strong and

negative emotions of course, since it is possible to argue that it is unethical to subject children to such emotions by any means at all.

The second problem is that, as we have seen, some motivations which look like emotions, originate in a part of the brain which, in evolutionary and operational terms, pre-dates rational thought. There are emotions which seem to operate at the sub-conscious level, of which we are unaware, and which, for many clients in psychotherapy, are incredibly difficult to access. Making more rational action possible requires addressing the sub-conscious and bringing it into consciousness. Thus, depression might be alleviated through therapy which helps the client experience a long repressed emotion, identify it, “own” it and express it. The challenge for the therapist (or for the teacher acting in a quasi-counselling pastoral role), is how to help the client/child to access such emotions in the ‘here-and-now’ of the counselling room. This requires a measure of creativity on the part of both the teacher and the child.

An important aspect of creativity is *imagination* and this is linked to the capacity for *playfulness*, being able to play around with ideas, fantasies, dreams and so on. It goes beyond empathising with another in allowing a freer range to the non-rational part of the psyche. Indeed, there is an established field of professional practice called Educational Psychotherapy which is focused by the recognition that learning difficulties are often linked to emotional problems. Educational Psychotherapy addresses these simultaneously in “a fusion of educational and therapeutic techniques and insights” (Salmon and Dover, 2007:1). It makes use of the techniques of a range of therapies, including art-, music- and drama-therapy. All of these are creative and engage the imagination in their methods.

Imagination is an essential aspect of much therapy and counselling. Art-, music-, drama- and play therapies might therefore all be employed in creating the experiences through which emotional education is possible. At a more mundane level, some of the activities of PSHE (such as ‘Circle Time’, scripted fantasy and meditation) might help children to make the connections between the emotional and the rational in ways which preclude later mental health issues such as depression and anxiety.

Conclusion

I am left with the possibility that emotional education requires an element of something which looks more like counselling than it does teaching, and something which looks more like creativity than understanding. Since the emotions are at best central, and at the least pivotal, in morality, so, too, must they be to moral education. If my argument about the power of emotions to operate at a subconscious (and therefore less-than-rational) level is correct, the education of the emotions in morality is going to require something more than the kind of teaching which might ‘work’ in other parts of the curriculum. The techniques and insights of play therapy and the arts therapies as they are used in Educational Psychotherapy would seem to have much to offer. However, we must first free ourselves from the idea that they are appropriate only for children with mental health problems; we must eschew the presumption that education is not therapeutic and therapy is not educational.

The very acceptable notion of the 'health-promoting school' is based on the recognition that one does not have to be ill to benefit from health-promoting activities. In a similar fashion, you do not have to be *mentally* ill to benefit from counselling or to be evil in order to benefit from moral education. I am suggesting that *all* children would benefit from an emotional education which employs a range of creative opportunities and imaginative activities which facilitate a connecting with, and experiencing of, emotions working at the sub-conscious level.

If this is correct, the implications for schools, the role of teachers and the training they receive are enormous.

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