

On explaining recalcitrant emotions

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In 'The significance of recalcitrant emotion (or, antiquasijudgmentalism)' (*Philosophy* 2003; 52 (Supp): 127-145), Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson argue that 'quasijudgmentalist' theories of emotion, i.e. those cognitivist theories that argue an act of cognition less than a judgment or belief is a constitutive component of an emotion, cannot adequately account for emotions that are in tension with the subject's considered judgment. They defend a theory of 'natural' or 'basic' emotions according to which 'natural emotion kinds' are 'products of relatively discrete special-purpose mechanisms that are sensitive to some important aspect of human life'. This paper responds that their solution cannot adequately explain recalcitrant emotions either, and that there is an alternative solution, relying on a theory of unconscious imagination.

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1. A recalcitrant emotion is an emotion that is in tension with the subject's settled judgment. For example, I may judge that her remark was entirely justified, under the circumstances, but feel angry about it nevertheless. Or that flying presents no special danger, yet feel afraid every time I fly. Fear of flying is an example of 'stable' recalcitrance, i.e. rather than being a single episode of a recalcitrant emotion, it is a disposition to episodes of recalcitrant emotion. In a recent paper, Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson (2003) argue that the existence of recalcitrant emotions presents the basis for an objection to those theories of emotion that claim judgments – or similar cognitions, such as thoughts or construals – are necessary components of emotion.

The objection to judgmentalism – theories that claim full-blown judgments or beliefs are components of emotion – is well-known. Suppose that fear involves the judgment that danger is present. If a person feels fear of flying while judging flying to be safe, they judge or believe both that flying is safe and that it is not. Such an apparent and immediate contradiction is not easy to sustain. Furthermore, the general behavioural consequences of judging that flying is dangerous are not forthcoming, e.g. the person does not warn their friends not to fly. The only grounds for attributing the judgment is the fear itself. Rather than attribute such obviously contradictory beliefs, we would do better to say that the person's fear of flying does not involve the judgment or belief that flying is dangerous.

This objection has often been put by philosophers who defend what D'Arms and Jacobson term 'quasijudgmentalism'. These theories claim that emotions still involve a form of thought or cognition, but not judgment or belief. For example, Robert Roberts – who D'Arms and Jacobson discuss – argues that the cognitive component of emotion, which he terms 'construal', is more akin to perception: 'Construals have an immediacy reminiscent of sense perception. They are impressions, ways things appear to the subject; they are experiences and not just judgments or thoughts or beliefs' (2003: 75). We can now explain recalcitrant emotions more plausibly: they occur when the subject construes the object of emotion in one way, e.g. construing flying as dangerous, while judging the opposite. After all, we do not always judge that things are as they appear to be.

D'Arms and Jacobson argue that quasijudgmentalism does not succeed in resolving the problem. What causes the difficulty is that quasijudgmentalism continues to argue that *thoughts* (they think of construals as a type of thought) are constitutive of emotions. They challenge the quasijudgmentalist to answer 'Why do the putatively constitutive thoughts of certain emotions continually reassert themselves despite their

conflict with considered judgment? After all, people are not generally vulnerable to recalcitrant thoughts contravening their settled judgments' (141). D'Arms and Jacobson's objection is that quasijudgmentalism understands emotions as conceptualized evaluations. The difficulty that recalcitrant emotions pose is explaining how it is that two conceptual systems of evaluation – one emotional, the other the non-emotional system that supports the conflicting judgment – can conflict in this manner.

It is a key point in their argument that quasijudgmentalism is committed to emotional evaluations being conceptual. They claim that 'because the judgmentalist tradition [by which they intend to include quasijudgmentalism] is committed to defining appraisals characteristic of emotional experience in terms of independently available concepts, it is forced to treat conflicts between an agent's emotions and her judgments as competing exercises of conceptual thought' (142). Unfortunately for D'Arms and Jacobson, many quasijudgmentalists do not sign up to this description of their position. Roberts explicitly claims that, while for many human emotions 'a propositional expression of the character of the construal is compelling', the construal need not be conceptual, and its linguistic expression can be problematic: 'expressibility of a construal is approximate only, because the concepts in terms of which it is expressed give it further, and sometimes significantly different, definition' (Roberts 2003: 109). The comparison of emotional construal to experience, rather than thought, opens up the question of whether it is conceptual or non-conceptual. While people may not generally experience recalcitrant thoughts, people are vulnerable to recalcitrant *perceptions*, as in the case of optical illusions, such as the Müller-Lyer lines. If all that is required to account for recalcitrant emotions is that one evaluative system is non-conceptual in nature, quasijudgmentalism may accept the point without fuss. D'Arms and Jacobson have simply made an error in assuming that all intentional content must be conceptual.

