



Review

FURTAK, R. A. *Knowing Emotions: Truthfulness and Recognition in Affective Experience*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018

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The discussion about the role of emotions in human life, despite the obvious antiquity of the theme, is quite recent in terms of systematic and autonomous philosophical inquiry. Until very recently, emotions have been viewed, save a few notable exceptions, as mere obstructions to the objective and realistic understanding of the world as it is. Addressing a similar issue, in the middle of the last century, Erich Fromm, for example, ironically describes the curious status of this “realism,” especially in a world where we “have a special word for each type of automobile, but only the one word “love” to express the most varied kinds of affective experience” (2013, p. 11). A few years later, arguing for the relevance of deepening our approaches to emotions in order to strike a balance against intellectualist models, Michael Stocker (1958) pointed to the schizophrenic conception of ourselves we were nourishing. His criticism was addressed to those who claim that there should be a division between an impersonal and impartial world of "reasons" that can guide us and the world of affective and personal aspects - which should be hushed up so as not to contaminate the former.

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These instances reflect a reality that is constantly being challenged by theorists who, like Stocker, defend and highlight the fundamental role that emotions play in our lives. Rick Anthony Furtak's *Knowing Emotions: Truthfulness and Recognition in Affective Experience* is a fine and stimulating example of this recent trend. More than arguing that emotions have a place in the moral construction of a meaningful personal life, the author emphatically maintains the epistemic centrality of emotions in the very *revelation* of the “external” world as it appears to us. Above all, Furtak seeks to break with a still persistent view of “all or nothing” held by cognitivists and non-cognitivists, arguing that emotions are both viscerally constituted and cognitively instructive.

The author is associate professor of philosophy at Colorado College. *Knowing Emotions* is his fifth book, the second to specifically address the issue of emotions - the first is "*Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity*", published in 2005.

Knowing Emotions: Truthfulness and Recognition in Affective Experience is structured in seven chapters, divided into three large parts, as summarized below.

Chapters one (“The Intelligence of Emotions: Differing Schools of Thought”) and two (“What the Empirical Evidence Suggests”), which constitute the first part of the text (*THE RATIONAL AND THE PASSIONATE*), provide an overview of the debate between cognitivists and non-cognitivists about emotions – a debate that delimits the central aspects of all subsequent arguments of the book – using both conceptual clarifications and empirical evidence. According to Furtak, cognitivist theories of emotion are those which defend that intentionality has a decisive role in the composition of our affective expressions (p. 7): an emotion such as anger, in this sense, can only be understood as such to the extent that it is “anger of” something, someone, and so on (pp. 7-8). This “intrinsically intentional” component (p. 75) leads to the idea that emotions have their own intelligence and are epistemically fundamental: “our affective experience is our mode of access to significant truths about what concerns us” (p. 14). Non-cognitivist theories, in turn, conceive emotions primarily as somatic or physiological components for which intentionality is merely a contingent aspect, so it would be unwise on our part to rely on emotions (pp. 16-7).

The author highlights the mistake of assuming a closed attitude on either side. But it does not mean that seeking a “middle path” capable of reconciling the two positions is the most appropriate posture (p. 21). He argues instead that the affective experience concerns two aspects that are only “conceptually separable” in so far as they concretely concern a type of “unified response” (pp. 19-20). The author's main effort, however, is to oppose, from the outset, non-cognitive postures, which he considers more distant from his ideal, particularly because of the non-cognitivist's tendency to regard emotions as no more than “physiological disturbances” (p. 1). In contrast, Furtak suggests that emotions are at the same time "necessarily" composed of "certain feelings of physiological or *bodily* activity" and "necessarily" composed of "a *cognitive* impression - which may be accurate or inaccurate" (p. 18).

