

Mechanisms can be complex

**Talia Morag: *Emotion, Imagination, and the Limits of Reason*.
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Talia Morag has produced a highly original contribution to the philosophy of emotion that stresses the idiosyncratic nature of both emotional episodes and their causes. She reintroduces the faculty of imagination to a philosophical literature that has long focused on the opposition between (or integration of) emotion and reason. According to Morag the aetiology of emotional episodes proceeds by imaginative association of ideas, a process she identifies as fundamentally anomalous. She quotes with approval Hegel’s characterization of the principle of association as one of “caprice and contingency” (14). The theorist who most fully appreciated the role of imaginative association in the aetiology of emotion was Freud, and Morag draws extensively on the psychoanalytic tradition.

Her admiration for Freud does not insulate him from criticism, however, and existing Freudian philosophies of emotion are one of three broad approaches that Morag seeks to undermine. The second is the “judgmentalist” approach long popular in analytic philosophy (Solomon 1976; Nussbaum 2001). Whilst this is a very diverse group of theories, they agree that emotions centrally involve a judgement about the significance of some state of affairs for the subject, and most take a highly intellectualist view of “judgement”. The aetiology of emotion is therefore essentially a matter of forming, or at least entertaining, a judgement of significance. The third broad approach she targets are “sub-personalist” accounts that characterize emotions themselves in behavioural or neurological terms and analyse their aetiology as a causal process rather than an inferential one. Her targets here include myself (Griffiths 1997) and Jesse Prinz (2004).

Morag offers three main criticisms that are intended to undermine all three of these approaches to emotion, albeit in different ways. First, she argues that none of

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them has an adequate account of the *recalcitrance* of emotions. Recalcitrance is an old idea, but was identified as a central problem for philosophy of emotion by Justin D’Arms and Daniel Jacobson (2003). Emotions are sometimes *but not always* sensitive to reasons. Learning that I have not been wronged often defuses anger, which seems explicable as a rational response to information contracting the judgement that is implicit in the emotion of anger, but *sometimes it does not*. The philosophical literature contains much criticism of overly rationalist accounts for failing to explain cases where emotions are recalcitrant to reasons. Conversely, an adequate theory must explain why emotions are often sensitive to reasons. The originality of Morag’s dialectical use of recalcitrance lies in her insistence that whether emotions respond to reasons is highly idiosyncratic, and differs not only from person to person but from occasion to occasion for a single person. Her use of recalcitrance is thus part of a second, broader criticism of all three philosophies of emotion that she terms the “singularity question”:

None of the accounts can answer the singularity question: why does this individual emote in this specific way here and now? Judgmentalism contradicts the familiar and ordinary fact that very similar external circumstances that can all be judged as fitting a certain emotion-type and as bearing on one’s wants, needs and values, sometimes give rise to emotional reaction and sometimes not. The sub-personalists who assume a law-like connection between certain external circumstances and certain emotion-types either ignore the singularity question or attempt to add variables that would explain it – but with no success. And the seeing-as conceptualists [*a variety of judgmentalism*], although they leave room for the possibility of singularity, do not have the resources to answer the singularity question. (159).

Morag’s third criticism is that all three existing theories take a functionalist approach to emotion: emotions perform some *function*, and they occur in the service of pre-identifiable goals that we can ascribe to the subject. Morag, in contrast, argues that emotional episodes can typically only be comprehended in light of the highly personal imaginative response of an individual subject.

In this short review I will try to show that sub-personal accounts of the aetiology of emotions have more resources to address the singularity question than Morag supposes. I will make three main points. First, contemporary accounts of mechanistic explanation are richer than the “covering laws” account of scientific explanation that Morag seems to presuppose. Second, in recent sub-personalist accounts mechanistic explanation is supplemented by dynamical explanation, which seems well suited to meet some of Morag’s demands on a theory of emotional aetiology. Finally, although Morag correctly identifies and argues against the view of the functions of emotions that is dominant in recent philosophy, another view is available, and it can embrace the phenomena to which Morag rightly draws our attention.

Morag assumes that a sub-personal account of the aetiology of emotion would identify regularities in the relationship between stimuli and emotional response and explain these regularities with some intervening, sub-personal mechanism. But a contemporary version of this form of explanation can accommodate an almost

unlimited amount of variation between individuals and in an individual across time. A mechanism in the sense embraced by contemporary philosophers of mind and biology (e.g. Craver 2007) is a set of components arranged in such a way that their interaction with one another produces a phenomenon. The mechanism explains the phenomena. But there is no requirement that the mechanism is rigidly pre-specified or that it does not change across time. Nor is there any requirement that the phenomenon to be explained takes the form of a regular association between two events. A neural mechanism, for example, will be constructed as part of the development of the brain. The structure of the neural mechanism is explained by the developmental mechanism that builds it. But that developmental mechanism need not rigidly pre-specify a particular structure for the neural mechanism. James Tabery and I have argued that a mechanistic account of explanation is the best way to express “developmental systems theory”, according to which development is the response of a flexible, reactive genome to a rich set of environmental factors which may differ from one individual to another (Griffiths and Tabery 2013). Because the developmental environment is itself partly constructed by feed-forward effects of the activity of earlier stages of the organism, developmental mechanisms produce unique developmental trajectories.

