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Commentary

# Seeing Complexity to Continue to Better Understand Emotions

Dina Mendonça
Instituto de Filosofia da Nova, Lisboa, Portugal

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**Abstract:** Commentary on Michael S. Brady's book, Emotion: The Basics, indicating that it offers an overview of the field of philosophy of emotions while raising awareness about the intrinsic complexity of the issues in emotion research. This makes it possible to show how emotion research is inevitably tied to specific philosophical assumptions. Three illustrations are discussed that hopefully also testify that, as Brady states, the philosophy of emotion is inevitably tied to the question of what it means to do philosophy.

**Keywords:** emotion, mind, self, pride, pain, and rationality

Michael S. Brady's book, *Emotion: The Basics* (2019), provides an overview of the field of philosophy of emotions while raising awareness about the intrinsic complexity of the issues in emotion research. One of the illuminating conclusions of the book is pointing out how "emotions provide the solution to an emotional problem" (Brady 2019, 54) showing that any conception of emotion, in any theoretical framework, is itself the test to its overall proposal. That is, whatever conception of emotion is presented, it must be able to critically justify its own theory and, at the same time, solve specific problems of emotion theory. For example, arguing for a conception of emotion which has various distinctive elements that work together and enable emotions to do a variety of things provides a more adequate interpretation of how a great variety of emotional processes occur (Brady 2019, 9, 40, 89, 108, 152). Accordingly, Brady's proposal solves the problem of emotions' ambiguous epistemic role (Brady 2019, 40) because it explains that "emotions can motivate the search for and discovery of reasons, and in so doing can help to bring about a more accurate judgement as to whether emotional appearance matches evaluative reality" (Brady 2019, 58). This is what ultimately explains how to overcome the apparent contradiction of emotions' epistemological role of being sometimes the source of bias, and at other times the

guarantee of certainty (Goldie 2004, 249) by showing that emotions are linked to attention and salience, and this is also what guides people to search for reasons that confirm, or deny, emotional information.

Thus, the book highlights how emotion research is inevitably tied to specific philosophical assumptions, offering an important theoretical demand to evaluate emotion research by examining specific underlying philosophical assumptions. In order to unfold this theoretical richness of the book three issues will serve as examples: first, how the interdependence between philosophical reflection and empirical evidence hides the more complex issue of which picture of the mind underlies different efforts in emotion research; second, how examples of emotions given in the literature are tied to specific theoretical frameworks that reinforce specific conceptual interconnections at the cost of others; and finally, how pain provides a rich gateway to further reflect on the insightful topic on how emotions are connected to sensations (Boddice and Smith 2020)..

## THE UNDERLYING CONCEPTION OF THE MIND

Concerning the first issue: the philosophical discussion is inevitably linked to the vast empirical literature on emotion that has continuously increased since it began in experimental psychology (Gendron and Barrett 2009), and later taken up by neuroscientists, like António Damasio (1994), Joseph Ledoux (1998), and Jaak Panksepp (1998). There is a sense in which philosophers are always hoping that their speculations are proven right by empirical research, as a decisive way to overcome the philosophical disagreements and debates. However, the empirical evidence does not guarantee a sure victory to any theoretical proposal, and often does not do much more than to help divide the field. This was already identified in the 1980s by Amélie Oksenberg Rorty in her paper, "From Passions to Emotions and Sentiments" (Rorty 1982, 172), and remains true nowadays.

The reason for this state of affairs lies in how "it is not always clear what the arbitrating theory-neutral facts could be. When read fully and sympathetically, each robust theory comes complete with its own sustaining facts" (Rorty 1982, 172). This means that the disputes between the different theories end up being tied to how the phenomenon is initially described. No doubt, this is in part due to how no theory is able to capture the whole domain of the nature of emotions and, as Brady argues, the only viable way out for this lack of completeness is to accept that each different theory will capture a certain range of emotions, and is correct only in light of a specific limited domain of emotion experience (Brady, 2019, 35-36). However, there is another aspect of this theoretical obstacle, namely that the conceptual take on emotions is given by a certain conceptional topology within the mind. That is, part of the reason why there are several different theories of emotions is tied to the way there are different pictures of how they are conceived in the mind and in relation to the self (Rorty 1982, 161).

