EMOTIONAL INSIGHT

The Epistemic Role of Emotional Experience

MICHAEL S. BRADY

OXFORD

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For my mother Dorothy, and in memory of my father John

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Contents

Introduction 1

1. Towards the Perceptual Model 8
   1.1 A platitude about emotion 10
   1.2 Emotion, attention, and salience 16
   1.3 Emotion and evaluation 25
   1.4 Theories of emotion 30
      1.4.1 Desire theories 31
      1.4.2 Judgementalism 33
      1.4.3 Other cognitive theories 37
      1.4.4 Feeling theories 40
   1.5 Conclusions 43

2. The Perceptual Model 45
   2.1 Similarities between emotional and perceptual experience 46
   2.2 Literal vs non-literal versions of the perceptual model 52
      2.2.1 Literal versions of the perceptual model 53
      2.2.2 Non-literal versions of the perceptual model 60
      2.2.3 Which version of the perceptual model should we prefer? 63
   2.3 Emotional experiences as reasons to believe 69
   2.4 A direct realist epistemology for emotion? 78
   2.5 Conclusions 82

3. Against the Perceptual Model 83
   3.1 An argument against the "default" view 83
   3.2 Emotion and attention revisited 90
   3.3 An emotional solution to an emotional problem 98
   3.4 Why emotion is helpful for reappraisal 101
   3.5 Against the perceptual model 109
   3.6 Conclusions 116

4. Emotion and Understanding 118
   4.1 In defence of the perceptual model 119
   4.2 A further argument against the perceptual model 125
   4.3 Emotional experiences as proxy reasons 129
   4.4 Emotion and understanding 133
   4.5 Understanding as our ultimate epistemic goal 137
   4.6 How emotions facilitate understanding 147
   4.7 Emotion and self-understanding 150
   4.8 Conclusions 155

5. Emotion, Attention, and Virtue 158
5.1 Emotion, attention, and reflection 160
5.1.1 Problems with emotional persistence 161
5.1.2 Problems of dissociation between emotion and reflection 163
5.1.3 Problems with emotional focus 164
5.2 Virtuous habits of attention 170
5.3 Virtue and understanding 175
5.3.1 Problems with emotional persistence 175
5.3.2 Problems of dissociation between emotion and reflection 179
5.3.3 Problems with emotional focus and distraction 180
5.4 Does the virtuous person trust her emotional responses? 186
5.5 Conclusions 189

Bibliography 193
Index 201

Introduction

The courtroom drama provides a rich source of examples for thinking about epistemological matters. Consider, for instance, Sidney Lumet's classic 1957 film *12 Angry Men*, in which Henry Fonda's juror manages to convince the other jurors of the defendant's innocence, after all but Fonda were initially willing to deliver a 'guilty' verdict. The drama is organized around a host of epistemological issues concerning prejudice and bias, the reliability of testimony, the significance of disagreement, and the status of experts.[1] But central to the film—as the title indicates—is the presence of emotion in the jury room, and in particular the issue of the effects that emotion can have on deliberation and judgement. One such epistemological effect, as we all know, is deleterious. To illustrate, consider the following exchange between Lee J. Cobb's 3rd Juror, and Fonda's 8th Juror.[2]

3RD JUROR: It's these kids—the way they are nowadays . . . When I was a kid I used to call my father "Sir". That's right . . . "Sir". You ever hear a kid call his father that anymore?

8TH JUROR: Fathers don't seem to think it's important anymore.

3RD JUROR: You got any kids?

8TH JUROR: Two.

3RD JUROR: Yeah, well I've got one. He's twenty. We did everything for that boy and what happened? When he was nine he ran away from a fight. I saw him. I was so embarrassed I almost threw up. So I told him right out. "I'm gonna make a man outta you or I'm going to bust you in half trying". Well, I made a man out of him alright. When he was sixteen we had a battle. He hit me in the face. He's big, y'know. I haven't seen him in two years. Rotten kid. You work your heart out . . .

[1] To take another example, consider the trial in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, discussed in Miranda Fricker's book *Epistemic Injustice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2007).

[2] *Twelve Angry Men*, original screenplay by Reginald Rose (1954); quotations from (1996) Methuen Drama version.

