

MYTH EIGHT

Emotions Happen to Us (They Are "Passions")

It sometimes seems to be one of the phenomenological "data" of our experience of emotions that emotions happen to us, and sometimes, they do. Even in Aristotle's naming of this intriguing set of phenomena, *pathé* or passions, the idea is clear that these are things that we *suffer* in life. Thus we talk about the passion of Christ, meaning his suffering, and we often talk about passions using variants of what I called the hydraulic model, images of exploding, erupting, being struck, being invaded, being felled, and "falling." We talk about being "paralyzed" by fear, "smitten" by love, "struck" by jealousy, "overwhelmed" by sadness, and being "made mad" with rage. But as we give up the hydraulic metaphor and its variants in favor of a more rational, more cognitively and evaluatively rich model of the emotions, we find ourselves less enamored of this "passivity" conception of the passions as well.

Or else, we might want to hold onto some conception of "passion" to cover just those instances of emotion that really do get out of hand and beyond our control, cases of obsession and compulsion and neurosis (not to mention psychosis), but with the clear understanding that these are not the usual but only extremely deviant instances of emotion. Most of our emotions, most of the time, are not entirely beyond our control. They do not just happen to us, but we are responsible for them. We practice them, cultivate them, and in many cases *choose* them, even if unconsciously. Thus I have described the emotions as strategies, strategies for living well, even if a great many emotions are rather short-sighted and thus not very good strategies. But to say that emotions are strategies, as Jean-Paul Sartre

suggested more than seventy-five years ago, is to say something very much at odds with the current and traditional view of emotions. It is to say that our emotions are to some extent our "doing," and not just something that happens to us.

To put it a different way, how much control do we have over our emotions? Does it even make any sense to say that we choose them? Psychologists talk about "emotion regulation," leaving it open to what extent and in what ways the languages of control or of choice might apply. Philosophers have long taken the position, in part because of their celebration of reason, that we can control (but not choose) our emotions only by constraining them, or by controlling their expression. But is the question of control and constraint perhaps the wrong question? Or a much-too-limited question? Is controlling an emotion something like controlling a wild animal within? (Horace: "anger is like riding a wild horse.") Is it like controlling one's blood pressure, or one's cholesterol level, something that (certain Yogis excepted) we can do only indirectly? Or is it rather like a boss controlling his or her employees by way of various threats and incentives, the "boss" being reason? (Plato's model in *The Republic*.) Or is controlling an emotion like controlling one's thoughts, one's speech, one's arguments, putting them into shape, choosing one's mode of expression as well as one's timing? Consider the difference between spontaneously "blurting" out a comment and giving a considered response. Or is it like coordinating one's actions through practice, like riding a bike, which may be "mindless" (that is, wholly unreflective and unselfconscious) but is nevertheless voluntary and both very much within one's control and a continuous matter of choice?

Now, to be sure, to say that we choose our emotions is not to say that our emotions are sheer instances of "will." We do not just "do" them. Circumstances often impose our emotions on us, and the nature of emotions in general is such that we certainly do not have entirely free and unconstrained choice in which emotions we will have or whether we will feel—or allow ourselves to feel—any emotion at all. With the possible exception of joy and depression, and other moods that for the most part float free of the particular circumstances of our lives, we are "captive" to our circumstances. I did not choose to be in this bar at the same time as this offensive thug who is now making fun of my clothes, my height, my moustache, my accent, and my behavior. But now he has deeply offended me, and I have to decide what to do with it. I did not choose to be in this situation with this offensive thug, but I might well have chosen it. Indeed, I may resolve to come back at the same time tomorrow night to repeat the encounter and show or tell him a thing or two. So I am not completely the victim here. Even if I did not know about this particular thug, I did know about the reputation of the bar, and of the proclivities of my friend who

brought me to the bar, and of the dangers that lurk in bars in general. Here I am repeating a point often made by Aristotle, that even when it seems that we have no choice or responsibility in the matter, we may well be responsible for putting ourselves in this situation, or, more importantly, for cultivating the character who would put himself in such a situation and thus be provoked or tempted to act this way.