They may reply, however, that an account of this non-conceptual system of emotional evaluation is required. And this is what, in any case, they seek to provide.

2. D'Arms and Jacobson argue that there are 'natural emotion kinds', pan-cultural emotions identified by psychologists as having evolved to deal with 'fundamental life tasks' or 'universal human predicaments'. Lists differ to some degree, but commonly found are 'amusement, anger, contempt, disgust, embarrassment, envy, fear, guilt, jealousy, joy, pity, pride, shame, and sorrow' (2003: 138). It is tokens of natural emotion kinds, they claim, that most often tend to be recalcitrant. They take this to support a particular explanation of recalcitrance.

D'Arms and Jacobson contrast natural emotion kinds with what they term 'cognitive sharpenings', in which the thought that picks out the emotion type is made more specific. For example, resentment is a cognitive sharpening of anger, one that involves the thought of injustice; homesickness of sorrow; fear of flying of fear. If cognitive sharpenings are considered 'types' of emotion, in such cases, the thought must form a necessary and defining component of that emotion 'type'. If a cognitive

sharpening were recalcitrant, this would seem to be an instance of two thoughts conflicting, which was the grounds for objecting to quasijudgmentalism.

However, cognitive sharpenings as such do not tend to be recalcitrant. For example, resentment, which involves the thought of having being wronged *unjustly*, could be argued to be a form of anger. D'Arms and Jacobson argue that if one remains angry while accepting that what occurred was just, you can't be said to be resentful, since there isn't a conflict over whether the act was *unjust*. Your emotion is recalcitrant as an instance of anger, not resentment. Likewise, if you fear flying, it is not 'fear-of-flying' that is recalcitrant, since there is no conflict over whether you are *flying* or not; your emotion is recalcitrant as fear. Both emotion and judgment agree that one is flying; but one's settled judgment is that one is not thereby in danger, and one's fear is experienced as in tension with this.

It is not the 'cognitive' bit of a cognitive sharpening that produces recalcitrance. It is difficult for two thoughts to remain in conflict; rationality, by and large, brings one or other into line. D'Arms and Jacobson claim that recalcitrance, and especially stable recalcitrance, 'is much more familiar with respect to the natural emotions than it is for the many possible cognitive sharpenings' (140).

3. This leads D'Arms and Jacobson to argue that we can explain recalcitrant emotion if we reject the claim that emotions, at least those that are examples of natural kinds, necessarily involve thoughts. Their account of their alternative is both clear and succinct:

Think of the natural emotion kinds as products of relatively discrete special-purpose mechanisms that are sensitive to some important aspect of human life... fear: a syndrome of directed attention, physiological changes, affect, and motivation that can be functionally understood as constituting a kind of appraisal of the circumstances. There may be no better way of articulating that appraisal than by saying that it involves construing oneself to be in imminent danger; but it does not follow that, in order to feel fear, one must deploy this or any other concept.... all natural emotional kinds... are subserved by discrete, non-linguistic mechanisms....

recalcitrance is the product of two distinct evaluative systems, one emotional and the other linguistic. Because these are discrete modes of evaluation, only one of which involves the deployment of conceptual capacities, it is possible for them to diverge systematically... recalcitrance will be far more familiar and stable with respect to the natural emotions than to cognitive sharpenings, because only when an affective state is the product of some discrete evaluative mechanism can it compete seriously with our judgments. (141)

In favour of this view, they cite empirical evidence that 'the most commonly diagnosed phobias are directed at objects that plausibly reflect an evolutionary

preparation to be sensitive to the dangers that faced ancestral human populations: such things as insects, snakes, and heights' (141).