Cobb's character transmutes his sadness and frustration—and possibly guilt and shame—at his estrangement from his son into anger towards the young defendant, who seems to represent a substitute for the son; as a result, he believes the defendant guilty. Here a particular configuration of emotions has a negative epistemological effect: it is because Cobb's character is emotional in these ways that he believes what he does about the young man on trial. And here the drama illustrates part of our common-sense thinking about emotions, which is that they can lead us astray in our beliefs and in our actions. For it is because the 3rd Juror is emotional that he forms his erroneous belief; and it is because the 3rd Juror has this belief that he votes in the way that he does.

However, the film illustrates another, and more optimistic, view of the epistemic and practical effects of emotion. Consider now the following exchange between Fonda, Ed Begley's 10th Juror, and Jack Warden's 6th Juror:

> 8TH JUROR: According to the testimony, the boy looks guilty. Maybe he is. I sat there in court for three days listening while the evidence built up. Everybody sounded so positive, you know, I . . . I began to get a peculiar feeling about this trial. I mean, nothing is that positive. I have questions I would have liked to ask. Maybe they wouldn't have meant anything. I don't know. But I started to feel that the defence counsel wasn't doing his job. He let too many things go. Little things.
> 10TH JUROR: What little things? Listen, when these fellas don't ask questions, that's because they know the answers already and they figure they'll be hurt.
> 8TH JUROR: Maybe. It's also possible for a lawyer to be just plain stupid, isn't it?
> 6TH JUROR: You sound like you've met my brother-in-law.

As the story progresses, we discover of course that there *is* something dubious about the witnesses and the defence counsel; the 8th Juror's feelings *get things right*. Moreover, his reticence to judge the boy guilty, and his coming to realise that the boy is in fact innocent, are grounded in his *trust* in his feelings about the witnesses, the defence council, and the trial as a whole. In this case, the character's emotions have a positive effect along both epistemic and practical dimensions: Fonda's character believes correctly as a result of his feelings, and the outcome is that an innocent man's life is saved.

This illustration of the positive epistemological effects of emotional experience is not anomalous. For it is a commonplace of everyday thinking that our emotions can get things right in this way, and when they do they can inform us about value. It is, indeed, something of a cliché that in certain

circumstances—when buying a new house, or deciding whether to change careers, or pondering the marriage proposal—that one should listen to, and sometimes follow, one's 'heart', understood as meaning one's emotional responses to the property, the career, the proposal. Common-sense thus supports the idea that emotions can play a positive epistemic role: emotions can constitute reasons for our beliefs and judgements, or can provide information about our evaluative situation.

But how are we to understand the positive contribution that emotions can make to our epistemic standing? And what are the conditions in which emotions make such a contribution? My aim in this book is to answer these questions. In doing so I hope to illuminate a central tenet of common-sense thinking, contribute to an ongoing debate in the philosophy of emotion, and illustrate something important about the nature of emotion itself. For as will become apparent, the epistemological story that I end up telling will be grounded in a novel and distinctive account of what emotions are and what emotions do. On this account, emotions help to serve our epistemic needs by capturing our attention, and by facilitating a reassessment or reappraisal of the evaluative information that emotions *themselves* provide. As a result, emotions can promote understanding of and insight into ourselves and our evaluative landscape.

The book will be organized around a critical examination of an increasingly popular theory in the philosophy of emotion, namely the *Perceptual Model*. The focus on the perceptual model is warranted for three reasons. The first is that the perceptual model seems better placed to capture our common-sense views about the epistemic role and value of emotion than other, more traditional theories of emotion. Indeed, we'll see that the perceptual model is an attractive prospect for those who favour 'cognitive' theories *and* for those who favour "feeling" theories, since versions of the perceptual model which promise to avoid traditional problems for these theories can be formulated along both cognitivist and feeling-based lines. The second reason is that the perceptual model is characterizable as *primarily* an account of the epistemic role and value of emotional experience. This is because the central claims of the perceptual model are that emotions can play a positive epistemic role by constituting reasons or evidence for evaluative judgements, and that the conditions in which emotions do so are analogous to the conditions in which sensory perceptual experiences constitute reasons or evidence for empirical beliefs. Moreover, the perceptual model would seem to be the only extant

account of emotion that can be regarded as explicitly aimed at answering our two questions. It therefore makes an obvious, and natural, focal point for an investigation into this theme.