But here I am, and here he is, and here is this situation. I feel myself getting tense (the Stoics' "first movements"), but now, do I just get angry? I have a number of choices, though none of them is very pleasant. I can walk away, and shoulder what abuse and ridicule may follow. I can answer him in kind, an unwise choice given his size and evident disposition. I can pretend to ignore him. I can really try to ignore him, for instance, by engaging my friend in a lively discussion of university politics. I can get angry at my friend for bringing me to such a place. Meanwhile, in all of these responses, I sense in myself a rising anger (note the hydraulic metaphor). I grow more tense and irritable (Jamesian physiology). I find myself thinking of all sorts of insults and defensive responses to throw at the thug—or more likely to share with my friend after we have safely left the bar (here the judgment components of my anger are fully articulated). But my choices are real choices, with real consequences, some of which further the anger (notably by aggravating the situation that initially caused it), while others tend to shift the anger (perhaps toward myself, perhaps toward my friend), and others tend to diminish it.

Distraction is often a good way of diminishing an emotion, especially if (though not in this case) the offensive situation is not continuing. An effective way of dealing with anger is going with your grandmother's advice, to "count slowly to ten" before doing anything. During that time, the situation may clarify. The guy is a thug, whom I will never see again. The evening is young, and it's been a good day. Why let him ruin it? It should be obvious that it is not simply a decision to be angry or not, but it is equally obvious that I am not simply a victim of anger. Once again, I would want to remind us of the distinction between the emotion and the event or situation causing it. Even if I may rightly consider myself a victim of the thug or the situation, I am nevertheless something like the coauthor of my anger. But as with any demanding coauthor and a dictatorial editor, I cannot write anything that I want. I have to start with what there is (or, at least, what I think there is).

One problem here is that so much of the emotions literature, and our popular talk about emotions, focuses on single instances and often very short bursts of emotion. In such cases, the idea that we are the author or coauthor of our emotions seems implausible indeed. But expanding

cultivate their emotions and emotional responses. They discover, for example, that anger is an effective way of intimidating people, and so they allow themselves to get angry at the slightest provocation. I say "they allow themselves," but this does not imply that there is any conscious decision at the time of the outburst. It is rather a pattern of behavior that is cultivated over time. So, too, some people cultivate sadness, perhaps because they earn sympathy that way, or because "feeling sorry for themselves" allows them to withdraw and be irresponsible or unsociable. Others allow themselves to fall in love frequently, possibly just because they find it invigorating and fun. We resist calling this love, looking instead for signs of insecurity, manipulation, utter irresponsibility, or deep neurosis. Of course, we may also be morally critical, insofar as such a person tends to forget about the feelings of the transient victims. Indeed, I would say that failure to take into account the feelings (and especially the "hurt" feelings) of one's supposed beloved is definitive proof that the emotion in question—whatever it may be—is not love. Which is not to deny that it, too, whatever it is, consists in part of choices as well.

But most significant emotions are not single episodes, much less "bursts" of affect. They are processes over time. Then we can see quite clearly our role in getting angry, for example, as we willfully remind ourselves of a previous slight, over and over again, embellishing and elaborating the offense, perhaps generalizing one's thoughts to include other, similar offenses, imagining ways of getting even, until one literally "works oneself up" into a rage. For those of us who have studied emotions—and by now all of you—this angry recitation might well be joined by an interlocutor, one of those small voices of prudence in our heads that resembles the voice of one's parents or rabbi or preacher, the "Superego," nagging "Do you really want to do this?" or "Wouldn't you be much better off if you just let it go?" But there seems to me to be little doubt, in such cases, that anger does not just happen to us and it is not simply dictated by the circumstances. Our anger is, at least in part, our responsibility, and so we should *take* responsibility for it.