For a second time, what comes to mind is the parallel with optical illusions. Our sensory systems, such as vision, can be given an evolutionary explanation as dedicated cognitive systems, which as 'discrete' from our general conceptual ratiocination, can produce anomalous experiences such as visual illusions; and D'Arms and Jacobson are happy to draw this comparison themselves (142). The phenomenon of recalcitrance in vision and emotion supports an equivalent explanation for natural emotion kinds, and of recalcitrant emotions. Even if perceptual or emotional experience is argued to involve intentional content, such content is not thought-like in nature, and quasijudgmentalism is misguided in its assimilation of the two.¹

D'Arms and Jacobson's argument, then, is that emotions involve non-conceptual evaluative appraisals, rather than evaluative thoughts; and that such an appraisal forms part of the product (the emotion as a whole) of a relatively discrete mechanism sensitive to some important aspect of the universal human predicament, which mechanism was selected by evolution for its adaptive value. They judge this theory an improvement on quasijudgmentalism in the light of recalcitrant emotions, because it does not require two conceptual evaluative systems to conflict with each other, as the two systems in conflict are conceptual and non-conceptual. It explains why recalcitrant emotions don't give way in the face of a settled judgment, and why recalcitrance is predominantly a feature of natural emotion kinds, rather than cognitive sharpenings.

4. But the question arises how we should characterize recalcitrant emotions on this account. How can something that is non-conceptual conflict with a conceptual judgment? Recalcitrant emotions are explained as involving appraisals that a person has but judges are not 'fitting': 'the thoughts that judgmentalists and quasijudgmentalists treat as constituents of emotion are better understood as a special type of normative standard for emotions' (132), which D'Arms and Jacobson call 'norms of fittingness: all and only those considerations about whether to feel x that bear on whether the emotion's evaluation of the circumstances gets it right' (132).

As rational creatures, we quite rightly

think critically about [our] emotions and to try to interpret the significance of their concerns.... Furthermore, emotional evaluations insinuate themselves into more

¹ They have a further argument against the claim that thoughts are necessary components of emotions – and hence that emotion-kinds may be individuated by their constituent thoughts. This is that it is either impossible to specify the thought (the intentional content) that is supposedly a necessary condition of an emotion or the analysis is tautological: 'Understood as an account of the thoughts necessary to have a given emotion, even the best glosses either are subject to counterexample, or else succeed only because the relevant thought can be attributed to an agent simply because he is feeling the emotion' (135). While their development of this argument is interesting and contains much of value, I believe it also misunderstands the commitments and resources of quasijudgmentalism.

richly conceptualized systems of motivation, evaluation, and intention... we have no other option but to articulate their appraisals in language.... To judge an emotion is fitting is... to endorse its evaluation as correct. This is a kind of a higher-order attitude toward the emotion, which we reify by wielding a vocabulary of regulative terms such as *fearsome*, *shameful*, and *funny*... providing standards of fittingness which we use to judge and criticize our emotions in a distinctive fashion. (145)

Because of our conceptual and rational capacities, we articulate appraisals and reflect on their fittingness to the situation. If we judge an emotion is not fitting, but we feel it anyway, it is deemed recalcitrant.

However, as Roberts notes, recalcitrant emotions can't be in tension with our judgments unless they have 'a character that can be expressed in thoughts' (2003: 111), and it is clear from D'Arms and Jacobson's remarks that they accept this point in some form; appraisals can, at least in a 'rough-and-ready' way, be expressed in language, and it is our tendency to interpret the concerns embedded in our emotions – and I take interpretation to involve thought-like activity – that gives rise to the phenomena of recalcitrance. It is not that appraisals are not amenable to *interpretation* that is responsible for recalcitrance, even though the interpretation may not be a precise representation of the appraisal; it is rather that the appraisal, as a product of a special-purpose mechanism, is not completely amenable to alteration by rational reflection. If appraisals were a form of thought, this would not be so; hence we do better to regard thought not as intrinsic to emotions, but as providing norms of fittingness.

5. I am unconvinced. I believe their argument presents a *prima facie* case for the intentional content of emotions being non-conceptual, or perhaps more accurately non-linguistic, but Roberts equally presents such a case. Let us therefore assume this is true. The issue is whether this supports D'Arms and Jacobson's explanation of recalcitrance and the relation between thought and emotion.