Amélie Rorty explains how the conception of the mind and that of the emotions changed during the period from Descartes to Rousseau. She describes that the standard procedure of philosophers in giving an account of the mind often began by critically exposing the work of their predecessor as something of a disaster of a technical nature (Rorty 1982, 160), which then created the space to give their own proposed version. Often, these philosophers, such as Descartes and Hume, subsequently proceeded to explain emotional processes they had to "revise their initial accounts of the mind and its powers" (Rorty 1982,161). According to Rorty, in this historical process, emotions stopped being only brute forces from physical states that needed to be controlled or

suppressed, and became also a constitutive part of human beings. After this transformation emotions are no longer just disruptions but, instead, also count as motives for actions and guides for morality. Of course, this is just a small part of how the concept of emotion "makes for a long and complicated history" (Scarantino and de Sousa 2021, 6) and Rorty's diagnosis is an historical evaluation that helps to further explain why the term "emotion" was only scientifically and systematically studied after the mid-nineteenth century (Dixon 2012, 338; see also Dixon 2003; Solomon 2008 as cited in Scarantino and de Sousa 2021, 6).

The general outcome is that emotions are conceptualized in two different ways: first, sometimes emotions appear as something overwhelming to the subjects who experience them, in the face of which only rationality can guarantee justice; and second, emotions appear as allies of justice and reason when the "virtue of justice can become the sense of justice, its operations assured by benevolent social passions rather than by rationality" (Rorty 1982, 159-160). Rorty points out that what makes emotions especially insightful, and able to provide a diagnosis for proposals of a conception of the mind, "is that they are found in that no-man's land where theories create the experiences they describe . . . and yet also in that area where there are constraints" (Rorty 1982, 171). Emotions are conceived as having a certain place "in the topography of the mind" (Scarantino and De >Sousa 2021, 1-2) and accepted as part of the mind. According to Rorty's historical diagnosis this means that when philosophers further analyze emotions, they identify that emotional processes interfere with the underlying description of the mind, and consequently integrate them as part of the conditions of the functioning of the mind (Rorty 1982)..

According to Amélie Rorty, this theoretical consequence is still present in contemporary proposals for emotion theories (Rorty 1982, 171-172). That is, the contemporary philosophical work focuses on various roles of emotions in the functioning of the mind, and when one philosopher revives this or that aspect of their role in the mind and in life, focusing on this or that apparent theory and neutral facts, it appears that "[d]isputes between such theories are reproduced as disputes that can be straightened out by a little terminological hygiene" (Rorty 1982,172). However, given that the problem lies deeper in the historical inheritance, and no complete genealogy can be offered, there are always other possibilities that complicate the theoretical suggestions given by how the philosophical "history with its babble of conflicting tongues remains alive and intact within us" (Rorty 1982, 172), making communication among theorists of different philosophical schools virtually impossible.

One important consequence of recognizing this historical picture is disclosing that empirical research is also based on philosophical commitments, which are adopted with various degrees of consciousness, from researchers in a variety of different research fields. Thus, there is another explanation for the well-recognized contemporary plurality of emotion theories (Brady 2019; De Sousa and Scarantino 2018; Griffiths and Scarantino 2009), suggesting that the emotional landscape of plural theoretical proposals may very well be, not a shortcoming of our contemporary theories impossible to be overcome, but a diagnosis of the inadequate underlying theories of mind present in philosophy, and all other fields of expertise that research on emotion. Though Brady identifies the culprit as the wide range of things that are covered by the term emotion (Brady 2019, 13), the problem may be also brought about by the underlying philosophical heritage and its undiagnosed confusion.

## BIASED EXAMPLES OF EMOTION

The second issue that reveals the richness of emotion research for further reflection concerns how the examples of emotion given by the different theories tendentiously format the reflection about emotions in general. As Brady well explains, the theoretical term "emotion" refers to an ample range of phenomena within the emotional landscape (Brady 2019, 13). The term emotion includes, at one extreme, automatic bodily reaction, as bodily disgust, some kinds of fear, anger, and surprise; and, at the opposite extreme, more complex emotions, such as Schadenfreude, compassion, remorse, and pride. There are two consequences of the inevitable choice of examples within this wide amplitude of meaning: first, the theoretical proposals select examples of emotions that reinforce their own project, and privilege specific descriptions of emotion; second, the wide amplitude of the term makes any attempt to fix a taxonomy of theories of emotion difficult to attain. Though the muddy terrain is ultimately given by the way these two consequences cannot be completely set apart, for the sake of clarity, they are considered separately.