In the discussion about empirical support, especially neuroscience, António Damásio's and Joseph LeDoux's works are presented as emblematic postures of cognitivism and non-cognitivism, respectively. Noteworthy in this discussion is Furtak's critical and contrary stance in relation to fragmented and reductionist science models, such as the neurological works that seek to reduce our experience to this or that brain space (or even to equate our emotional reactions with those of rats, as does LeDoux) (pp. 29-30), as well as in relation to the hasty generalizations that many philosophers, in wanting to empirically sustain their theories, draw from these very limited scientific works (pp. 30-1). A negative aspect of this first part of the book is the lack of depth in the author's presentation of the non-cognitivist version he aims to oppose, reducing it to some remarks about one or two passages by William James (p. 15-7).

The second part (*ON REASONABLE FEELINGS AND EMBODIED COGNITION*), which comprises chapters three (“Feeling Apprehensive”) and four (“Emotions as Felt Recognitions”), discusses the arguments that favor the detached cognitive and epistemic role of our emotions in establishing salient and significant aspects of our experiences with the world: a model that the author defines as “a modified cognitivism” (p. 90). Here the author's criticism of non-cognitivists is stronger, suggesting that their positions eventually trivialize emotions “and encourage us not to take their content seriously”, “just because they are not reflective judgments, not impersonal, not subject to voluntary control” (p. 97-8).

Against this flawed model, Furtak argues that our affective life is deeply responsible for our sense of reality as a whole (p. 98). Without emotions, he argues, we would not be able to perceive a wide range of truths and distinctions that are fundamental to our life and our understanding of things. “A 'dispassionate thought' of loss or danger, without any feeling of grief or fear, is cognitively defective” (p. 74). To understand this, we must first of all reject the idea that the world can be understood by us with neutrality (p. 94); insofar as we are made of a specific organism, what we learn from the world is inseparable from the characteristics of that organism, and our affective reality is a fundamental part of who we are.

Noteworthy in part 2 is the author's discussion of emotions conceived as irrational affective responses, as in cases of phobia and so-called “recalcitrant emotions” (e.g. the person who is afraid of public speaking even though he or she knows that there is no reason for it) (p. 54). Non-cognitivists argue that these cases demonstrate the irrationality of emotions, since in “each of these cases, a person's felt emotions are at odds with the beliefs that he or she consciously affirms” (p. 55). From a series of considerations about the real meaning of “knowing” something, Furtak argues that, in fact, the problem in these cases is not that emotions are at odds with cognition, but that cognition itself, which must be seen in a gradual sense (and not “binary one-or-zero matter” (p. 60; 62)), has not yet reached a satisfactory degree of reflexive clarity. In this sense, though a person who is afraid of public speaking may not believe that the public threatens her, she may still believe that she can have problems in her speech (and she cares about it). That is, as much as she verbalizes that she is convinced that there is no cause for concern, she nonetheless maintains cognitive components contrary to this assertion (p. 56).

In support of this thesis, Furtak presents some of the most interesting passages of the book, like when he discusses the case of Proust's protagonist. Here, even though the protagonist had long known of his grandmother's death, he only acknowledges this situation when he visits the house where he had lived with her for a long time, he realized, in fact, that she was no longer there.

Although in one sense the narrator already knew of his grandmother's death, he did not know it perfectly well. The full significance of her death does not register in his awareness until this later moment. It is only now, “a

year after her burial," that "he learns that she is dead," as Samuel Beckett comments. "For the first time since her death he knows that she is dead, [and] he knows who is dead." (p. 70)

The third, longest, and last part of the book (*THE REASONS OF THE HEART*) consists of chapters five ("On the Emotional A Priori"), six ("Love's Knowledge; or, The Significance of What We Care About") and seven ("Attunement and Perspectival Truth"), and details the author's personal positions on the wisdom of our affective constitution. In the first chapter, the author argues in favor of what he called "*emotional a priori*", the "*affective dispositions*", which would constitute the background (the most enduring and persistent affective component), the *sine qua non* condition, which enables the manifestation of episodic emotions (pp. 105-6) discussed throughout the first two parts of the book (p. 107).

