

Beware stories: emotions and virtues

La vie d'un homme est son image ... il doit non pas raconter sa vie telle qu'il l'a vécue, mais la vivre telle qu'il la racontera.

André Gide

Il est incroyable que la perspective d'avoir un biographe n'ait fait renoncer personne à avoir une vie.

Cioran

Nous sommes si habitués à voir dans la sagesse un résidu des passions éteintes qu'il nous est difficile de reconnaître en elle la forme la plus dure et la plus condensée de l'ardeur, la parcelle d'or née du feu, et non de la cendre.

Marguerite Yourcenar

***Eve:** I finished Anna Karenina for the third time yesterday. But it meant a lot more to me this time. I think I've been everyone in the book now. The injured spouse, the seduced spouse, the lover. I can see my own motives more clearly through the book. I'm Anna this time round, and I can see how I'm an accomplice in my own undoing. Moth to a flame, and all that. And I accept it. If that's the way I am then I'll just have to follow where it takes me.*

Adam: Beware stories. I mean, look out for the ways they supply you with pre-packaged emotions to make a nice self-portrait. So you should be suspicious of the pressure to see your life as a story. You find yourself supplying tidy endings and pleasing connections between events. You insert irony, suspense, tragedy, and justice.

***Eve:** It isn't a pleasing connection I'm supplying. The story isn't a cover for believing some comforting but implausible conclusion. It's an uncomfortable, even tragic, conclusion I am pushed to. I am in some way doomed, and that is something which, however uncomfortable it may be, I must embrace. No self-deception here, just open-eyed acceptance of a sad fact.*

Adam: Listen, Eve, you're in love. You start out in an intensely emotional state, and then you find that there's a narrative frame that you can put around your feelings, and that squeezes them into a particular form. If I can do anything for you in this conversation it is to convince you that you don't have to put this particular frame around your situation. There are lots of ways you can see it. For the better ones you'll have to step back from your present emotion a bit, to escape the story it's forcing you into.

***Eve:** You want me to pretend a kind of unfeeling masculine detachment before you'll think I have any understanding. I thought we had generally got beyond that. What particularly puzzles and annoys me is your linking of emotions and stories. As if when one feels something one becomes the prisoner of a plot. "Don't be so emotional", they say, as they break your heart. That's the slogan of bullies, fogies, and the emotionally damaged.*

Adam: I just mean that very often to feel an emotion is to see oneself as occupying a particular role in a particular kind of story, and often that story is not an enlightening one. So there are good reasons to resist the judgment-clouding influence of emotional thinking. So, to face the labels you want to pin on me, yes I do think there is something to the warnings wise people used to issue against emotion. I know that we now think it is just repressed or oppressive people who are wary of feeling. But I think there is something right about it all the same. To the extent that a state can fairly be described as an emotion, it has a power to blind us.

Eve: *If there is anything to what you are saying, it is that if we apply the wrong stories to ourselves we get blinded. The culprits are not the emotions but the stories. So the remedy is to pay honest attention to what you feel, and to let it choose the story, rather than the other way around. That's what I'm doing. I'm a civilized person; I know hundreds of stories. And out of all of them I've found the one that describes the place I find myself.*

Adam: I think there's a closer connection between emotions and narratives than that. Ronald de Sousa got it right, with his idea of a paradigm scenario. According to de Sousa, each emotion has an essential link to a schematic story, in which the person whose emotion it is plays a role. Courage: an aggressor moves to hurt you or take something from you, and you must strive to resist. Fear: a dangerous and powerful thing or agent is near to harming you, and you must escape. Despair: you must watch while something you have long wanted not to happen occurs. Joy: you have long wanted something and now you get it. And so on. There are many such stories, and they are the best way of seeing similarities between emotions.