The third reason for investigating the perceptual model is that it is mistaken; emotions are not akin to perceptions at the epistemic level. Indeed, I will argue that we can only capture our common-sense thinking about the epistemic value of emotion if we *reject* the perceptual model. But this is not a purely negative thesis, since the reasons why the perceptual model is mistaken will bring to light distinctive and hitherto unexamined ways in which emotions can have epistemic value. In other words, a focus on the perceptual model is warranted because the reasons why this model fails to provide adequate answers to our two questions will help to illuminate the epistemic credentials that emotions in fact possess, and thus help us to answer our questions along rather different lines. I propose, therefore, that the common-sense idea that emotions play a positive epistemic role will be best investigated *via* a critical examination of the model of emotion that is explicitly aimed at explaining this idea, and that such an examination will expand and enhance our understanding of the positive epistemic role that emotions can play. The end result will be a deepened appreciation of the truth to be found in our common-sense thinking about emotion, and of what is right, but mainly of what is wrong, with a recent and important development in the theory of emotion. The details of the specific chapters of the book are as follows.

In Chapter 1, I support the idea that emotions can play a positive epistemic role by showing how the idea emerges from a commonplace or platitude about what emotions do, and from close links between emotion and attention. I then investigate what emotions must be like in order to play this epistemic role. I argue that traditional cognitivist and feeling accounts will struggle to capture common-sense thinking about the epistemology of emotion, but that versions of both cognitive and feeling theories might fare better on this score in so far as they embrace the thought that emotional experience is akin to perceptual experience. As a result, I claim that support for the perceptual model can be generated from an examination of the epistemic viability of rival theories of emotion, and that proponents of these theories have good reason to take the model seriously.

Chapter 2 consists of a detailed examination of the perceptual model. As we'll see, the perceptual model is not a single distinctive theory, but a

broad church. I consider versions of the theory that maintain that emotional experiences are literally perceptual experiences, and versions that maintain that the former are merely akin to or analogous to the latter. I argue that non-literal versions are more plausible, and then proceed to investigate in some detail the epistemological thesis that is at the heart of all forms of the perceptual model. I first outline the claim that emotional experience is thought to constitute reason or evidence for evaluative judgement, in much the same way that perceptual experience constitutes reason or evidence for empirical judgement. I then fill in this outline, by presenting the standard "indirect realist" account of the role that *perceptual* experience plays in the justification of empirical belief, and by seeing what the perceptual model of emotion looks like on these lines. Finally, I consider, only to reject, the possibility of adopting a "direct realist" account of the role that emotional experience plays in the justification of evaluative belief.

In Chapter 3, I argue that we have good reason to be sceptical about the perceptual model, as presented in Chapter 2, since there are significant disanalogies between emotional and perceptual experience at the epistemic level. These differences are grounded in differences in the *nature* of emotional and perceptual experiences, and, in particular, in the different relations emotional and perceptual experiences have with attention. The idea that emotions can direct our attention is explained in some detail in the first chapter. But in Chapter 3, I claim that emotion can also capture and *consume* attention, and that this serves an important epistemic goal. In particular, I argue that emotions, through the capture and consumption of attention, can motivate the search for reasons that bear on the accuracy of *their own* initial assessment of some object or event, and thus motivate the rational *re*appraisal or *re*assessment of that object or event. If so, however, this suggests that emotional experiences are not reasons for evaluative judgements at all, since such reasons are constituted by the very considerations that bear on the accuracy of emotions themselves. Emotions are not reasons or evidence for evaluative judgements, but instead they motivate the search for considerations that are. If we hold that sensory perceptual experiences *are* reasons or evidence for empirical judgements, then the epistemic analogy between emotions and reasons, and with it the perceptual model of emotion, collapses.