So, too, love. There is such a thing, I acknowledge, as being "smitten." In fact, it still happens to me on occasion, despite my happy and faithful marriage. But that is hardly love, despite what crude males may say in moments of desperation, sexual enthusiasm, or harassment. The truth is, it passes, usually quickly, and it is an experience not much more significant than catching a whiff of a delicious dish being carried past my table at a good restaurant. Sometimes, two people meet and there is "chemistry" between them. There is an exchange of mutual glances, mutual appreciation, mutual attraction. But that, too, is not love. It is just that, mutual attraction and appreciation. Now I am willing to admit the idea that,

without such "chemistry," love may be less likely to develop, or in any case will be slower in coming. It is not, to put it clumsily, "love at first sight." But we all know how getting to know someone allows mutual appreciation to develop, and with it, the likelihood of mutual attraction and mutual glances that slowly transform themselves from a friendly wink to a longing gaze, from acquaintance to friendship to love. But love, let us say it explicitly, is always a process, not a momentary emotional episode. It does not make sense, except in very rare circumstances, to say that "I fell in love for fifteen minutes," or, for that matter, even three days. One might object that Romeo and Juliet were madly in love for just three days, but it is not irrelevant that then they were dead. Had they lived, and Romeo bolted back to Rosalind, we would certainly have revalued their romance. It would have been one more irresponsible teenage crush, and no more.

"Falling in love," I have argued for years, is a matter of choice, of multiple decisions. Love may begin with a meeting, which may be wondrous and magical and all of that. The eyes might lock and the gaze becomes transfixed. The most casual of conversations quickly demonstrates mutual interests, mutually exciting backgrounds, mutual compatibility. But then there is a series of choices and decisions, both mutual and individual: Should I stay or leave? Should I see him again? With or without my friends? Should we have lunch or dinner? In a romantic setting or not? Should we kiss goodnight? "Should we meet the parents? And every such decision is also a decision whether or not to further or hamper the growing relationship and the feelings that constitute it. And then there are the more straightforward and usually silent modes of emotional preparation. One thinks, "what a charming thing to say," "what delightfully intelligent eyes!" "I wonder what it would be like on a romantic vacation together," "I wonder what sort of lover he/she would be." And then the imaginative, hopeful, fanciful thoughts: going over the conversation in immediate retrospect, including an embarrassing critical analysis of every word and nuance, rehearsing follow-up conversations. And then we entertain the images, perhaps repeatedly: walking on the beach together, making love together, making babies together. Love is a process of willful escalation, and we don't "fall" into love. We *work* our way into it. As I heard it well said in the recent movie *Closer*, the lament by the Alice (Natalie Portman) character, "there is always a choice point [in falling in love], where you say to yourself, 'go ahead, or don't go ahead.' I don't know what that choice point was, but I know that there was one."

Sometimes decisions are so easy to make that we don't think of ourselves as making them at all. But the most important decisions, for instance, to say "I love you" for the first time, are dramatically transformative. This is no mere confession. It is an explosive speech act, a bomb dropped at the

feet of the relationship. With some luck and insight, the explosion is mutually delightful, a happy moment indeed. But sometimes it is not, and friendships and work relationships are ruined forever. But every decision involving the beloved enriches and advances or endangers the growing feeling of love. So are we responsible for love? In the case of romantic love and despite all of the traditional "swept away" metaphors and excuses, I do not see how one can insist otherwise.

The decisions involved in love (and other emotions too) are not all forward looking. Some are retrospective as well. My favorite example supplies an answer to the not infrequent question, "do you believe in love at first sight?" My answer, you might be surprised to learn, is "yes, I do." Two people meet and their eyes lock (or, less romantically, one person spies another, and he or she is transfixed). They get together, make the right decisions, their love grows, they live together, and perhaps get married. Several years go by. They look back at their relationship or the first time they met and they agree, "I loved you the first moment I saw you." And that's right. But alter the scenario. Two people meet, their eyes lock (or one person is "taken" by another), they spend a few passionate days together, but then they get tired or disgusted with one another. Sometime in the future, one of them looks back at the brief relationship and concludes, "that was some infatuation" (or "crush," or "wild weekend") but the word "love" will certainly not be part of the description. (This was my point in my unromantic retelling of the Romeo and Juliet story a moment ago.) But here is the interesting part: The initial experience in the second case may have been exactly the same as the initial experience in the first one. What has changed is the retrospective interpretation of that meeting. In other words, love at first sight depends on how the relationship works out. So, too, it turns out to have been rational in retrospect, but there may have been no telling at the time.