Eve: *If those were all the emotions we were capable of, you might have a point. But that is a minuscule portion of the human range. The richness of our emotions can't really be fitted into a little list of labels, so if we are fitting stories to emotions we are going to need all of past and future literature. And the plots are going to have room for all the human possibilities. No real Procrustean danger.*

Adam: You're missing something about why we need emotions. Yes, I do think we need them: just not for self-knowledge. They provide a link between primitive hard-wired routines and sophisticated intellectually demanding culturally modulated patterns of thought. As de Sousa suggests, an emotion provides a selection of facts, perceptions, and possible courses of action. Fear equips us to escape, anger to resist, joy to appreciate. That is what these emotions essentially are, their nature both in biology and in common sense. So too for the sophisticated emotions: curiosity allows us to find novelty, loyalty allows us to maintain our good opinion of people in the face of contrary motives or evidence. In all these cases the emotion makes thought and deliberation easier - sometimes makes it possible - by imposing a particular pattern of salience on our knowledge, our desires, and our perception of our situations. We notice some things and ignore others. The paradigm scenario just is a representation of that pattern of salience. So it is a recipe for simplification, a simplification that is sometimes what the situation calls for.

Eve: *And what the epistemic situation calls for, too. What about intellectual courage? What about curiosity? What about persistence? These are emotions in the service of understanding. Everything you have said so far is a symptom of an old-fashioned epistemology on which a purely disinterested and ideally rational agent calculates the inevitable best explanation for some incontrovertible evidence. But it's not really like that. We form our beliefs for reasons; we must cope constantly with the competing pulls of honest partisanship and blinding prejudice; we must struggle constantly against the limitations of our own reasoning capacities. This last point is the most subtle and in a way the most important. It would be just as irrational to try to take account of all the ways in which your reasoning is defective as it is to pretend that you are a paragon of reasoning power. There are too many holes you could fall into to try covering them up - you'd have to be the perfect being you know you aren't in order to do this. So you have to choose which defects to watch out for and compensate for and which not to.*

Adam: So? I think I could agree with most of this, and still rephrase my argument. What you say certainly does not show that being in the grip of a strong emotion is a good basis for thinking objectively.

Eve: *You missed the point of the particular emotions I mentioned. Courage, for example. Consider someone who is facing evidence which might well lead to a conclusion she doesn't want to believe. Perhaps the evidence threatens to show that she has been wrong for years about something important. She must steel herself against the tendency to dismiss or undervalue the evidence. It's just like facing an enemy, except here the enemy is a tendency in herself. (The enemy doesn't have to be in you. It takes courage to consider a conclusion that you know others will find unwelcome, too.) We all know that following out reasoning that seems to be going to an unwelcome conclusion takes courage, because we have all found ourselves failing the test, because of what we consciously or unconsciously feared to discover.*

Adam: Yes, yes, the well known can of worms phenomenon. But it doesn't show more than that there is a special disposition that people need, so they can overcome their own irrationality. You can call it courage if you want.

Eve: *Intellectual courage isn't just whimsically so called. It has essential features in common with what is needed to face physical danger. The distinction between courage and foolhardiness is important to it too, for example. It isn't intellectual courage to blunder in where angels fear to tread. And think how many and how varied the examples are. Patience, self-control, persistence, curiosity. All of these are needed at times in knowing anything, including knowing oneself. All have to apply at the right moment in the right context, or they obstruct rather than help. Just like emotions in a practical or social activity. And that's because they are emotions.*

Adam: The contextuality point shows that we need a distinction here. Think what we'd say when someone persistently and obsessively faced unwelcome facts, even when there was no point to it. We'd say he was a kind of intellectual masochist, a seeker after conceptual humiliation for its own sake. Or suppose someone's intellectual

patience amounted to ignoring promising leads because of the abstract possibility that more promising ones might come along. We'd say he was finding principled reasons for laziness. Masochism and laziness are vices. And I have no problem with there being specifically intellectual forms of these vices. Or even with there being forms specifically concerned with self-knowledge. That seems like an important insight, that the intellectual vices are broadly continuous with the more general ones. And the courage, patience, persistence, curiosity, you mentioned are the opposites of these vices. That is, they're virtues, not emotions. They just happen to have the same names.

Eve: *They have the same names because they are the same. Virtues are a kind of emotion. They're the emotions that have good results, to simplify a bit. And the emotions that have bad results are vices. Of course there is a time and a place for every virtue: exhibited at the wrong moment even courage is a vice.*

Adam: There is a basic distinction to make here, which we have to mark one way or another. Take an uncontroversial virtue like honesty. A person who has this virtue will not always be exhibiting it, but he will always have the capacity to, which will emerge when the time is right. So he won't be honest one minute and dishonest the next. He's either an honest person or not.

