Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions

On the one hand, the intellectual and pragmatic bankruptcy of psychoanalysis and most other forms of therapy shows that we simply do not know enough about the workings of the mind to be able to change its course predictably and reliably.232 If read at a guide to planned character change, Aristotle's remarks are too simplistic. A person with no settled disposition either way may perhaps mold himself by his actions, but it is far from obvious that an ineradicable person can change his disposition by controlling outward expressions of anger.233 Moreover, for some dispositions the Aristotelian recipe will not work even in the former case. To become compassionate, it is not enough to behave compassionately. One has to have suffered oneself to understand the sufferings of others.

On the other hand, certain dispositions may be intrinsically unambitious to conscious planning. They can only arise as by-products of activities that are undertaken for other ends. Compassion, again, provides an example. A person who felt insufficiently compassionate could not develop that disposition by voluntarily exposing himself to suffering. To take a trivial example, one cannot bring oneself to understand what it means to fail at an important examination by deliberately flunking an examination oneself, because failing means trying and not succeeding rather than not trying. The by-product problem also arises with regard to the intentional production of current emotional states. I cannot make myself laugh by telling a joke to myself or tickling myself. I may feel proud of my achievements, but I will not achieve much if I am moved only by the desire to feel pride. More generally, people cannot plan the surprise that will enhance their emotions.

To the extent that my encounters with the world are both independent of my actions and unpredictable, I may not know what to plan for. A set of emotional dispositions that are useful in one state of affairs may be counterproductive in another. A stoic attitude may be useful if one goes bankrupt but might otherwise be a kiln. Montaigne observed, "If you say that the convenience of having our senses chilled and blunted when tasting evil pains must entail the intentional incoherence of rendering us less keenly appreciative of the joys of good pleasures, I agree. But the wretchedness of our human condition means that we have less to rely than to have to rely." (Essai, p. 545). In the turbulent times in which he lived, this was perhaps a correct appreciation, but in general I do not think one can defend the claim that the benefits of feeling pain less acutely offset the cost of a less keen sense of pleasure.

Finally, the emotions themselves may serve as an obstacle to emotional planning. Making contingency plans for dealing with unpleasant emotions in the future is a source of unpleasant emotions in the present. "Making a list of worries before embarking on a trip seems like a reasonable cognitive coping strategy. But nobody likes to worry; thus, we forget to act on such advice. Relative few people can plan for tomorrow's emotional distress."234 Although such avoidance behavior may be irrational,235 it need not be. Thus towards the end of his life, Montaigne found that he had been wrong earlier when he had argued that we should keep death constantly in our mind in order to reduce the fear of death. In doing so, "we prepare ourselves against our preparations for death! Philosophy first commands us to have death ever before our eyes, to anticipate it and to consider it beforehand, and then she gives us rules and cautions in order to forestall the being hurt by our reflections and our foresight" (Essai, p. 1192).

BECKER'S THEORY OF THE EMOTIONS

Although the idea of rational planning of one's own emotional dispositions may be chimerical, could one have more success in planning those of others? Over the past twenty years Gary Becker has moved towards a position of this kind. In most of his work, Becker has taken emotional dispositions for given and tried to incorporate them into economic models. In his most recent writings he goes beyond this approach, by trying to endogenize emotions. More specifically, he tries to show that emotional dispositions as well as current emotions or

232 For the pragmatic issue, which is the most relevant one here, see Dawes (1994).
234 See Chapter II of Elster (1989) for the idea of states that are essentially by-products.

320
their absence) can be the result of rational choice by the emotional subject or by others.²²⁷

Becker’s writings on altruism view this emotion as an externality in the utility function, a person’s utility being a function of his or her own consumption, the consumption of spouse, and the consumption of children. In some applications, the utility of the altruistic member is assumed to depend on the utility rather than on the consumption of other family members. Applying this idea within the context of a family, Becker shows that the presence of a genuinely altruistic person in a household may induce selfish or even envious members of the household to act as if they, too, were altruistic. Modeling envy as another utility externality, he shows that the head of the family is envious, selfish family members act as if they, too, were envious. As these results are well known and do not involve emotions in more than a minimal sense, I shall not discuss them further.