The last consequence pointed out is well exemplified by Brady's great effort to present a coherent historical perspective on emotion theories. After having described feeling theories and the cognitive ones, he shows how different versions of perceptual theories seem to collapse to one or the other type of theories of emotion previously described (Brady 2019, 31). And the issue is not just due to how the analogy between emotional experience and perceptual experience is questionable, as Brady insightfully points out. The matter in question may hide a more complex problem about the very nature of offering an emotion theory with a set of selected examples of emotions, and using their interpretation to provide a complete understanding of the entire emotional landscape.

In what concerns the first consequence: what is problematic is not that the theoretical proposals reinforce their own project by picking specific examples but that, by doing so, they also fall prey to their own biased portrayal. Take for example the suggestion offered by William James to invert the order of the events for a better understanding of an emotional experience. He argues that it is not the perception of some object or event (i.e., a dangerous bear moving towards you) that excites the fear but, instead, that the bodily changes that follow the perception of the object or event, and that these changes, as they occur, make up the emotion (Brady 2019, 17). James offers specific examples to illustrate his proposal, writing that, "we lose our fortune, are sorry and weep, we meet a bear, are frightened and run; we are insulted by a rival, are angry and strike" (James 1984, 190), and inadvertently he implies that all instances of each emotion is dictated by the descriptions given. This suggests, for instance, that all cases of fear will somehow resemble the fear of a bear.

Even though William James (1884) carefully begins his famous article "What is an Emotion?" by stating that he will only consider emotions "that have a distinct bodily expression" (James 1884, 189), it is still the case that the fear considered is that of the danger in the wild, and no consideration is made to how this emotional experience is different, or not, from other instances of fear such as fear of bureaucracy, or fear of a damaged self-image, or of the futility of life. The theoretical outcome is that fear in general is that his account of fear overgeneralizes from the example of seeing a dangerous animal, and consequently asserts without any detailed discussion that all instances of fear must somehow resemble it. This uncritical way of using examples is reasonable enough, and only reveals its problematic silhouette when crucial links of emotions to other aspects of the mind are identified.

The subtlety of the problem makes it difficult to spot its importance, which makes it all the more difficult to be overcome.

As an illustration of the unsettling nature of the puzzle, take the description of pride in chapter four of Brady's book, "Emotions and Social Groups." Brady uses the example of pride to show how emotions have social value and that they communicate virtues that benefit groups. He starts by using Gabriele Taylor's definition of pride, writing that, "we feel pride in some object or event that we think is valuable or desirable, and that stands in some relation of 'belonging' to us" (Brady 2019, 110). Emphasizing how the definition clearly mirrors the evaluative nature of emotions, Brady further grounds and reinforces his proposal calling upon recent work in social psychology to show that the empirical testimony indicates how facial and bodily expressions of the emotion of pride "have the function of advertising and communicating one's achievements to others, and as a result of enhancing one's status and esteem" (Brady 2019, 111). Brady continues by pointing out how individuals strive for socially valued achievements by appealing to how pride reveals, and simultaneously enhances, reputation and social status, which can also be recognized in how pride is pedagogically reinforced (Brady 2019, 111-112).

Brady inadvertently takes for granted the connection of pride to the constitution of the self. The link between self and pride is fundamental to understanding the overall self-reflective nature of the emotion of pride. In fact, the analysis of pride in the philosophical literature appears in a decisive manner with David Hume, and is made a "pivotal point for the construction of the fictional idea of the self as an agent" (Rorty 1990, 256). Hume underlines how the admiration and prize of the sources of pride by others introduces historicity and cultural variability on the idea of the self (Rorty 1990, 262), and shows that the way pride affects agency is intimately connected to "the ways in which some pleasures and pains are weighted by their central connection to her conception of herself, a conception that identifies her long-range interests" (Rorty 1990, 263). This is why Hume gives pride its place in his explanation of agency, and in so doing changed the meaning of pride (Rorty 1990, 269): pride was no longer merely a sin because the connection to agency opened the possibility of describing it as a crucial element for personal transformation. Ultimately it could also explain why a person would attempt "to change her motivational structure by changing her conception of what is essential to her, and changing her conception of herself by rearranging the pattern of what gives her pride" (Rorty 1990, 266).