A much more terrible instance of the same retrospective reinterpretation is the disclaimer, "I guess I never really loved you," at the end of a long and for all intents and purposes genuine love relationship. But does such a denial mean that the love was never real? From a third-person point of view (of a mutual friend or a relative) it may be the denial that is both untrue and cruel. But from the point of view of the unceremoniously dumped lover, this will probably prompt a wholesale reconsideration of not only the entire relationship but of one's own identity and existence, possibly with devastating consequences.

When I insist that emotions can be strategies rather than mere reactions, I do not mean to say that emotions are *deliberate*, the results of overt plans or strategies. We do not think our way into most emotions. Nor do emotions fit the philosophical paradigm of intentional action, that is, actions

that are preceded by intentions—combinations of explicit beliefs and desires and “knowing what one is going to do.” Insofar as the emotions can be defended in terms of a kind of activity or action, it is not fully conscious intentional action that should be our paradigm. But the realm of semi-conscious, inattentive, quasi-intentional, habitual, spontaneous, and even “automatic” activity and action have received little attention in philosophy, despite the efforts of such seminal figures as William James and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. But between intentional and full-blown deliberate action and straightforward passivity—getting hit with a brick, suffering a heart attack or a seizure, there is an enormous range of behaviors and “undergoings” that might nevertheless be considered within the realm of activity and action and (more generally) as matters of responsibility.

Consider thoughts. Emotions are a lot like thoughts, and not only in the sense that emotions typically involve thoughts. Jerome Neu, following Spinoza, suggests that emotions simply *are* thoughts. Some thoughts are carefully and conscientiously cultivated, as when we “think our way through” a problem. On some occasions, it may make sense to say that the thoughts are “invited,” for instance, when after mulling over a philosophical puzzle, we give up on it for the day, and find that the answer “comes to us” in the middle of dinner or the middle of the night. But thoughts also come to us unbidden, even unwanted, and such cases support Nietzsche’s famous observation that “a thought comes when *it* will, not when *I* will.” Nevertheless, I have always thought that Nietzsche’s observation served mainly to throw the whole idea of agency open for closer examination, not (as it is often interpreted) as a rejection of the notion of agency as such.

The fact is that most of us take full responsibility for our thoughts, no matter how unbidden, so long as they fit into our personal agendas, particularly if it is an original or particularly brilliant thought. But also, more generally, we accept responsibility and take a thought as “our own” if it fits a problem we are working on or an issue in which we are engaged. This might suggest to some (as Nietzsche is taken to argue) that there is no need for such concepts of “agency” at all, but I think it rather relocates the question. It suggests that our sense of agency is far more expansive than the limited realm of “the will,” that is, what we conscientiously *try* to do, and so, too, is our sense of responsibility.

Thoughts, whatever else they are, are tell-tale symptoms of emotion. When we find ourselves having certain thoughts, for instance, momentary homicidal or sexual fantasies, even in the absence of any other evident signs of emotion, that is some reason to accept the attribution of the relevant emotions (fury and eros, respectively). If the thought is sufficiently horrifying, we may well dismiss it as nothing but fleeting and insignificant, but if it comes back, again and again, mere dismissal is no longer plausible.

