

## A Critical note on Moral emotions and social moral conflicts

*Una nota crítica sobre las emociones morales y los conflictos  
morales sociales*

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### ABSTRACT

I propose in this critical note to reintegrate the place of moral emotions in the space of reasons by establishing a conception of moral conscience as a high degree of consciousness following Hegel's ideas on consciousness. The space is significantly enlarged by the emotions of empathy, guilt, shame and compassion, these emotions allow us to bring to consciousness reflective control without jettisoning away negative emotions contrary to these, and, then, in such space we increase reflective control relative to our moral lives.

**Keywords:** moral emotions, moral conscience, consciousness, moral conflict.

### RESUMEN

En esta nota crítica propongo una reintegración del papel de las emociones morales en el espacio de razones por medio del establecimiento de una concepción de conciencia moral como un alto grado de conciencia siguiendo las ideas de Hegel sobre la conciencia. El espacio es significativamente ampliado por las emociones de empatía, culpa, vergüenza y compasión; estas emociones nos permiten traer a la conciencia el control reflexivo sin eliminar las emociones negativas que les son contrarias, y, así, en tal espacio de razones incrementamos nuestro control reflexivo relativo a nuestras vidas morales.

**Palabras clave:** emociones morales, conciencia moral, conciencia, conflicto moral.

One of the key issues of improving the conditions of justice in democratic contexts is, by and large, the problem of appealing to emotions in order to convince the masses. Emotions are tainted with a negative label, as though these

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were obstacle for reasoned decisions. In this note I want to resist this tendency of despising emotions, particularly moral emotions, by proposing a positive role of moral emotions in democratic dialogue and therefore strive to clean the negative atmosphere surrounding the role of emotions in decision making processes. It is true that recent events such as the Trump election, Brexit, and the rise of extremisms appears to be tainted by a manipulation of emotions, the point of these lines is, however, to show that emotions can and ought to be part of our rational decision. I even go as far as explaining that the sheer desire for knowledge is a kind of intellectual emotion that sets our intellectual lives in motion, without a longing for understanding our efforts to think come to a halt. It even seems that the classical philosophy of Plato and Aristotle is completely in tune with the positive role that emotions can imply for the search for truth.

In analysing our mental lives when we want to understand our moral emotions we need to take on account a fundamental concept, i.e., the fact that the centre of our moral decisions is known as moral conscience. Is more conscience a part of our rational mind or is it something of an instinct? This is a complicated and important question that I believe requires us to take on account emotions and the span of our mental life. However, in this particular case, I will use the framework of a Hegelian concept of consciousness in order to understand reasoning as stream of different levels of consciousness, of which moral conscience is an important one. In fact, I will also claim that moral conscience is a level of consciousness that requires the integration and interplay of our moral experiences through our moral emotions. Indeed Hegel presents us in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit*<sup>2</sup> with a gradual account of consciousness that allows us to understand the experience of our consciousness not as a monolithic and uniform characteristic of our thought, but as a gradual enlightening of our levels of awareness.

One can 'gain' consciousness in many ways, of course by departing from the experiences reported by our senses, but this is just a stepping stone. Intellectual consciousness is gained as we are ever-so more aware of our intellectual reflective control of the situations around us, and these seem to scale up in levels of generality. Hegel reaches a point in his *Phenomenology* in which the consciousness fulfils a cycle of affirmations and negations that are sublated in ever so new levels of consciousness. Likewise, I would like to offer this account as the framework in which one has to understand how our moral emotions play a fundamental role in earning consciousness of our moral lives. Without these our moral lives will be limited by a very short consciousness of what is at stake when a moral dilemma comes to us.

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<sup>2</sup> HEGEL, G. W. F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by Terry Pinkard, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

After establishing the importance of emotions in the increasing of consciousness we are still talking about individuals thus far. However, this does not mean that the same acquisition of consciousness cannot happen in the social space and in the consciousness of a community of minds, and I could also push the idea up to the point of acknowledging that there is a moral conscience state in the community of minds. In fact, individuals grow in their particular consciousness by interacting with others in a space of reasons<sup>3</sup>. Hence, in order to understand the place of emotions in social moral conflicts, however, we need to acknowledge that what has been known as deep politics is eminently characterised by the fact of conflict at disagreements in beliefs of different members of a given society. Let us define this problem first so we can move into the place of moral emotions in the rational resolutions of such conflicts:

The problem of deep politics includes, accordingly, a paradox of moral disagreement: to what extent a moral doctrine opposed to the state policies must be tolerated without going against the liberties? Robert Talisse, in his 2012 book 'Democracy and Moral Conflict' for example, answers: "It seems, then, that the very liberties that constitute the core of democracy render the democracy's own conception of legitimacy unsatisfiable. This is the paradox of democratic justification."<sup>4</sup> Thus, the recognition of moral pluralism does not imply either moral relativism or scepticism, but renders the possibility of "honest moral error" plausible. Things being so, the honest moral error can be overcome through reasoned debate, by acknowledging the space of reasons that mediates our consciousness of the public space. Now, the problem of deep moral disagreement in the democratic assessment of moral issues within a plural society is a constant in liberal democratic societies: Several vibrant problems of contemporary politics are indeed needed of engagement and also involving an utterly notorious disagreement such as: the science curriculum, marriage and its annulment, pharmacists on emergency contraception, and the like.