Even though Hume might have been skeptical of isolated moves of self-reform (Rorty,1990, 266), the crucial element of Hume's work on pride is that is enables the pursuit of virtue by recognizing the variable and modifiable nature of the notion of self, while simultaneously revealing the "connections between psychology and politics" (Rorty 1990, 269). According to the description given by Amélie Rorty, pain and suffering are an unfortunate consequence of the transformative character of pride, and not a necessary condition because the inevitably relevant link is given to pride's connection to agency and to the self. Of course, this implies that agency for self-transformation must often represent some level of endurance and effort. Nevertheless, Brady's discussion of pride would have been greatly enhanced by identifying this historical connection, and he would have been able to refer to various elaborations of Hume's proposal, which are available in the more recent literature on philosophy of emotions (Davidson 1976; Baier 1978; Rorty 1990). This would have provided a different density to the philosophical description of why feelings of pride are often central to specific social groups (Brady 2019, 123), and would have revealed why pointing out certain connections has a philosophical sharpness that enhances the understanding of emotion both theoretically and in people's daily lives.

In the reflection about pride, Brady makes a general link between pride and pain arguing that, even though pride is generally of a positive valence, it entails overcoming pain and suffering. This is because "people wouldn't value or pursue some goal or activity unless it involved pain and suffering" (Brady 2019, 113), and the consequences of these aspects of the experience of pride are a part of the condition of feeling it. This takes us to our third and last item of the commentary.

## PAIN AND EMOTION

There is nothing contradictory in itself about Brady's interconnection between pride and pain, which is presented in chapter four; however when the book is taken as a whole, one needs to discuss how the proposed link between pride and pain can be maintained in light of the description of pain from the previous chapter, which argues that pain is of critical importance for motivation for action because "being in pain does, by itself, provide some motivation to act so as to alleviate that pain" (Brady 2019, 90). This offers ground for more reflection, as the two chapters appear to be in contradiction.

In the third chapter Brady presents pain as a feeling that cannot be termed an emotion, except metaphorically (Brady 2019, 16), which is crucial for the understanding of emotion's motivation story. Brady argues that emotions "move us in much the same way that pains move us" (Brady 2019, 89) because just as the way people are motivated to avoid and overcome pain, "the unpleasantness of remorse persists, normally up to and until we behave appropriately and make adequate apologies and reparations" (Brady 2019, 96). Yet, this description of pain seems to go against the description of how people look for difficult and painful experiences to be proud of their achievements in the fourth chapter. This gives the overall book project a theoretical tension to be resolved. In addition, it raises further and more complicated questions: Is it the case that people look for certain types of pain because it can, in the long term, grant them the experience of pride? Are people making a point of making their pains transparent and public to be able to subsequently feel pride? Does this pedagogical reinforcement encourage mimicking pain for the process of learning to be more rewarding? What happens when their pain and effort is not recognized?

The tensions and problems identified are best understood as a sign of the richness of pain for the enlightenment of emotion theory given that the "scientific study of pain, one of the most controversial areas in neuroscience, is rife with philosophical problems" (Aydede and Güzeldere 2002, 266). Consequently, many issues regarding the connection of emotion with pain are still in need of philosophical reflection. For example, there is no philosophical account of why the "desensitization to our own or to other people's pain tends to lead to an overall blunting of emotional sensitivity" (Kolk 2014, 222). And though the cognitive element of pain modifies the experience of pain, the sensation "remains incorrigible" (Ochs 1966, 256), suggesting that the emotional richness of pain is what makes pain difficult to communicate, (Scheper-Hughes 2019, 32), and why some cases of emotional pain, like self-pity, are hard to capture by any philosophical emotion theory.

There are many more thought provoking topics, such as the way the book takes up again and again the need to rethink the relationship between reason and emotion, for as Bernard Williams writes, "it would be a kind of insanity never to experience sentiments . . . and it would be an insane concept of rationality which insisted that a rational person never would" (Williams 1981, 29). When Brady explains how emotions are "important because

they undermine or short-circuit our reasoning and reflection" (Brady 2019, 2), he adds an unquestionable contribution to reinforce how emotion research gives rise to a reconceptualization of rationality (Mendonça and Sàágua 2019, 122). I hope that my commentary has made the reader curious to read the book, and contributed to enhancing how Brady shows that these issues are inevitably connected to questions such as "How do we do philosophy? How do philosophers think about the nature of emotion? How can philosophy helps us to understand this part of our experience, and indeed anything at all" (Brady 2019, 8).

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