Freud may have been wrong when he early on insisted that all such thoughts are manifestations of a wish, but he was surely right that they are usually manifestations of *some* desire or emotion. But are thoughts a kind of action? Are we responsible for them? Thoughts as products of thinking, certainly. Invited thoughts, perhaps. Thoughts uninvited, no. But it is not always easy to tell the difference between a thought that appears in the process of thinking and an invited thought, or even if uninvited.

So, too, you cannot “simply” decide to have an emotion. You can, however, decide to do any number of things—enter into a situation, not take one’s medication, think about a situation in a different way, “set oneself up” for a fall—that will bring about the emotion. Or you might *act as if* you have an emotion, act angrily, for instance, from which genuine anger may follow. There is William James’s always helpful advice: “Smooth the brow, brighten the eye, contract the dorsal rather than the ventral aspect of the frame, and speak in a major key, pass the genial compliment, and your heart must be frigid indeed if it does not gradually thaw” (2003). But this does not mean that we simply “manipulate” or “engineer” our emotions, as if we perform actions that affect or bring about *them*. The question of what we can control, and what we cannot, is much more complex than the usual distinction between activity and passivity would suggest.

Different aspects of emotion require very different sorts of arguments regarding the voluntary-involuntary, active-passive status of emotions. Moreover, there is a broad range of claims regarding such status that might be made regarding emotions, from the relatively innocent view that one can always do something to not only control but “set-up” (or prevent) particular emotions to the insistence that we are responsible for our emotions (whether or not we can control or choose them) to the view that emotions are active and do not just “happen” to us to the very strong claim that an emotion is a matter of choice, something voluntary and even willful. And since different aspects invite very different conclusions, the discussion of the passivity of emotions is no simple matter and yields no single conclusion. We sometimes hold people responsible for what they think. We usually hold them responsible for what they do. Some expressions of emotion are voluntary, but not all are.

In what sense are we responsible for what we believe, think, judge, and appraise? Does it make any sense at all to say that we are responsible for what happens in our brains (leaving aside the willful intake of mind-altering substances)? Or that we are responsible for we feel? What does happen when we choose or force ourselves to have an emotion? Arlie Hochschild (1983) did a fascinating study many years ago of airline stewardesses who have to smile and be cheerful for hours on end in the face of often irate, unruly, and sometimes rude customers. They succeed,

Hochschild says, by retooling their thinking. But is the resultant emotion therefore “inauthentic”? We usually think that “manufactured” emotions are thereby phony, but I think that is a presumptuous conclusion. There are, of course, “fake” emotions, easily detected. But cultivated emotions are not therefore phony, any more than the very real, even if totally planned, emotions that can happen when we knowingly get ourselves into a heated situation (for example, a confrontation with one’s ex-wife’s new boyfriend).

Which brings us back to the critical role that reflection plays in our emotional lives. So far in this chapter, I have been discussing the voluntariness of our emotions but without emphasizing the fact that much of this is due to the fact that we can think about them, weigh their warrant and justification, reconsider their strategies and/or consequences, distance ourselves from our own emotions (if only by virtue of the passing of time), and come to see ourselves as others might see us. Nevertheless, virtually everything that I have said presupposes this remarkable ability and would not even be intelligible without it. Getting angry has a lot to do with our “building a case,” our looking for and bringing in more evidence, our deciding that “yes, I’m right to be so upset and he was really wrong to do that!” Falling in love has a lot to do with entertaining thoughts of the beloved, rehearsing upcoming conversations and remembering, fondly or with distress, past meetings, reaffirming one’s love of the beloved, and thinking in terms of the word “love.” I said that we need not think of emotions as deliberate, but I certainly do not want to rule this out either. We do sometimes plan strategies, and while there is something odd about explicitly planning how to feel, we do just that whenever we put ourselves in situations that we know or hope will inspire emotion.

