



UNIVERSITY OF
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THE IRRATIONALITY OF AMBIVALENT EMOTIONS

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Ambivalent Emotions

Ambivalent emotions are two or more co-occurring emotions that are directed at the same object and that conflict with each other.

- Conflicting emotions: happiness, sadness; love, hate; hope, fear; guilt, pride; disgust, attraction.
- Ambivalent emotions are distinct from other psychological phenomena, like emotion oscillation, recalcitrant emotions, meta-emotions.

Example

Bethany and Alice are auditioning for a place in an orchestra. They are best friends, and they trained themselves very hard for the audition. The result is published, and Alice obtained the job. Unfortunately, there was only one position open and given that Alice got the job, all the other candidates including Bethany had their application rejected. Bethany is happy for Alice, after all, she is her best friend and she knows that Alice deserved to have a place in the orchestra. However, Bethany is also sad: she craved that opportunity and she failed to achieve it.

Empirical Research

- Psychologists: ambivalent emotions conflict because they have opposite valences e.g. (Larsen, McGraw, Cacioppo, 2001).
- Extant empirical studies to establish the existence of ambivalent emotions do not distinguish between co-occurrent emotions with an opposite valence directed at different objects and co-occurring emotions of sadness and happiness directed at the same object.
- This contrasts with the way according to which philosophers define ambivalent emotions.

The problem

Ambivalent emotions seem to involve a representational contrast: the same object is presented as having two incompatible properties. Surprisingly, the phenomenon of ambivalence has not been extensively explored in the emotion literature and it is not clear which requirement of rationality (if any) is violated by ambivalent emotions. Three strategies have been proposed so far to explain the contrast involved in ambivalent emotions: the aspectual solution (Kristjánsson 2010), the compatibilist strategy (Tappolet 2005) and the asymmetric solution (Greenspan 1980). However, these extant explanations of the conflict involved in ambivalent emotions are not satisfying, because they either fail to explain why ambivalent emotions are not subject to consistency relations, or they fail to explain the source of conflict involved.

Aspectual solution

Bethany is seeing Alice’s win under two different aspects:

- My rival at the orchestra’s audition.
- A person with whom I identify with.

However, there is not something like ‘a general aspect’ of the object. Therefore, Kristjánsson concludes, ambivalent emotions are not contradictory.

Problem: this solution does not acknowledge the phenomenal contrast involved in ambivalent emotions.

The compatibilist strategy

1. Ambivalent emotions do not involve any contrast.
2. The evaluative properties figuring in the content of the ambivalent emotions are not mutually exclusive.

3. Therefore, ambivalent emotions are not contradictory.
 - a. Alice’s winning of the job is good (goal-conducive).
 - b. Alice’s winning of the bad (goal-obstructive).

Problem: being goal-conducive and being goal-obstructive are two incompatible properties.

Asymmetric solution

Greenspan individuates the content of the emotions as follows:

1. Alice’s winning of the job is good (as a whole).
2. Alice’s winning of the job is bad (as a whole).

Problems:

- ❖ Why this implies that emotions follow a different logic?
- ❖ The content of the emotions remains contradictory!

My proposal

I distinguish between the evaluations that trigger the emotions and the evaluations that constitute the emotions.

- The contents of the emotions are contradictory.
- The evaluations that trigger ambivalent emotions are not contradictory.

- Evaluative contents of ambivalent emotions resist qualification.
- The evaluations that constitute the emotions are contradictory.
- Ambivalent emotions involve a failure of procedural rationality.

Causal and constitutive evaluations

The causal evaluation is the evaluation of the kind of bearing that an object or an event has for the well-being of the subject. This evaluation is called “causal”, because in normal conditions if the causal evaluation had not happened, the emotion would not have been activated. The causal evaluation is the evaluation responsible for the intelligibility of the emotion because it explains why the emotion activates; this evaluation does not need to be the output of a deliberative process: it can also be instantiated automatically in an unconscious way. Causal evaluations account for the perspective or the point of view from which we apprehend an object. Constitutive evaluations, on the other hand, are evaluations that describe the way according to which the event is presented to us in our emotional experience. They are part of the emotion experience, and they determine, at least in part, the content of the emotion.

Advantages

- ✓ It renders justice to the phenomenology of emotions (there is a real conflict).
- ✓ Some ambivalent emotions have incompatible evaluations.
- ✓ It explains why the emotion can occur in a generally rational person (the causal appraisals are not contradictory).

Example

Causal evaluations of Bethany’s happiness and sadness have the following contents:

- Alice’s win is good in that it satisfies the desire of someone with which I identify.
- Alice’s win is bad in that it frustrates my own desire.

The constitutive evaluation of Bethany’s emotions has respectively the following contents:

- Constitutive evaluation₁: Alice’s win is good (as a whole).
- Constitutive evaluation₂: Alice’s win is bad (as a whole).

Conclusions

- ❖ Ambivalent emotions involve a contradiction at the level of the evaluations that constitutes the emotions.
- ❖ Causal evaluations are consistent.
- ❖ Having ambivalent emotions entails, on a certain extent, a failure of procedural rationality.

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