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Tyler Flanagan
flanat23@uwosh.edu

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Abstract

In this paper I examine the relationship between emotions and practical rationality, arguing that emotions are incredibly useful in assisting us in making practical choices. However, this enthusiasm needs to be met with some caution as it not the case that every one of our emotions give us reasons we should be considering in order to make a rational choice, and there are times where if we did follow our hearts we would end up feeling ashamed or displeased with ourselves afterward. At the same time, we can feel guilty about a decision we made while purposefully ignoring our emotions when they tell us otherwise. It is ultimately those instances of reflexive shame or displeasure that tell us something about our agency. Our reflexive emotions show us what we should really care about and when we are failing to do so. And, since the purpose of making rational decisions is to properly attend to our goals and aspirations, part of being rational is to pursue what we care about. Our reflexive emotions act as a guide to how well or how poorly we are doing just that.

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Tyler Flanagan

University of Wisconsin Osh Kosh

flanat23@uwosh.edu

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Abstract

In this paper I examine the relationship between emotions and practical rationality, arguing that emotions are incredibly useful in assisting us in making practical choices. However, this enthusiasm needs to be met with some caution as it not the case that every one of our emotions give us reasons we should be considering in order to make a rational choice, and there are times where if we did follow our hearts we would end up feeling ashamed or displeased with ourselves afterward. At the same time, we can feel guilty about a decision we made while purposefully ignoring our emotions when they tell us otherwise. It is ultimately those instances of reflexive shame or displeasure that tell us something about our agency. Our reflexive emotions show us what we should really care about and when we are failing to do so. And, since the purpose of making rational decisions is to properly attend to our goals and aspirations, part of being rational is to purse what we care about. Our reflexive emotions act as a guide to how well or how poorly we are doing just that.



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In recent years research concerning emotions and rationality has revealed that our abilities to reason and deliberate are not as opposed to our emotions as was once thought.¹ Because our emotions are evaluations about the world rather than baseless feelings, they are subject to correctness conditions and justification conditions. We ask for reasons as to why we experienced this or that emotion, so that emotions are not simply passive irrational or arational phenomena but rather one of the ways in which we examine and make sense of the world around us through our own eyes (Deonna & Teroni, 2012).² We would never accuse someone of being irrational if they feared losing their job in itself because of how important it is to have a job in order to survive and be happy. However, we may tell the worker that their fear is misguided and false if their fear comes from being paranoid that their boss does not like them, when it turns out their boss likes them very much. Part of developing a more positive outlook on the relationship between emotions and rationality includes recent reflections on the role emotions play in our practical reasoning. In this paper I argue that our emotions can in fact positively contribute to our practical reasoning, but only a particular set of emotions actually assist us in making rational decisions. These are emotions that are authentic to ourselves as agents, and I posit that the only way to reliably tell if an emotional experience is authentically ours is through our reflexive emotions.

As our emotions are thought to give us privileged access to values as we examine the world, they make salient important reasons for our making one choice over another given what we care about. It is then argued that it is not at all irrational if we become emotional while deliberating over what to do, because of the special access to important reason-giving considerations that our emotions provide to us. These sometimes contradict even our most reasoned judgements (Arpaly, 2002; Jones, 2004). If we take a worker who becomes fearful of losing their job as an example, their fear is really that of losing the income and insurance that the job provides in order to continue to take care of themselves and their family. They *value* the health and happiness of their family and themselves, and the job provides a way for the worker to satisfy what they care about. Thus, when the worker deliberates over what they should do, they are almost pulled towards picking up weekend shifts and staying late on weekdays. What matters for practical rationality is the rationality of the emotional agent's actions, rather than the internal rationality of the agent's emotions. The worker as an

¹ The amount of literature on this topic is immense and it would be impossible for me to list all relevant articles. See especially Damasio, 1994; de Sousa, 1987; Elster, 1999; Greenspan, 2000; Zhu & Thagard, 2002.

² See chapters 8, 9, and 10.

agent is rational insofar as they make decisions and act towards achieving the goals they have set for themselves, often based on what they value. The worker's emotions are closely related to their goal of maintaining employment, due to both sharing the same value of familial love (Copp, 2005). So, although the emotion the worker is experiencing is inappropriate and therefore irrational, it nevertheless plays a part in rational thought and action. Even though the worker incorrectly fears that their job is in danger, nothing about their actions of staying late and working weekends decreases their job security. If anything, those actions increase job security. Any action the worker can take in order for them to keep their job is rational in light of the goals and values that the worker has, even though the motivation behind those actions is an irrational emotion and false belief. The worker's emotions are also authentically theirs, because their emotions fall in line with what they value and how they see themselves as an agent. There is no incoherency if the worker stands by their emotions and emotionally motivated actions even after learning that they were mistaken.