In various places Becker extends the analysis to cover parental preferences over what he calls “merit goods,”²²⁸ or “particular traits or behavior [sic] of children that parents care about.”²²⁹ These include emotional dispositions such as envy, other dispositions such as laziness, and behavioral patterns such as gambling and excessive drinking. Parents, typically, do not want their children to be lazy or envious, or to waste their money on gambling and liquor. Conversely, they might have a preference for positive merit goods, such as working hard or being obedient. In conjunction with his writings on altruism and envy, Becker’s theory of merit goods suggests that parents have preferences over their children’s utility, their consumption, their behavior, and their character traits. Although he briefly mentions the possibility of parents who are envious of their children²³⁰ or who take a sadistic pleasure in making them worse off,²³¹ he mainly assumes that their preferences reflect a concern for what they believe to be good for the children, whether or not that is also what the children prefer.

By and large, preferences over merit goods take second place to preferences over consumption or utility. In his discussion of envy in the family, for instance, Becker analyzes the behavior of an altruistic father with a daughter Jane and an envious son Tom, assuming that the utility of the father “depends positively on his own consumption, the utility of Tom, and the utility of a selfish Jane.”²³² Under this assumption, “a shift of Tom’s utility function toward greater envy would reduce his father’s contribution to Jane. Indeed, if Tom became sufficiently envious, the contribution to Jane might be reduced to zero.” The assumption seems to be that, for the father, a little is a little, independent of the motivation that underlies it. If Tom’s envy makes him suffer intensely from Jane’s well-being, their father will take income away from Jane to assuage his envy. In fact, “Tom might benefit from actions that harmed Jane sufficiently to reduce family income, because his father might not reduce his contribution to Tom by much.” At this point Becker seems to notice the somewhat surreal nature of the argument, for he adds, “Of course, the father’s utility function might depend only on Tom’s consumption and not on Tom’s utility if the father disapproved of envy between his children.” Sometimes, utilities are indeed not interchangeable. Yet this brief appearance of common sense is only a momentary one. In the continuation of the discussion, Becker argues that the victims of envy would “want to lower the envy income of the envier and harm him because he would then make them better off.”²³³ More plausibly, in my opinion, they might harm him because of the anger induced by their perception of the envious motivation. As I noted in IV.2, beliefs about other people’s motivations can trigger powerful emotional reactions.

Before I proceed to the more interesting case of indigenous emotions, let me note a curious feature of Becker’s discussion of envy and altruism. In A Treatise on the Family from 1901, envy is treated together with altruism as respectively negative and positive externality in the utility function. In a 1974 article, “A Theory of Social Interaction,”²³⁴ envy is paired with respect rather than with altruism. The general idea is that a person might maximize utility by

²²⁷ In his various references to emotions, Becker discusses altruism (1976, Chapters 13, 11, and 10, p. 476), envy (1976, pp. 259-60, 257-80), 1991, pp. 158-90), guilt (1990, pp. 158-90), and love (1990, pp. 257-80). Indirectly, Becker (1996, Chapter 11) also refers to altruism in his discussion of social norms. As these references indicate, the discussions of altruism are by far the most extensive. Although Becker (1976, pp. 257-80) also refers briefly to altruism, this is for him simply a synonym of envy. This cavalier use of terminology reflects the fact that Becker seems entirely unaware of the psychological literature on the emotions, at least as far as one can judge from his written work.


²³³ Ibid., p. 259.

allocating some of his income to activities that affect others rather than to his own consumption. Thus he might seek to achieve "distinction" by investing in activities that will gain him the respect and approval of others. Alternatively, he might seek to enhance his well-being by investing in activities that will detract from the income or prestige of others.225 Envy is contrasted, that is, both with the desire to make others better off and with the desire to make others think well of oneself. The latter two motivations would seem to be very different from each other. In his application of his theory to the issue of charitable contributions, Becker notes that "apparent charitable behavior" can be motivated by a desire to avoid the scorn of others or to receive social acclaim, but adds nevertheless that "not much generosity is sacrificed... by only considering charity motivated by a desire in well-being."226 Although there may be analytical purposes for which it makes no difference whether people donate to charities to make themselves better off or to make others better off, there are contexts in which that distinction may be important. Some people, for instance, prefer to donate anonymously.

