

Ronald de Sousa

Emotional Truth.

Oxford University Press 2011.

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Students of philosophy who were introduced to the subject of the human mind by reading the dialogues of Plato tend to assume that the emotions are not and cannot be anything more than a small, exceptional, troublesome, and irrational part of the mind, which constantly needs to be overseen, controlled, and corrected. For example, recall Plato's three-part, politically inspired image of the mind's organization, which consists in, i) an inner man, located in a person's head, who represents the faculty of reason; ii) a lion located in the breast, who represents the faculty of courage or spirit; and iii) a many-headed, writhing reptilian monster located in the stomach, which represents the emotions. Plato believed that one of the main jobs reason had to perform (with the help of courage) was to 'farm' the many-headed monster, by cutting off those heads that proved to be hurtful and vicious, and encouraging the growth of other heads that were relatively benign and useful. How did reason succeed in obtaining a sufficient amount of wisdom and moral goodness to allow it to perform that task successfully? Plato's answer was that the structure of the universe as a whole was constituted by what he referred to as the Forms, Universals, or Essences, each one of which was an encapsulation of intellectual knowledge about one or another subject, combined with moral knowledge about that same subject. Furthermore, reason was the 'divine spark' or 'divine part' of human nature, which was both similar to and related to those Forms. Because of that fact, it was easy and natural for reason to be open to their guiding influence.

In the book I am reviewing here, Prof. Ronald de Sousa defends a quite different view of emotions, which is more influenced by Aristotle than by Plato. For example, although Aristotle did not deny that universals were real things, he did not believe they constituted the foundation and structure of the universe considered in general. Rather, he thought they existed only inside of living biological organisms, and that their principal function was merely that of guiding the development and life stages of the particular organisms containing them. Similarly, Aristotle parted company from Plato also by virtue of the fact that he did not consider the emotions to be a small and negatively regarded part of the human mind. Instead, he maintained that the means people did and should use to improve themselves in intellectual and moral respects over time was not by letting themselves be guided by reason in order to (re)discover important truths that stemmed from the Forms, but instead by patiently working on any emotions they happened to have, in such a way as to bring about a situation where—relative to every new set of circumstances they met—they always could and would be able to feel a correct and appropriate emotion, of the right sort, and to the right degree of intensity.

Over the years, philosophers of mind have answered the question, 'What is an emotion?' in many different ways. A representative list of 29 answers to that question appears at the beginning of Chapter 2 of Prof. de Sousa's book. Here de Sousa gives a

brief analysis and categorization of the items on his list, by saying that some of the answers interpret emotions (a) as somatic phenomena like feelings; others construe them (b) as conative states like desires; still others represent emotions (c) as experiences of one or another broad type; some construe emotions (d) as cognitive states or processes like judgments, beliefs, or perceptions; and finally, some accounts take them (e) as things that do not fall neatly into any one of the categories just mentioned. As indicated by his title, *Emotional Truth*, it turns out to be the case that de Sousa's theory is an instance of '(d)', the cognitive view of emotions. This is shown by the fact that he claims we are justified in speaking of emotions as being true (in a generic sense of this last term). To be still more precise, de Sousa maintains that the least misleading way of thinking about emotions is to describe them in an Aristotle-like fashion, as perceptions. Perceptions of what? His answer to this question is that emotions are Janus-faced items that proceed in either one or the other of two possible directions at different times and in different circumstances. When one turns one's emotions in an internal direction, it is appropriate to think of them as perceptions of oneself. By contrast, whenever one turns or points emotions in an external direction, then it is appropriate to think of them as perceptions of values, in the sense of things about which one cares and feels strongly.

In my opinion, however, these two aspects of emotions largely boil down to the same one thing, because de Sousa does not think of emotions in what I am taking to be the traditional Aristotelian way—namely, as objectively existing things that are (or potentially would be) the same for all observers. Instead, he conceives of emotions as self-created items that—in the case of each separate individual in turn—count as direct and intimate expressions of that particular individual. Furthermore, de Sousa adopts the libertarian-like view that 'it is possible for conflicting values to be real'. What this means is, for example, that if you and I are very different people who hold different values, so that I consider X to be something good while you think X is bad, then it really is the case that X is good as far as I am concerned, while the very same X is bad as far as you are concerned. Accordingly, de Sousa has almost nothing to say at this point in the book about how it might happen in some circumstances, and what it might mean to say if it did so happen, that some emotions could show themselves on examination to be false rather than true, or to be instances of misperception rather than of perception.

My general impression is that most of the arguments de Sousa offers for his fairly complex position are interesting, plausible, and well thought out. In particular, one of the claims he makes that especially impressed me was his contention that, in place of the short list of 10 to 30 standard emotions that tend to be named in typical philosophy textbooks (e.g. 'joy', 'sadness', 'love', 'hate', 'jealousy', 'greed', 'anger', 'fear', 'lust', etc.), his view dictates that we should greatly expand the number of all the possible emotions that people can experience (or 'the number of all the possible values that people are able to perceive'). On page 116, he suggests the figure of 10 to the 17th power as the number of the emotions that it would be possible to have. This not only implies that it would be impossible for any person to count all of the emotions in question, but also—*a fortiori*—that it would be impossible for anyone to name them. Instead, according to de Sousa, it would be better for us to conceive of and analyze the organization of emotions

in one or another ‘mass’ fashion—e.g. it would be more adequate and realistic for us to order them as if they were analogous to all the colors on the color cone.

As a means of defending this last idea, de Sousa appeals to the ordinary experiences that people have of aesthetic matters. Why, he asks, do we constantly assume that it is worthwhile and necessary for us to develop new and different pieces of art? The answer, according to him, is that no matter how rich and complicated the twisting, multi-dimensional chains of emotions are that a person experiences whenever he or she is exposed to a piece of art—say, a particular passage of symphonic orchestral music—no such chain or set of chains can begin to exhaust the well-spring of possibilities out of which it was drawn; and this fact it inevitably leads us to look for more and different emotions and combinations of emotions in addition to any we might have known and experienced before.

There are two short negative comments I feel obliged to make about this book. (The fact that these comments are so few and so short largely may be a result of my not being able to claim to be an expert in de Sousa’s field.) First, it is my honest opinion that if the book had been at least 30% shorter, it also would have been at least 30% more effective. Second, the book’s index, although fairly large, does not strike me as having been organized in a very helpful manner. (As an example of what I believe a useful philosophical index ought to look like, I humbly suggest that readers could take a look at the one I prepared, which starts on page 519 of *The Mind as a Scientific Object: Between Brain and Culture*, edited by Christina A. Erneling and David Martel Johnson, Oxford University Press, 2005).

However, I propose to end this review on a positive note, with the following comment. I think one of the best features of de Sousa’s book is its admirable series of background sketches on particular philosophical topics (which mostly occur in its first half). It seems clear to me that de Sousa is an up-to-date, effectively organized, and well-informed teacher of the general field of analytic philosophy. Because of that fact, he is in a position to—and furthermore does—give his readers the gift of providing them with accurate and useful summaries of recent work that has been done on many important questions, concepts and problems—e.g. truth, proper functions, the notion of possibility, and moral theory. In my view, this single aspect of the book is enough, just by itself, to make it worth reading.

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EDITOR’S NOTE: Later in this issue of *Philosophy in Review*, Ronald de Sousa, author of the book reviewed above by David Martel Johnson, reviews David Martel Johnson’s book, *Three Prehistoric Inventions that Shaped Us* (Frankfurt & New York: Peter Lang 2011).