In this same chapter, he also discusses "how" these affective dispositions foster episodic emotions. The "emotional a priori", according to Furtak, is basically constituted by "love, care, and concern" (p. 105). According to him, these basic concepts are relevant because it is through them that we engage, not just with this or that activity, person or thing, but with the world as a whole. Quoting Max Scheler, Furtak states that "love provides the foundation for every sort of knowing" (p. 108).

This third part may contain the greatest virtues and, at the same time, the greatest problems of the book. On the one hand, Furtak makes us realize how limited or even empty our conscious rationality is when not substantiated or embodied. He argues that even activities allegedly free from any affective interference, such as the empirical sciences (p. 177), are also charged with prior valuation, which in turn depends not on rationality itself, but on the visceral, affective importance that certain things (at the exclusion of endless others) have for us as beings endowed with a specific and corporeal nature. Without this visceral component, quoting James, "no one portion of the universe would then have importance beyond another; and the whole collection of things and series of its events would be without significance" (p. 141). Therefore, if we were guided solely by this idea of a neutral and abstract reason, not only would our subjective life lack any significance and meaning, but also the very understanding of reality external to us. We do not address the world "outside" with neutrality. Whenever we

engage with it, we select certain things that have some special value to us by virtue of our preferences, and this selection is itself a break with the supposed neutrality.

One of the problems of this part, if I see correctly, has to do with the ease with which the author starts from this visceral conception, moves through affective aspects and arrives at very abstract instances such as the interest in my neighbor's interests (p. 130), all this without clearly showing how these instances are implicated. I fully agree with the view that rationality itself is incapable of giving meaning and flavor to life and to relations with the world. But I am not convinced that this other component, capable of filling the gap left by reason, is the triad that makes up the author's "emotional a priori". His basic argument, in fact, insofar as it rests on notions such as being "sentient beings" (p. 142) endowed with a certain bodily constitution (p. 167) or a certain organism (p. 36), could more easily authorize a naturalistic theory based on crude concepts such as selfish biological needs (which may also fulfill the criteria presented by Furtak as essential so that the world does not seem to us completely indifferent).

For instance, the author tells us: "underlying affective dispositions function as the lenses through which we view the world: without them, we could not discern the meaning or value of anything whatsoever" (p. 113) and adds: "If we find the world to be charged with value, this is because we are 'always already' loving or caring beings" (p. 124). Now, that the world has "meaning" or "value" for beings like us, it does not follow that, as a condition, we love the world. An overly greedy person will see, through her distorted lenses, value in material things, but that does not mean she loves them. Likewise, an explanation tied to a certain kind of evolutionary theory might say that things are valuable to us simply in that they facilitate, for example, the perpetuation of our genes.

Furthermore, even if we accept, as Furtak claims, that it is indeed emotions that guide us and reveal to us the truths that disembodied reason cannot, we would still lack a careful explanation of what separates true or genuine emotion from a false or treacherous one. Furtak certainly does not ignore that such a distinction exists, but his exposition in *Knowing Emotions* does not address this important issue. He rightly tells us that "if we could validate our emotional responses only by appealing to universal consensus, then it would follow that my

grief upon the death of someone whom I knew and appreciated as no one else did would qualify as irrational” (p. 180- 1). But this is only true for a specific set of emotional responses, and certainly not for cases in which the same argument is used to validate neurotic feelings and emotions of all kinds. The very idea of love is perhaps one of the most mistreated by this lack of discrimination, and is usually confused with less noble manifestations such as affective dependence, sexual desire and possessive fixations. In holding that our emotions occupy such a central place in our lives and that we must trust them, it is necessary to present a consistent criterion, or set of criteria, capable of showing why the affections and emotions of a sadistic or a neurotic person are distinct from those we consider worthy of affirmation and trust.

This, however, does not detract from the brightness and vigor of Furtak's text. Above all, I find his basic proposal to break with dichotomous attitudes toward emotions quite potent, as well as his argumentation for the incapacity of (supposedly) neutral rationality to guide us wherever we are.

References

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