Still, we should have reservations with putting such an unwavering trust in our emotional experiences being indicative of our values, and that they present reasons to us that will lead to rational decision-making. There is a danger in taking the case of the worker too far and passively accepting all of our emotions as giving reasons that we should accept and take on in our reasoning, as not all emotions represent our personal values. The emotion-personal value relationship is much tougher to suss out in the first person standpoint. Oftentimes our emotional experiences are not black and white and we are left to figure ourselves out. Epistemological conflicts involving emotional self-knowledge, including phenomena such as emotions that directly contradict our most reasoned judgments, or emotions that reflect a character that seems to contradict the values we have committed ourselves to, are central to our possible self-deception about the emotion-personal value link. Even when our emotional experiences are actually indicative of our values, we may not even know ourselves that it is the case (Damm, 2011). The already tenuous link between our emotions and our values, including whether we can know when it is the case that they are linked, presents an important dilemma for practical rationality: if we are rational in pursuing what we value, can we really trust that our emotions give us reasons to act or decide as reasons *for us*?

There are times when we react emotionally to a situation that surprises even ourselves. If it were always the case that our emotions presented our values to us in one way or another, what are we to do if the emotion's evaluation contradicts the kind of agent we take ourselves to be? I see this as a conflict between the narrative self and the "emotional self". The narrative self is indeed telling a story of person we think we

are, and also the person we think we ought to be. The values that we see ourselves as committed to upholding are part of the narrative self. The emotional self is our actual emotional reactions as we experience them. The story of who we want to be may not be entirely accurate at the time we tell it if our emotional self seems to represent an entirely different set of values than the values presented by the narrative self. I am suggesting that while we cannot be deceived about the sort of values we want to have, we may certainly be deceived about the values we currently have, when it is the case that our emotions reflect values that we subconsciously hold due to how we were brought up. Part of becoming authentic is integrating the emotional self with the narrative self.

Only by achieving emotional authenticity will our emotions present reasons that we should accept. By becoming emotionally authentic we achieve a sense of autonomy, because to be autonomous is to act and decide in a way that tracks to what we care about in one way or another (Furrow & Wheeler, 2013). What we value in general is integral to our authenticity and autonomous agency because our valuations emphatically present to us objects in the world we care about: things, people, and situations which have import to us when our goals are set (Helm, 2009). They are what matters to us as agents. To identify with a value to see oneself as committed to that value, taking the opportunity when it is appropriate to exemplify that value. Our autonomous agency is at least partly constitutive of the values we have because we get to choose the values we want to commit ourselves to. Some theories of agency that take values and cares into consideration fail to capture the intimate link between what we care about and our emotions, and so they also do not account for how we could possibly be motivated by our values and how an agent can still be wholly rational even if their emotions are irrational.³

Jane values her relationship with her daughter, so she keeps her daughter in mind when she makes decisions about what to do with her days. When most people think of Jane they have difficulty doing so without seeing her daughter by her side. Harry values the quality of his home, so he spends a lot of time meticulously caring for of the upkeep his furniture, garden, and overall look of the house. Therefore when Harry experiences anxiety about a buildup of hair on his treasured couch, it leads him to spend time cleaning it up even after a long day at work. He deliberates and thinks that if he does go ahead with cleaning the couch he will be tired at work tomorrow, and that it would be perhaps best for him to get some rest. Yet he is pulled towards cleaning and cleans his couch anyway. While Jane's daughter is away at school,

³ See especially Bratman, 2007 esp. ch 8 and Frankfurt 2004.

Jane laments not having seen her friends in a while and decides to make plans to see them. However, later that evening, after her daughter is home from school, Jane is just about to step out of the door when her daughter begins crying. Seeing her daughter in tears, Jane finds herself utterly unable to leave the house. Despite Jane's acknowledgment that her daughter will calm down in a bit and that her husband would pay plenty of attention to their daughter while Jane is out, Jane just cannot pull herself away. Perhaps she anticipates the guilt she would feel if she really did leave the house. In both cases, what is valued takes precedence over other considerations (including other values, but perhaps less important ones), and our emotions lead us to reasons for acting on these values in ways that certainly seem to trump the reasons we reach through contemplating the situation. In fact, both succeed in being rational for the same reason as the worker before them. The difference being that in the worker's case his deliberation and emotion lead to the same action.