In his recent work, Becker tries to explain the emotions rather than taking them for granted. In his general program, he aims at giving a rational-choice explanation. As indicated in Table IV.1, he focuses on preventing emotional reactions from arising in oneself and on minimizing emotional dispositions in others.227 The idea of emotional self-management is a relatively undeveloped category, represented only by a brief note in Becker's most recent book.228 The idea is that people have an incentive to avoid situations that might trigger certain emotions they do not want to have, an idea that is applied first to guilt and then to love. Except for those who enjoy meeting beggars because it makes them "feel superior or lucky,"229 people avoid beggars because they want to avoid the feelings of guilt triggered by the encounters. It is not clear from Becker's discussion whether the root cause is the negative valence of the emotion or the monetary loss associated with the giving which is the action tendency of guilt. When he asserts that "people do not want to encounter beggars, even though they may contribute handsomely after an encounter,"230 the phrase that I have italicized suggests the first reading. On the second reading, we would expect "because" rather than "even though."

If the case of guilt is supposed to be analogous to that of love, however, the second reading must be chosen. Here, Becker's argument is that high-income individuals stay away from low-income individuals of the opposite sex, because they know that they might fall in love with them and that if they do they will want to share their income with them. In this case the emotion itself has positive valence but is avoided because of the loss of income that will be predictably induced by the associated action tendency. Because guilt as well as love may induce generous feeling and because generosity is costly, individuals who care about their income stay away from occasions that might trigger these emotions. I offer a somewhat similar argument in V.3, when discussing the transmutation of intentions into action. Here I shall only note that this avoidance behavior might have costs of its own. If the set of partners is very restricted, one might not meet anyone who triggers the emotion. The plot of Pride and Prejudice would not have gotten off the ground if Darcy had acted in accordance with Becker's analysis.

In Accounting for Taste, Becker offers two analyses of the inculcation of emotions in others. One is parental inculcation of guilt in children, the other is upper-class inculcation of religion in the lower classes. Although religion is not an emotion, it is sustained by social norms that are, in turn, sustained by feeling of shame. Although this is a borderline case, I discuss it here because it suggests some interesting perspectives on inculcation more generally.

In both cases, the inculcation is done for the benefit of the inculcator rather than for the benefit of the persons who are inculcated. Becker's analysis of guilt differs, therefore, from Frank's. Yet Becker does not imply that parents care only for themselves. Because they also care for their children, they want them to be well off; hence they will invest in their education. At the same time, they want to be well off themselves in their old age. They can achieve this end by reducing the amount of demands they leave to their children, or by investing in actions that induce guilt in the children, so that they will take care of their parents when they grow old. Because of their altruism, the parents suffer when their children feel guilty. They also suffer when
the children, to relieve their guilt, transfer income to the parents and thereby make themselves worse off. Given their various intercon
nections, optimal investments by parents in the education and guilt
of their children, as well as optimal bequests, are then determined by
the appropriate marginal balancing.

Note that the analysis refers to the negative valence of guilt as well
as to the action tendency induced by the emotion. On the one hand,
the guilt of the children is costly to the parents, because they care
about the welfare of their children. On the other hand, it is beneficial
to the parents, because it induces the children to support them in old
age. Becker also assumes, however, that "children feel less guilty
when they contribute more."241 If the parents anticipate that effect
as they should—the cost to them of their children's guilt should also
be reduced. As far as I can judge from Becker's compact treatment,
he does not take into account this implication. In calculating the
cost of the children's guilt to the parents, he considers the pretransfer
situation rather than the more relevant post-transfer situation.

Although Becker does not specify what he means by "investment in
guilt," it could be spelled out as follows. In raising children, example
tends to work better than prescription or manipulation. "Do as I say,
not as I do" is notoriously ineffective. To ensure that the children will
feel guilty enough to support them, parents may have to incur the cost
of supporting their own parents. Yet what is missing in this analysis is
that children also feel love for their parents, not only guilt when they
fail to support them. (In fact, one reason they love their parents may
be that they observe how loving the latter are towards their parents.)
There is an unjustified asymmetry in assuming that parents transfer
income to the children because they love them and want them to be
better off, whereas children transfer income to their parents only
to reduce their own guilt. Why assume that what matters for the
children is the amount they transfer to their parents rather than the
post-transfer income of the parents? I think many children support
their parents because they love them. Moreover, I do not think this
love is a result of any previous parental investment in filial love. Were
Becker to make that argument, we would have to ask him whether the
parents' love for their children could not also be result of the children
investing in parental love (by "playing cute" and so forth).