I believe that D'Arms and Jacobson have turned to a causal, evolutionary explanation far too quickly, and that even if their view about emotions as the product of naturally selected special-purpose mechanisms is true, it fails to explain recalcitrance. One point tells against their claim directly: the analogy with optical illusion is weak just where it needs to be strong, viz. optical illusion is *universal* – (almost) everyone sees the Müller-Lyer lines as of unequal length. However, recalcitrance, at least for the type of examples discussed by D'Arms and Jacobson, is *not* universal, far from it. The natural emotion kind is said to have evolved in response to 'universal human predicaments'; that is why the emotion kind is universal. But if recalcitrance is to be explained in the same way, we should be seeking universal recalcitrance, just as we find universal optical illusion. To make good this point, there is a great deal more I should say here on the nature of explanations in evolutionary psychology, but I must put this to one side. Instead, I note a point that Freud (1916: Lecture XVI) made in a similar context 90 years ago: that even if an explanation in terms of evolution, e.g. a

genetic predisposition, is available for a psychological phenomenon, that does not mean it is exhaustive, that no other explanation is needed for the particular case. Given the lack of universality in recalcitrant emotions, I would argue that some further explanation, other than the one D'Arms and Jacobson provide, is clearly needed for any instance of recalcitrant emotion.

This might be thought unfair: after all, D'Arms and Jacobson are seeking to explain the phenomenon generally, not any specific instance of it. Their account is motivated by the need to explain why recalcitrant emotions don't give way to the subject's settled judgment, what Peter Goldie (2000: 76) has called the 'cognitive impenetrability' of such emotions. But what I shall propose is that the explanation of the individual case will enable us to account for cognitive impenetrability, in which case, first, we have no need to appeal to emotions as adaptive special-purpose mechanisms to explain recalcitrance (the evolutionary claim should be established on other grounds), and second, we have an explanation for the lack of universality of recalcitrance.

6. To support their case that the 'thoughts' said to be constitutive of emotions are really norms of fittingness, D'Arms and Jacobson consider the example of a sports fan feeling proud of the achievements of his team. They object to Philippa Foot's quasijudgmentalist claim that pride can only be felt about something good that is one's own (Foot 1978a: 76; Foot 1978b: 113). The fan doesn't think the achievements of his team are his 'own'; he isn't in any way responsible for them: 'The sense in which the club's accomplishments belong to the fan is simply that he is able to be proud of them. It is, after all, "his team" – but in this sense only' (136). Hence pride determines what can count as 'one's own', while thoughts of what is one's own do not set boundaries on what can count as an episode of pride. Foot's claim that pride involves the thought of something good that is one's own is in fact a norm for when we think pride is fitting, not a necessary condition for an emotion to count as pride: 'Philosophers inclined to view the fan's pride as bizarre can hold that his emotional involvement is unfitting...' (136). And so D'Arms and Jacobson are led to say that 'almost anything *can* be an object of pride'. However, 'there are many things that cannot *plausibly* be so taken' (136), and we may always debate norms of fittingness.

This analysis overlooks a possible explanation of the fan's pride, one that essentially preserves Foot's claim, though in a modified form. This is that the fan *imaginatively identifies* with his team, and *this* gives us the sense in which their accomplishments are his. This account provides an explanation where D'Arms and Jacobson see none, when they say the team is 'his' *only* in the sense that he is able to be proud of them, and then seek to explain pride as a discrete special-purpose mechanism. Their approach allows only a causal explanation for the existence of pride, not an idiographic explanation for the fan's pride. If they are right to say that almost anything can be an object of pride, this is not because pride involves no thought of some good as one's own, but because almost anything can be imaginatively identified with. Or, as I would prefer to put the point, the limits of pride are precisely the limits of imaginative identification.