In Chapter 4, I continue the critical examination of the perceptual model, with a view to putting the epistemic credentials of emotions in a

more positive light. A central claim, in this chapter and the next, is that we can give due credit to emotion's positive epistemic influence only if we reject the perceptual model of emotion. I begin by claiming that even though emotions are not genuine reasons for evaluative judgements, they might nevertheless play a positive epistemic role in so far as they can be *proxies* or *substitutes* for such reasons. I then argue that the perceptual model, in thinking that the epistemic yield of emotions mirrors that of perceptions, actually obscures or understates the epistemic importance of emotion. This is because emotion has an epistemic role to play that goes beyond that played by perceptual experience, a role which (as I argue in Chapter 3) is strongly linked to the idea that emotion facilitates its own reappraisal through the capture of attention. I provide more details of this picture here, by maintaining that emotional experience can (thereby) promote evaluative *understanding*, and in doing so serves an epistemic need. This illustrates two things: first, why it is not permissible for us to rest content with the epistemic deliverances of our emotional experiences, in conditions where evaluative understanding is available; and second, why emotional experience has value that is not envisaged by common-sense thinking or philosophical orthodoxy. As such, criticism of the perceptual model, far from debunking the epistemic credentials of emotional experience, actually illuminates the significant epistemic value that emotional experience has.

The proposal that emotions can, through the capture of attention, promote evaluative understanding needs further development and support, however. For it seems obvious that emotional effects on attention can be negative as well as positive, in which case I need to specify or explain the *conditions* in which emotions play the positive and novel epistemic role that I have identified. In the final chapter I attempt to provide such a specification by appealing to the *virtuous* governance of attention. I argue that such governance is itself dependent upon understanding in a number of ways. I then argue that this account of virtue, emotion, and attention allows us to explain what the perceptual model cannot, namely the conditions in which we are *right* to rest content with what our emotional proxies tell us about value. As such, the account I develop in Chapter 5 explains the conditions in which emotions play the distinctive epistemic role that I identify in the previous chapter, *and* also allows us to capture the common-sense thought that in certain conditions at least, we are right to put our trust in the deliverances of

our emotions. My account therefore promises to deliver what the perceptual model cannot, namely a plausible way in which we can capture common-sense thinking about emotion's epistemic credentials. But it also illustrates how emotions have epistemic roles and value, in facilitating their own reassessment and in promoting evaluative understanding of our evaluative situation, that go a good deal beyond what common-sense and philosophical orthodoxy have supposed.

Let us proceed, then, to explore how we ought to understand the idea that emotions can make a positive contribution to our epistemic standing, and discover the conditions in which emotions can do so.

1

Towards the Perceptual Model

It is a staple of common-sense thinking about the mind that emotions have significant practical value. Emotions can, for instance, be responsible for setting up goals or ends, as when my shame over my behaviour at the Christmas party moves me to give up drinking. Emotions can enable us to stick to our plans, as when pride at giving up smoking strengthens my resolve so that I don't give in to temptation. Emotions are capable of moving us directly to do something that we have reason to do, as when disgust at the mouldy bread prevents me from eating it. And emotions often have strategic value, as when my angry disposition is responsible for me being left alone to work uninterrupted by colleagues. It is, of course, uncontroversial that emotions can have *disvalue* from the practical standpoint: we all know the negative effects that shame, pride, and anger can have. But this should not blind us to the obvious fact that emotion, when properly regulated and controlled, plays a vital role in our practical lives. Although emotions can lead us astray, it is doubtful whether we could achieve much if anything in the way of successful pursuit of our practical goals and ends without the capacity to experience (when appropriate) fear and anger, pride and joy, shame and guilt, curiosity and love, and the very many other emotional responses that characterize human lives.[1]

This fact suggests and supports another tenet of common-sense thinking, namely that emotions have significant *epistemic* value. Emotions can, that is,

[1] For a recent and influential account of the necessity of emotions for successful deliberation and decision, see Damasio, A. *Descartes' Error*, New York: G. B. Putnam's Sons (1994). Damasio's point isn't, of course, that emotion *guarantees* successful deliberation and decision, but that "certain aspects of the process of emotion and feeling are indispensable for rationality" (p. xxiii). Rational decision-making needs emotion, therefore, even though emotion is often not sufficient for the making of good decisions.