Emotional authenticity secures a formal coherence between our self-conception, values, and emotions in a particular place and in a particular time. In order to preserve the self-governance and autonomy that emotional authenticity provides us, a flexible view of authenticity is needed to capture our valuations that change over time. If we are to remain emotionally authentic through time we must have some room in this view of authenticity for self-guided change (Betzler, 2009). When we experience an emotion that challenges our identity as agents, we experience an emotion that seems to be alien to ourselves. Inauthenticity then occurs as we experience alien emotions we do not identify with. However, if we were to distance ourselves from emotions that seem alien to us as if they were not a part of us -especially alien emotions that bring us a sense of deep shame or humiliation- we would close ourselves off from opportunities to change as people. These seemingly alien emotions must be a part of us, in one way or another, so we can see ourselves as at stake, and change ourselves (Helm, 1996).

Reflexive emotions allow us to look at ourselves critically and put ourselves in a brand new light that we did not consider before, offering a sort of mechanism for checking how close we are to exemplifying the values we want to exemplify. Reflexive emotions are then the only emotions that can tell us distinctly about ourselves, because reflexive emotions are emotions about ourselves. Just like before, our emotions are still evaluative, only now we are evaluating ourselves instead of the outside world (Teroni, 2016). If after the fact I think about the reaction of anger and am met with a deep sense of shame, then it seems that I do not think of my anger as authentic to who I am based on the values I have committed myself to. So, I failed to be authentically myself when I reacted in anger to that particular situation. In acting inauthen-

tically I would fail to act as a rational agent as well, for even if my anger helped me achieve my goals in one way or another it would be a stroke of luck rather than actually helping me pursue what I care about. I was misguided to take this anger as giving reasons for me. A positive reflexive emotion can serve to build confidence, working to reinforce a previous experience. If the worker, Harry, or Jane felt pride after following through with their emotionally guided action then they would certainly think they made the right decision. This approach allows a weaker requirement of emotional self-knowledge as well. In reflecting on a previous experience, I need not have the answer to that question for it has no bearing on emotional authenticity. In instances where I cannot be entirely sure why I became as angry as I did, I can still tell if the response is congruent with who I am as an agent based the quality of my reflexive emotion.

Consider the case of Julian. Julian envisions himself as a passionate advocate for disability rights. He sees it as central to his identity. He protests, goes on marches, writes speeches, and even stands on street corners handing out leaflets. Anyone who had only known Julian briefly would not have much cause to disagree with Julian when he says that he is a disability advocate. One day, when getting on the bus, he spots a small area to stand in and begins to walk towards the space. Before he can get there, an individual in a wheelchair takes the spot Julian wanted to stand in. Julian becomes angry. He wanted to stand there and now not only did he not achieve what he desired, but he has to stand in a spot on the bus where he stands shoulder to shoulder with others. He feels downright enraged at the person who forced him into this misery.

After calming down a bit Julian feels a twinge of guilt. He realizes he got angry at one of the very people he is supposed to support. His general sympathy for the disabled conflicts with a genuine instance of anger that seems to be targeted at the disabled person. How can Julian's anger possibly be authentically his based on what he values? The message of disability rights advocates is that we should think of those who are disabled no differently than those who are able bodied, and that we are all equal in spirit. Perhaps in this way Julian does not need to disassociate his emotion from himself despite his guilt, because he would have reacted in the same way regardless of how able-bodied the person was who stood in the spot. Julian's anger was about having the spot stolen, and it just so happened that a disabled person took the spot. By realizing this, his guilt may change targets; he instead realizes that he might have some anger problems in general. Importantly, Julian may not be able to resolve this conflict in that way if he is unable to work that out for himself. Reflexive emotions allow us some slack in our emotional self-knowledge as the motivational role of emo-

tions do enough for us to change the way we react to situations. The next time Julian gets on the bus and is met with a similar situation he may remember the guilt he felt from last time even if the target of his emotion ends up being an able-bodied person.

