

Emotion, Perception, and Virtue

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I was initially drawn to Iris Murdoch's discussion about "attention" because, along with the related terms "perception" and "discernment," it appears relatively infrequently in modern moral theory. With Susan McDonough, I think that this is unfortunate because, as she says, how we see can have important implications for how we act. While I do not wish to take issue with McDonough's engaging analysis, I do question whether Murdoch herself paid enough attention to the emotions. My question is suggested by a much older tradition in moral thought — namely, that founded by Aristotle — and I raise it here in hopes that doing so might contribute in some way to the broader discussion about the significance of emotion in moral life. Murdoch tolerates the emotions under certain circumstances, but, to quote McDonough, for Murdoch, "what one feels is relevant only to the extent that it is the natural result of seeing something real or true." As this line suggests, Murdoch raises all sorts of interesting epistemological questions. Here, however, drawing on Aristotle, I merely want to indicate how the emotions may actually enhance our capacity for paying attention and, more generally, how they may contribute to moral motivation and education.

Aristotle, of course, did not equate virtue with emotion. While Aristotle did challenge what he saw as Plato's one-sided intellectualism, he also thought that reason was inextricably involved in the exercise of virtue:

Intelligence is yoked together with virtue of character, and so is this virtue with intelligence. For the origins of intelligence express the virtues of character; and correctness in virtues of character express intelligence. And since these virtues are also connected to feelings, they are concerned with the compound.¹

Aristotle's concern with attentiveness and perception is related to his conception of virtue. In much of the contemporary, popular literature, virtues are discussed as if their implications for conduct are clear and straightforward. Aristotle, in contrast, thought that how any particular virtue is actually expressed will depend on the circumstances. According to his formulation, in every situation in which choice and/or action is appropriate, a person of good character determines which virtue is needed and how it should be manifested. One assesses what will be entailed in acting in accord with virtue case by case. Aristotle writes, "So...giving and spending money is easy and anyone can do it; but doing it to the right person, in the right amount, at the right time, for the right end, and in the right way is no longer easy, nor can everyone do it."² Not just anything will count as generosity or courage or truthfulness, or any other virtue, but what *will* count can be determined only in relation to a particular situation, not abstractly.

In light of Aristotle's idea that what constitutes virtuous action is determined in large measure by the context in which it occurs, it is not surprising that perception plays a major role in the exercise of virtue. Again Aristotle, "[How] far and how much we must deviate [from the mean] to be blamed is not easily defined, and [since]

these [circumstances of virtuous and vicious action] are particular, the judgment about them depends on perception.”³ Whether one responds overtly at all, and if so, how one responds, will be determined largely by one’s perception of the situation.

Clearly, emotion is not the whole of virtue, but Aristotle thought that to possess a virtue is, in part, to have an emotional sensitivity that shapes how one sees the world. In this sense, emotions can be regarded as *drawing* one’s attention in particular ways. A person who possesses the virtue of generosity, for example, will have a heightened sensitivity to, and feel distressed by, others’ needs; under happier circumstances, such a person will see opportunities for giving gifts and otherwise sharing resources. A stingy person may well be blind to all such occasions and therefore unmoved to act.

In some cases the emotional response and the virtuous action occur practically in the same moment. When asked to explain an act of great courage, say, jumping into a freezing lake or burning building, it is common to hear an individual report that he or she did not think twice about acting as they did. The perception of dire need, which may register emotionally as a physical response — as a pounding heart, perhaps — instantly calls forth the courage of the person who possesses that virtue.

Aside from their role in perception, emotions are an important aspect of moral response itself. As Aristotle puts this,

We can be afraid, for example, or be confident, or have appetites, or get angry, or feel pity, in general have pleasure or pain, both too much and too little, and in both ways not well; but [having these feelings] at the right times, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the intermediate and best condition, and this is proper to virtue.⁴

As I understand it, Martha Nussbaum’s point in the work quoted by McDonough reflects this idea. Merely going through the motions is morally inadequate when, for example, one’s lack of emotional engagement diminishes another. A bland “too bad” or “that’s nice” in response to someone who has had an experience that is momentous, is hurtful and demonstrates a lack of appropriate regard for the other’s feelings. Aristotle would even say that this blasé attitude is incompatible with moral maturity. In his conception, a person is not thought to have exercised mature virtue unless his or her actions are accompanied by certain feelings.⁵ For example, to give, but to do so grudgingly falls short of Aristotle’s standard for the virtue of generosity.

In addition to aiding perception and good conduct, the emotions can play an important role in moral development. For instance, our emotional responses to our own conduct can be morally instructive. Aristotle thought that if an individual were going to develop into moral maturity, this would require, first, cultivating a desire to be virtuous. At some point in his or her development, such an individual says in effect, “I want to be a good, virtuous person.” In more contemporary, psychological terms, this person has a self-conception that includes the desire to be courageous, generous, truthful. When a person wants to be virtuous, he or she takes pleasure in acting in ways that decent people act. Conversely, such a person feels emotional pain, often shame, when his or her actions fail to meet this standard. On this account, after telling a lie one feels bad about not living up to one’s own self-conception as

an honest person. At least intuitively, adults adopt this way of thinking when, in their efforts to help a child make a decision about how to proceed, they ask the child to imagine how he or she would feel after taking different possible alternatives.

A related point is that one view of the emotions is that they are particular kinds of feelings that “just happen” in response to particular events. Part of the impetus to suppress the emotions is their assumed unreliability and unwieldiness; if they cannot be controlled, at least they can be forced under ground. As Aristotle recognized, emotions *can* lead us astray, just as they can set us on a path toward good conduct. But rather than concluding from this that we ought to dampen the emotions, Aristotle argued that they ought to be trained and educated. Indeed, given their role in perception and the centrality of perception in acting virtuously, developing the virtues requires developing the emotions as well. With experience and guidance, Aristotle thought that a person could learn when particular emotional responses are appropriate, as well as to feel the emotions in a depth appropriate to the situation at hand.

As peculiar as it may sound to modern, Western ears, the basic idea that emotions are not merely given, but are rather susceptible to cultivation, animates educational practices elsewhere in the world. In Japan, for example, the Ministry of Education states explicitly that in addition to learning subject matter content, children should acquire certain modes of feeling. Among many other emotional capacities, it is hoped that children will acquire “fondness for exercise,” “love of nature,” “richness of sentiment,” “taste for joy,” and, more broadly, an “approach to life that is happy and pleasant.”⁶ Such aims are broadly Aristotelian in the sense that they speak to children’s need not only for skills and knowledge, but also for emotional development.

In conclusion, Murdoch can abide the emotions when they are incidental to perception; however, beyond that, she regards the emotions as interfering with “objective attention.” From a point of view such as Aristotle’s, this understanding seriously underestimates the role of emotions in good conduct and human flourishing. Aristotle did not romanticize the emotions; if the emotions all by themselves led to virtue, then there would be no need for their training and education. What Aristotle offers is insight into how the emotions figure importantly, not only in perception, but also in moral motivation and development.

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 287.

2. *Ibid.*, 51.

3. *Ibid.*, 53.

4. *Ibid.*, 44.

5. For a discussion of this point, please see L.A. Kosman, “Being Properly Affected: Virtues and Feelings in Aristotle’s Ethics,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 103-16.

6. Catherine C. Lewis, *Educating Hearts and Minds: Reflections on Japanese Preschool and Elementary Education* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 66-68.