Eve: *He might be honest in his relations with his colleagues and not in his relations with his wife. Like someone we both know.*

Adam: Yes, yes, you know that's beside the point. Even when this is the case the person will be constantly an honest-at-work-but-not-at-home person. Virtues are dispositions to characteristic kinds of behavior, reasoning, and feeling, while emotions are states that a person is in at a moment.

Eve: *Can't someone be uncharacteristically honest just for a moment?*

Adam: It can happen. Mind you, often when we say someone is being uncharacteristically honest we mean that they are behaving as an honest person would - telling, and even seeking, the truth - without ascribing any virtue to them. But someone can have a disposition for a moment. A block of steel could conceivably be soluble in warm tea for a minute, while under the influence of Z-rays which changed the character of its crystalline bonds. Someone could even be uncharacteristically honest for a moment, while not actually acting honestly at that moment. It might be true, just for that moment, that if he were tested he would pass the test. Very unlikely, of course, and if it were so we'd never know. But let's get back to the point. A person who has the virtue of intellectual courage will have the capacities to investigate unwelcome possibilities and will be disposed to use those capacities at times when they are appropriate. This may require him to be capable of motivating himself to do the thinking required; it is quite likely that it would help him if he is disposed to have feelings characteristic of courage. So having the virtue of this kind of courage, like other virtues of courage, usually involves being disposed to the emotion of courage. When brave people are exhibiting their bravery they often, though not always, feel brave.

Eve: *Emotions are a lot more than feelings. The whole thrust of the study of the emotions in analytic philosophy in the past thirty years has been to free us from this identification. Emotions involve beliefs and desires and patterns of thought. Most emotions require particular concepts. Of course the bad old view of emotions as nothing but feelings is associated with taking emotions as gusts of affect which blow reason off course. Is that what lies behind your view? It seems to sit well with your picture of intellectual virtue as a very deliberate handing over of the guidance of cognition to feelings and special purpose dispositions. As if Reason sits up on high and supervises the tasks of her minions, occasionally even allowing a well-behaved feeling to play a carefully supervised part. That's not what it's like to be a thinking human being, and we've been steadily demolishing the assumptions that seemed to commit common sense to some such picture.*

Adam: You're being a bit selective in your history. Actually philosophers only flirted for a while with the idea that emotions are purely cognitive states. Then they soon retreated to compromise positions that tied emotions essentially to cognition but also gave them essential ties to affect. The retreat is perfectly clear in de Sousa, for example, and is one of the main interests in Greenspan. So the question is not whether affects mark emotions but rather whether emotions and virtues are marked by different relations to affect. I am sure they are. You're right, though, that I have been describing the intellectual virtues in a way that makes them seem too controlled and deliberate.

Eve: *Which is a sign of something going wrong at a much deeper level. You're allowing now that the right way to think about many things involves a certain amount of guesswork and passion. Sometimes you just have to throw yourself into the attempt to understand - understand yourself, understand another person, understand something intellectual - and hope that your personal characteristics will see you through. You can only control things up to a point.*

Adam: I think this business of throwing yourself into it is right at the heart of the question. An emotion is what you have when you've been thrown in, and a virtue is what does the throwing. That's why virtues often are defined as much by their relations to emotions that have opposite names as by the same-named ones. Having courage as a virtue means being able to throw yourself into a state which will protect you from your fear, and that may mean throwing yourself into a brave emotion. But sometimes it may not. A careful retreat avoids a rout more often than a heroic charge. Similarly patience takes an attitude to panic or haste, and justice takes an attitude to anger. I'm not sure rationality is a very coherent virtue, but to the extent that it is a single thing it is a capacity to take evasive action to avoid panic, haste, enthusiasm or laziness, and other states in an admittedly rather varied list. (Some of those are emotions. Not all.)