The dilemma Huckleberry Finn faces when he is trying to decide whether or not he should turn Jim in to the slave hunters presents us with a different challenge.⁴ Huck feels torn between the sympathy and love he has found for Jim as a friend and the moral values instilled in him by society. The reason Huck's inner conflict is so difficult to solve for him from his own point of view is because he has not committed himself to upholding either of the two values he finds himself torn between. He obviously sees both the values instilled in him by society and the values that brought him his friendship with Jim as having import to him because he has emotional reactions in both directions. He feels anger when Jim talks about stealing back his wife and kids if he has to, but he also lies to the slave hunters because of the value that Jim's friendship has for Huck. On the boat after Huck lies to save Jim he admits that he would have felt a sense of guilt no matter what he chose, which is important because it shows that Huck has put himself at stake and sees the act of hiding Jim as *his act*. But instead of spurring change, the guilt causes him to give up morality altogether. Why?

While it is clear that his emotions reveal to him reasons to consider in his decision making processes (both in turning in Jim and giving up morality) which would not have come to him through thinking about it alone, Huck could not take any of those reasons to be relevant to himself as an agent. In Huck's state on the boat after hiding Jim, it would be difficult to see why he should take any of the reasons he was considering as reasons for him to identify with. Huck gives up morality because he could not see that he actually has a choice in what values he wants to commit himself to identifying with. Relying on reflexive emotions would do nothing for him because he does not even have a true sense of self yet. While he feels guilty, he has no way of really discerning why; after all he acknowledges that he would feel guilty regardless. Perhaps it is because of his young age that he thinks he cannot do anything about it, that he lacks the critical reflection skills to question the morality of society. Nevertheless, Huck's story should illustrate how central it is for one to have values that they autonomously chose to commit themselves to. In the each of the cases I have presented above, the agents already had particular values they were committed to, so their reflexive emotions always had a purpose. Without that sense of purpose and unity, our emotions would indeed feel disruptive and irrational, and we would end up in a nihilistic state where the self is never quite in reach to begin with. Even the

⁴ I am relying here on the discussion in Bennett, 1974.

most basic theories of agency that rely on authorship and reflective endorsement would agree that the most basic building block of agency is to choose values which we are committed to caring about.

It does us no good if the emotions claimed to focus our attention towards relevant reasons for us are in fact detrimental to our goals, self-worth, or anything else we value. In that way, we can hardly say that those reasons are actually reasons we should take up in deliberation. This moves us one step past Huckleberry Finn by actually starting with values one has committed themselves to like with Julian, Harry, Jane, and the worker. Emotional authenticity presents a bridge over the gaps between our emotions, personal values, and character. I believe that this takes the conversation in a positive direction as well since it presents a clear path towards self-integration and self-transformation. While we may not always be the people we hope to be, by taking ourselves seriously when we feel ashamed or angry with ourselves we have plenty of reasons to change. My anger towards myself when I become joyous for the wrong reasons, or my becoming sad or ashamed of myself because my anger led to a disastrous outcome pushes me from who I am in those moments of anger and joy to the kind of person I think I should be.⁵ By taking emotional transformation seriously in this way we act as rational agents. We can more easily pursue our values because we can use our reflexive emotions to tell when any emotionally guided action or deliberation has kept us rationally pursuing our interests. We become more rational as agents the closer and closer we get to being completely emotionally authentic.

The hiker who has a phobia of heights may not be able to help that they are afraid of heights no matter what, but if it is the case that when they think about the lack of control they have over the crippling fear that keeps them from hiking, they become sad or angry instead of content or indifferent; the reflexive emotion shows that they value hiking and see it as part of their identity. It would then be irrational of them not to at least try to find ways to alleviate their phobia, even if they are unsuccessful in doing so. Without that resounding emotional experience pushing one towards change, the supposed shift in character is very rightly open to censure as insincere and fake, as if putting on a mask. While it is not always the case that our emotions are representative of our personal values (especially phobias), reflexive emotions are. They guide us in being more authentic, and they help us realize in a distinct and particular way when we are not quite yet the type of person we want to be.

⁵ Becoming emotional for the wrong reasons is an epistemic issue regarding the justification and appropriateness of our emotions and is not the same as becoming emotional for what are morally bad reasons. On this distinction see D'Arms & Jacobson, 2000.

Taking a step back and allowing ourselves to be a worthy target of shame, regret, frustration, and despair takes a lot of bravery. But we can never hope to change and to become better people if we are not vulnerable –not to others, but to ourselves. If we wish to become the type of people who will sincerely and passionately stand by what we care about instead of simply feeling some inner obligation to do so, we need to have the courage to admit to ourselves that we have a part to play if we feel guilty and ashamed of who we are. But something beautiful occurs if we allow ourselves to be so vulnerable: we can change. We can truly become sincerely and authentically ourselves and by doing so allow our emotions to ground our practical rationality.

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