We also talked about thoughts and their peculiar role in our sense of agency, but reflection consists, to a large extent, of thoughts. (We do not want to forget, however, that much of reflection consists of other [“second order”] emotions as well.) But thinking about our emotions is fascinating both insofar as such thinking is more or less automatic—it just comes along with many of our emotions, often as a key component of those emotions—and is voluntary and cultivated. Reflecting on our emotions is something we learn to do, because we have to learn to control our emotions, and because we want to refine our emotions. But when we reflect on our emotions we often feel compelled to consider the alternatives, and this raises the question of choice and control, even when we are quite pleased with our emotional reactions and, in the terms of the Stoics, are happy to affirm them. But the key to overcoming the passivity view of emotions is to appreciate the power and pervasiveness of reflection in our emotional life. If we continue to feel passive with regard to our emotions, then that is something that we choose to do.

I do not want to overstate my thesis (that we are to a certain extent responsible for our emotions and, sometimes at least, we actually choose them), since, to be sure, the situations that provoke emotions often hit us unawares. Even where we do have a hand in setting up the circumstances that provoke us, in most cases it is not even plausible to say that we planned it that way. Of course, sometimes this is true, despite the vigorous denials. People do “set themselves up,” knowing the probable emotional consequences. And their being aware of what they are doing is not a necessary part of the charge. But, typically, our emotions are both unplanned and more or less dictated by circumstances and it would make little sense to insist that we are responsible or ought to take responsibility for our emotional responses. But even so, there is a self-fulfilling prophecy involved here that cannot be easily denied. It is, I think, a Hegelian insight. When we look into our emotional lives with the idea that we are or might be responsible and ask ourselves those probing questions, “what am I doing this for?” “What am I getting out of this?” we often see aspects of our strategic behavior that would otherwise escape us. By contrast, if we look into our emotional lives with the idea that our emotions are forces beyond our control that happen to us, we are prone to make excuses for ourselves and resign ourselves to bad and destructive behavior that otherwise might be controlled. As Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in one of his most popular essays, “The existentialist does not believe in the power of passion. He will never regard a grand passion as a destructive torrent upon which a man is swept into uncertain actions as by fate, and which, therefore is an excuse for them.” In other words, being an existentialist with regard to our emotions is *good for us*! Even if it does not allow us to take our lives in our hands, it lets us make our lives our own.

The voluntariness of emotion, if I may call it that, has been an under-explored theme in emotions research and in the everyday “folk psychology” of emotions. The extent to which we “choose” our emotions and are responsible for them is an almost invisible topic in the history of emotions. (Alva Noe [2005] has suggested a similar thesis for perception in general.) But at least this much is clear. No matter how fervently one believes that we are all victims of circumstances, or in God’s hands, or subject to mysterious Fates of one sort or another, we are not just victims or pawns. We are essentially agents, and we have responsibilities. Our emotional lives are part of that domain. But this also leads me to an offensive suggestion about why people have been so long wedded to thinking about emotions as hijackers that render us victims instead of thinking of them as strategies we cultivate and put into play. Sartre, in his tome *Being and Nothingness*, famously develops the notion of “bad faith” (*mauvaise foi*), by which he means our tendency to evade responsibility whenever we can. Our favorite

way of evading responsibility is to make excuses. ("I know I was supposed to be here at nine, but I was stuck in traffic.") In other words, "it's not my fault. I was prevented by forces beyond my control." So it would be very convenient to think of our emotions, which motivate a great deal of our behavior, as themselves beyond our control.

If we do, then we could blame our silly outburst at the meeting on our anger, and not take responsibility for it ourselves. Or we could blame our foolish behavior on the fact that we were in love, and not take responsibility then either. But Sartre sees through the excuses, and we should too. I once summed up Sartre's philosophy and existentialism in general with the simple statement, No Excuses! And that is how I would like you to think about the emotions, too. Not that they don't have their causes. Not that they aren't often dictated or circumscribed by circumstances. Not that there are not sometimes passions over which we really do have little control. But instead of shrugging off responsibility, thinking "I am not responsible for my emotions," I want to urge you to ask, whenever you can, "why am I doing this? What am I getting out of this?" And you may well find that by taking responsibility you will no longer feel like the victim of your own emotions.