Eve: *How can you say you've got away from a Cartesian, hierarchical model of deliberate rational control, while talking this way? You choose to throw yourself into an emotion when you calculate that it is the right thing to do?*

Adam: Let's go back to stories again. That might give me a better way of saying it. There's a special feature of the stories that go with emotions. The difference was pointed out recently by Goldie in connection with the emotions, though it's quite familiar in theories of narrative. Suppose you are following a story, and imagining the sequence of events. Usually you imagine them from the perspective of one character in the story. Call this centered imagining, because it centers on that character's point of view. (The terminology comes ultimately from Wollheim, though he and Goldie say "central" instead of "centered".) The acts of other characters are seen through a non-centered imagining. In a sophisticated story you often shift your center, so that sometimes you are imagining from one character's point of view and sometimes from another's. Then, sometimes, you imagine the same actions both from the point of view of the agent and from that of an observer. That's the connection with emotions; they don't do this. To the extent that emotions present themselves as stories they do so as centered stories, inviting only one point of view.

Eve: *That's hardly surprising, and certainly not a fault. If an emotion is a recipe for the actions and feelings appropriate to a situation then it is the actions and feelings that are appropriate to a particular person. There's no point being given a formula for someone else's use.*

Adam: That is certainly true for emotions, especially when you think of their primal use as pre-scripted scenarios that you can call on in an emergency. You want to be given all the information in the most convenient possible form, easily accessible from the point of view of you as an agent. So that means you want a story told from one point of view which you can easily superimpose on the perspective of your current situation. But that is not the kind of story that goes with a virtue. Again imagine someone bravely confronting the possibility of some unwelcome discovery. The script she needs to follow is one that runs something like this. Stop for a moment and consider whether the truth is worth knowing here, and whether there are better uses of the energy of someone in your situation. If it would be a good way to proceed then act according to the fearless curiosity script, but keep checking from time to time to see that that isn't leading to perverse results.

Eve: *You really think that a wise person should consider such an elaborate and deliberate procedure?*

Adam: No, not consciously. Someone who has intellectual courage as a virtue, and not just as a dominant emotion, will have a capacity or a disposition to act out this procedure, adopting the centered imagination it requires and also the non-centered reflection on the centered bit. If they needed to put the script before themselves explicitly it wouldn't be a virtue, any more than someone who explicitly follows the script for jealous rage is feeling that emotion. The narrative structures of emotions and virtues are descriptions of patterns of action and of thought that someone could follow. If they fit the pattern they have the emotion or virtue. But they're different patterns. Emotions are entirely centered narratives, and virtues involve a delicate mixture of centered and non-centered.

Eve: *Why fight about words? If you want to call something a virtue when for me it's a sophisticated emotion, I guess I don't care. Anyway, you've talked yourself out of describing me as trapped in some deluded state just because I'm determined to face up to the truth about myself. That determination is a virtue, as you so quaintly put it. I'm following through with a pattern of thought that is right for me now.*

Adam: Perhaps, as long as there's room in the pattern for sharp questions about which perspective to take. Here's a test. In the performance of *Anna K* in your head is it all seen through Anna's eyes, or do the author and other characters get a chance for the occasional cynical observation?

Eve: *Would someone who can put up with ten minutes of your hair-splitting be immune to cynical observation? Here's a problem for you, now. You want to call a state an emotion when it is best presented through a purely centered narrative, and a virtue when the narrative has shifting points of view. But that can't be right. What about vices? What about all the states that are best presented with complex narratives that are neither virtues nor vices?*

Adam: I certainly can't say that all states linked to shifts of narrative perspective are virtues. All I could claim is that sometimes it's the other way round: most virtues involve such shifts. And some vices are vicious because they don't have suitable shifts in them. They're more like emotions, from my point of view. But we all know that the terminology of the emotions is a mess. Emotions, passions, feelings, moods, sentiments: the meanings of these words keep shifting. Perhaps this is a domain where philosophers are forced to stop pretending the meanings sit still waiting to be analyzed, and start exploring some better ways of speaking.

Eve: *So perhaps you should withdraw your warning against seeing our own lives as stories. Whatever these things you call intellectual virtues are, they seem to allow the right kind of storytelling. I see the point that a good life need not make a good story, from a literary point of view, and I see that people torture themselves wanting their lives to turn out like satisfying plots. That surely leaves room for a kind of wise helpful narrative structure. We both wish we knew what that structure was.**

Adam Morton
University of Bristol

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