We characterised the issues of deep politics as issues that pertain people's core emotions regarding what they value most. These are problems that comprise and reveal moral emotions, and the resolution of conflict seems to be clouded by the emotional stances of people's commitments, but I am trying to defend that these emotions are legitimate, the problem will be when these

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<sup>3</sup> See McDOWELL, J., *Mind and World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> TALISSE, *Democracy and Moral conflict*, Vanderbilt: VUP, 2012, p. 15.

are not made conscious and overtake the possibility of bien unconscious of blindness. One has, therefore, to foster proper moral emotions that balance (not that annul) the negative emotions. Positive emotions balance negative emotions and this does not produce a canceling of emotions, but a sublation in the Hegelian sense: emotions have to be integrated if a sublation of the rational impasse is to be achieved.

Reasoned debate is needed to make our minds clear and prove ourselves capable of convergence and a rational and straightforward answer to them, but the main question at play here is how positive moral emotions are even beyond the disagreement expressed in moral conflict and, hence, provide an opportunity to solve conflicts as well as to grow in conscience.

Now, let me put an emphasis in the following moral emotions as universally helpful for reasoned conflict resolution: empathy, shame, guilt and compassion. Understanding these as emotions that educate us towards reasoned debate will help us to build a more consistent frame to discuss core moral disagreements. “internalisation and evaluation of certain core norms and values”<sup>5</sup>. It has to be stressed that cultivating positive moral emotions does not entail eliminating negative emotions: we need to assess our emotional states and acknowledge why we feel some emotions so apparent, if we were to simply ignore negative emotions we risk being doomed to blindness as to why we feel such input. The confrontation of such emotions allows to obtain reflective control and consciousness of why our emotions inform us in such ways and then nicely shape all the premises at play in a given conflict.

Some emotions, of course, are very intense and demand a careful handling: Pride plays a role in structuring our moral convictions, but it also bears the risk of isolating us and rendering us insensitive to the needs of others. Shame reminds us of the public character of our actions and makes us aware of it at all times, and guilt, rightly managed, helps us monitoring how we behave in the past in order to picture our future actions.

In Jason J. Howard’s opinion, conscience can be recovered as a horizon of fulfilment between the prideful self-absorption and a thoroughgoing commitment and sensitivity to other’s needs. This can also work for communities that experience disagreement: In order to facilitate this we need to integrate moral emotions with a sense of moral accountability. This is the way in which the faculty view of conscience (in which conscience is a sort of not-conscious aspect of our mental lives) can give way to a more reasoned view of conscien-

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<sup>5</sup> HOWARD, J. J., *Conscience in Moral Life*, London: Rowman and Littlefield, p. 87

ce that makes it a high degree of consciousness, one that does not isolate us from a reflective character in our moral commitments, whichever these are.

I have written above about positive emotions that can channel reasoned debate, in a very brief summary I can introduce some emotions that I consider key to equilibrate debate and make us aware of deep core commitments of our moral lives:

**Empathy.** Empathetic commitment is the moral emotion at grounding dialogue, the charitable listening attitude precludes a rationally open attitude.

**Shame.** A subject that dialogues in a rational way is also subject to the emotion of shame, shame here is a public control and a sense of being integrated to a community of dialogue in which it is desirable to stay.

**Guilt.** An internal emotion, one can use it to keep an account of our own loyalty to the commitments we made, helps us to avoid a condescending relativism to our own mistakes.

**Compassion.** Similar to the case of empathy but placed at a different stage of dialogue; compassion is an emotion that comes after assessing other's thoughts and finding that though different, they have potential to develop into a better position.

What I propose in this critical note then, is to reintegrate the place of moral emotions in the space of reasons. Such space is significantly enlarged by the angles that these emotions allow us to bring to consciousness and, then, in such space we increase reflective control relative to our moral lives. In these ways we can also advance in the resolution of moral conflicts, particularly those in which we have come to a difficult halt. Results of this tacit integration can be considered in recent work by Martha Nussbaum, who in her (2015) book 'Political emotions', offers us a list of necessary emotions for democratic life. What I have presented here, though, it is the basis upon which such work needs to be grounded.

## **Conclusion**

These brief critical note aimed to provide an enlarged conception of the concept of conscience that integrates moral emotions, the result of such integration is a dialectics that makes our space of reasons grow. By confronting the emotions touched by our moral disagreements we are able to find routes

to understand the meaning of the disagreement and the possibilities of solution based in a sympathetic approach to others.

This is a real way of earning consciousness of our moral lives as well as integrating the emotions that spark our interest and desire to achieve moral decisions that solve difficult moral situations, and most of all that generate reflective control in the growth toward moral reasonableness. Hand in hand with the personal and individual growth, though, moral emotions also constitute a cement that bind us to the social life, though that has to be a topic for another note in which these emotions are flesh out as the glue of social tissue.

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