I have two further objections to this analysis. First, parental in
vestment in guilt might not be rational if, as plausible, the guilt

241. Ibid., p. 154.

326
Rationality and the Emotions

refers to behavior that is inseparable from the emotion itself. Case (5) refers to behavior caused by the desire to maintain or change a situation that generates positive or negative emotions. Case (9) refers to behavior against one's own better judgment ("weakness of will") under the influence of emotions. Cases (10) and (11) refer to emotions that can induce myopic and farsighted behaviors respectively. Cases (12) through (14) refer to behavior generated on the basis of emotionally induced beliefs. Cases (15) and (16) refer to behavior induced by emotions that are triggered by the perception or anticipation of the emotions of others. Case (17) refers to behavior triggered by irrational emotions. Case (18) refers to behavior in situations in which the emotions serve as tie-breakers. Cases (19) and (20) refer to avoidance and undoing behavior induced by negative emotions. The hodge-podge nature of this list is obvious. Although I believe it reflects the complexity of the facts, others might wish for a more parsimonious and coherent account.

(1) Emotional experiences with positive valence ("positive emotions," for short) may serve as the goal of behavior. The link between behavior and outcome may be provided either by intentional choice or by the reinforcement properties of the experience. Example: Solomon's case of a woman who was willing to take a financial loss in order to get the pleasant feeling of righteous indignation.

(2) Future occasions that would generate negative emotions may steer behavior away from those occasions. The link between behavior and outcome may be provided either by intentional choice or by the reinforcement properties of the experience. Example: not going to a party at which we might meet a person towards whom we have behaved badly.

(3) We may engage in activity A for the purpose of changing or acquiring emotional dispositions in ways that will enhance the value of activity B. Example: seeing a psychotherapist to get rid of feelings of guilt about sex.

(4) We may engage in activity A for the purpose of acquiring emotional dispositions that will prevent us from engaging in activity C. Example: initiating moral behavior in order to become moral (Aristotle).

(5) Emotions may orient behavior in the present, by virtue of the associated action tendencies. Example: striking someone in anger.

(6) Emotions may also play a role in determining whether these tendencies are expressed or inhibited. Example: striking A when
Rationality and the Emotions

ways already mentioned. Example: a small child fighting at school to avoid the shame he would feel if his father expressed disgust at him for being a sissy.

(17) By virtue of ill-understood psychic mechanisms, beliefs may induce emotions that are, in some ill-understood sense, inadequate or inappropriate. These emotions, in turn, may induce behavior in one of the ways already mentioned. Example: My guilt for the bad weather while my guests are visiting may induce me to do more for them than I would otherwise have done (although the causal chain could also go in the opposite direction).

(18) By serving as tie-breakers in situations of indeterminacy, current emotions may help us choose more decisively and perhaps more wisely than we would otherwise have done. Example: When I am trying to decide whether to propose marriage to A or to B, gut feelings about who is more suitable enable me to avoid procrastination and perhaps to choose the one that is more suitable.

(19) Occurrent emotions with negative valence may induce behavior intended to blunt their impact. Example: an alcoholic who drinks to escape the guilt induced by the knowledge that he is ruining his life by drinking.

(20) Occurrent emotions with negative valence may induce behavior intended to harm the person who triggered them, even if that person is no longer in a position to do harm. Example: victims of torture who seek out their torturers to bring them to justice.
References


References


Baron, J. (1993), Thinking and Deciding, Cambridge University Press.


Billacols, F. (1982), The Dulc, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.


References


Brancombe, N. R., et al. (1996), "Rape and accident counterfactuals: Who might have done otherwise and would it have changed the outcome?" Journal of Applied Social Psychology 26, 1042-47.


Bryson, R. F. (1973), Honor and Death in Sixteenth-Century Italy, Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, University of Chicago.


References


References


References


References


References


Laclos, C. de (1781). Les liaisons dangereuses.


References


Merton, R. (1977), Social Theory and Social Structure, Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press.


Miller, W. (1993), Proverbs are never out of Season, Oxford University Press.


Montesquieu (1721), Lettres Persanes.


References


References


References