It is not just pride that would lead us to suppose a role for imaginative identification in emotions. We need to appeal to it to explain a wide variety of independent emotional phenomena. To take three examples briefly: In explanations of group psychology, it is a fairly standard to invoke ‘projection’ – individuals within a group project their ideal self into their charismatic leader, while projecting their flaws and repudiated parts of themselves into scapegoats; these are both acts of imaginative identification. In discussing emotional responses to fiction, Peter Goldie (2003) has argued subtly and in detail that which emotional responses are aroused in us depends very closely on our imaginative identifications with the various characters. He goes on to argue that this is equally true in real life, for we understand and make sense of emotions in the context of a narrative, which calls us to adopt certain perspectives on the events retold in the account of the emotion. Third, in empathy the precise way in which we imagine ourselves ‘in the other’s shoes’ is much debated, but that there is imaginative identification of some form is hard to dispute. Nietzsche (1881: §133) argues that in pity, while at a conscious level we are not thinking of ourselves, at an unconscious level we are; this is *not* to say that our concern for the other is reducible to a concern for ourselves, that pity is ultimately a reflection of selfishness; and the theories of psychoanalysts would seek to explain this more precisely.²

The role of imaginative identification in emotion is not restricted to identifications involving oneself. We may also identify the *object* of the emotion with some other object, and respond to it emotionally on the basis of this identification. Emotions have histories, histories that may well go back to our childhoods. For example, Descartes (1647) notes

When I was a child, I loved a girl of my own age who had a slight squint. The impression made by sight in my brain when I looked at her cross-eyes became so closely connected to the simultaneous impression which aroused in me the passion of love that for a long time afterwards when I saw persons with a squint I felt a special inclination to love them simply because they had that defect; yet I had no idea myself that this was why it was... So when we are inclined to love someone without knowing the reason, we may believe that this is because they have some similarity to something in an earlier object of our love, though we may not be able to identify it. (1647)

Charles Taylor (1985: 59) makes a similar remark about being attracted to certain people or to particular landscapes; such responses, which may initially seem to be empty of meaning or to defy reason – as when we are attracted to people we know are no good for us – in fact embody a host of meanings, an intentional content, of which we may not be aware. These meanings are embodied for us in the object of the emotion because of our imaginative play with it, an activity which is frequently unconscious.

² For a recent discussion, see Richmond (2004).

If this account of the intentional content of an emotion is available in the general case, it is available for recalcitrant emotions. Very often, the imaginative underpinnings of our emotional responses do not create a conflict with our evaluative judgments. In the case of recalcitrant emotions, a conflict arises. We may explain the cognitive impenetrability of such emotions thus: that the intentional content of the emotion, e.g. fear of flying, is neither consciously available nor a product of a system of rational thought. Famously, whether one subscribes to a psychoanalytic account of unconscious mental activity or not, what is unconscious is not directly amenable to alteration by conscious rational activity, whether this is reflection or acts of will. However, this is not because the emotion is a product of a special-purpose mechanism – *even if it is*; it is because it is the product of an unconscious activity of imagination which imbues the object of the emotion with a particular meaning. And unconscious activities of imagination cannot be controlled by conscious, rational judgment.

7. This account has several advantages over the evolutionary one proposed by D'Arms and Jacobson. First, it explains why recalcitrant emotions are recalcitrant, while protecting the claim that emotions constitutively *involve* thoughts, in a broad sense, rather than thought being just that which provides norms of fittingness. In the spectrum of emotions, then, some may involve conceptual thought, but some may not, and many may involve more than conceptual thought, because of the imaginative identifications, especially unconscious imaginative identifications, involved in them. We do not need, then, to adopt the distinction between natural emotion kinds and cognitive sharpenings D'Arms and Jacobson propose in order to explain recalcitrance. I believe this is a welcome outcome, not because I am certain such a distinction is flawed, but because I am not certain that it is not.

Second, it explains why recalcitrant emotions, unlike optical illusions, are not universal. For even if as human beings we have evolved to be disposed to particular patterns of imaginative activity, the imaginative identifications that lead to a particular case of recalcitrant fear or anger or whatever are individual; some subjects will imagine this way, others will not.

Third, and most importantly, it is idiographic; we are provided with a framework of explanation that enables us to explain individual instances of recalcitrant emotions in terms the individual subject's imaginative activity, which will likely depend upon their past experience. This is particularly important because we approach recalcitrant emotions, and emotions generally, as a phenomenon which we can *make sense of*, as opposed to D'Arms and Jacobson's purely causal explanation of recalcitrance and our explanations of optical illusions. Understanding recalcitrant emotions in this way furthers the activity of self-interpretation D'Arms and Jacobson recognise as a feature of our emotional experience, and which Charles Taylor argues is what makes our emotional experience distinctively human.

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