In this vein the philosopher of emotion Jennifer Greenwood has offered a richly scientifically informed theory of the ontogeny of emotions which emphasizes the unique history of interaction between mother and child and the fact that the emotions emerge from this interaction without being pre-specified on either side (Greenwood 2015). A strongly developmental, epigenetic model of emotional development such as that offered by Greenwood will supplement classical forms of mechanistic explanation with dynamical explanations (Bechtel and Abrahamsen 2013). The fact that a mechanism produces a particular outcome can be explained by the emergent dynamics that are produced when the mechanism is run. These dynamics can be described using data on multiple real or simulated runs of the mechanism, but the outcome of any individual run may be entirely unpredictable.

Another important application of dynamical explanation to the emotions is due to philosopher Giovanna Colombetti (2014). She argues that individual emotional episodes are not pre-specified by a neural programme, but are “softly assembled” as the dynamical system constituted by the brain and body interacts with its environmental context. Colombetti argues that her dynamical systems account can do justice to both the evidence for discrete emotion types, which are attractors for the dynamics of certain types of emotion system, and the evidence of the variability and context dependence of emotion.

If we combine a developmental systems theory of the ontogeny of emotion with an embodied, dynamical account of the operation of emotion at any one time in the life history of an individual, then it becomes much more plausible that a causal, sub-personalist account of the aetiology of an emotion could answer Morag’s “singularity question”.

Morag points out that, for all their other differences, judgmentalists and sub-personalists largely agree on the functions of emotions:

Although sub-personalists conceive themselves as very different to judgmentalists and in particular as “causalists” rather than “rationalists,” their sub-personal causal mechanism works in a way that maps onto rational processes. (160).

As Morag correctly observes, both judgmentalists and sub-personalists cite with approval Richard Lazarus’s “core relational themes” for emotion (Lazarus 1991). Anger, for example, can be either the judgement that an offence has been committed (e.g. Nussbaum 2001) or the perception of a bodily state whose function is to occur when an offence has been committed (Prinz 2004). Emotion theorists of both flavours share the commitment that anger has a purpose—to respond to an offence—and that this response serves the person’s goals, perhaps by deterring future offences. Morag takes a very different view. Emotions may or may not bring some benefit to the person who manifests them, but it is not part of the nature of emotion to do so:

Emotional reactions, in the first instance, are neither pathological nor healthy. Strictly non-inferential and non-rational, the emotions of human adults have no intrinsic purpose to track core relational themes, to enhance survival, or promote one’s well-being, and have no intrinsic way of failing to do so. (212).

Morag’s opposition to the idea that emotions serve a function and that they can be judged as normal or pathological to the extent that they serve their function is not unrelated to her broader theme of the singularity of emotion. If emotions could be judged against a functional standard, then this would suggest that the aetiology of emotions is governed by norms and, in a well-functioning organism, by regularities corresponding to those norms. However, I suggest that a more flexible account of the function of emotion is available, and one that is more consistent with Morag’s emphasis on the idiosyncratic nature of emotional episodes. Function as well as form may be highly varied!

Some years ago, Andrea Scarantino and I argued that emotions are not merely responses to the perceived situation, but actions designed to cope with that situation (Griffiths and Scarantino 2009). We suggested that emotions are designed to function in a social context—often as a social signal. Having emotions is a form of skilful engagement with the social world, and the exercise of emotional skill is scaffolded by the environment, both synchronically in the unfolding of a particular emotional performance and diachronically in the development of an emotional repertoire. As a result an emotional episode is dynamically coupled to an environment that both influences and is influenced by the unfolding of the emotion. Our paper was inspired by the theoretical and empirical work of *transactionalist* psychologists of emotion (e.g. Parkinson et al. 2005). Scarantino and I argued that the new perspective on emotion offered by the transactionalists is fundamentally the same as the new perspective on the mind offered by “embedded” or “situated” philosophers of mind. This new perspective on the functions of emotion has been built upon by later authors (e.g. Colombetti and Krueger 2015), who have incorporated other concepts from radical cognitive science, such as enactivism (Hutto and Myin 2012). The result is an account of what agents do with their

emotions that has many resources to explain the idiosyncratic evolution of emotional episodes to which Morag draws out attention in her book.

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