enhance our standing with respect to our beliefs and judgements. This would seem to follow directly from the idea that emotions have practical value, given that practical achievements require or depend upon suitable epistemic states. But it also enjoys support from everyday experience: emotions can make things salient for us, as when my nervousness draws my attention to how many people have come to see the talk, or my anger makes me notice just how loud my fellow passengers are when talking on their mobile phones. Emotions can inform us about value, as when my feeling of happiness on seeing her again tells me how lovable she is, or when my feelings of suspicion let me know that the salesman isn't to be trusted. Emotions can tell us things about ourselves, as when my pride upon hearing about English football hooligans rampaging through a European city informs me that I have dubious nationalistic commitments, or when my disappointment upon being overlooked for the role of Head of Department tells me that I really wanted the job. Again, it is uncontroversial to hold that emotions can and often do make us epistemically worse off: we all know the negative epistemic effects of jealousy, fear, and hope. Still, this should not blind us to the obvious fact that emotion, when properly regulated and controlled, plays a vital role in our epistemic lives. Although emotions can lead us astray epistemically, it is doubtful that we could attain the epistemic positions required for the successful pursuit of our goals, or have the same access to value, or attend to all of the things that we ought to attend to, in the absence of (appropriate) emotion.

The aim of this book is to investigate the idea that emotions enhance our epistemic standing, the ways in which emotions can do so, and the conditions that facilitate these outcomes. In particular, I want to investigate something that is both a central element of common-sense thinking about the epistemic value of emotion, and an issue of importance in moral epistemology, namely the thought that emotions have significant relations with our beliefs about or knowledge of *value*. Now the idea that emotions have epistemic importance is not new; there is, after all, a literature on emotions that have particular epistemic ends: these include "curiosity, intellectual courage, love of truth, wonder, meticulousness, excitement, humility".[2] But my investigation is not restricted to these particular

[2] Morton, A. 'Epistemic Emotions', in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*, Goldie, P. (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press (2010), p. 386. See also Stocker, M. 'Intellectual and other Nonstandard Emotions', in the same volume.

emotions; it has, instead, the goal of examining the epistemic value of emotions in general: that is, of central and paradigm cases of emotion such as fear and anger, joy and pride, jealousy and guilt, love and admiration. The story I will ultimately tell will be applicable to these central cases; but it will also be applicable to the kind of "epistemic" emotions just mentioned. On my view, then, many more emotions will turn out to be epistemic emotions than philosophers of emotion have traditionally thought.

In this chapter, my aim is to first explain how the above thoughts about the epistemic role and value of emotion fall out of a *platitude* about the nature of emotion, and as such are supported by reflection on a commonplace about what emotions are and what emotions do. I will then consider what emotions must be like in order that they can play these roles and have this value. I will argue that such consideration pushes us in the direction of the 'perceptual model' of emotion, so that the model emerges as a plausible attempt to capture our common-sense thinking about the epistemic role and value of emotional experience. This will motivate a detailed examination of the perceptual model in the chapters to follow. As we will see, this examination will reveal that emotion has epistemic value in important and hitherto unacknowledged ways. Let us turn then to one of the few uncontroversial claims we can make about emotions, which will prove as good a starting place as any for our investigation.

1.1 A platitude about emotion

It is a platitude that emotions constitute reactions to objects, events, and states of affairs that are potentially significant or important to us. Thus, as Annette Baier writes: "[w]e all accept the idea that emotions are reactions to matters of apparent importance to us: fear to danger, surprise to the unexpected, outrage to insult, disgust to what will make us sick, envy of the more favoured, gratitude for benefactors, hate for enemies, love for friends, and so on."[3] It is also a commonplace that what is potentially significant or important to us is a matter of what we care or are concerned about. Without such concern, it is puzzling how there could be an

[3] Baier, A., 'Feelings that Matter', in *Thinking about Feeling*, Solomon, R. (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press (2004), p. 200.

emotional response in the first place. Thus, it is because I love my wife that her welfare is especially significant for me, and this explains why I'm afraid when I hear that driving conditions on her evening commute are hazardous. It is because I'm concerned about my self-image that it is important what my colleagues think of me, which explains why I'm embarrassed at asking a stupid question during the seminar. And it is because I care about my community that the state of the local park matters to me, which explains why I get angry when people dump rubbish there. In the absence of these concerns, it is difficult to understand why I would feel fear, embarrassment, or anger in these cases.[4]

The idea that emotions are reactions to matters of apparent importance or significance, and grounded in our cares and concerns, suggests that emotions involve or motivate a *behavioural response* to such things. This is in line with our experience of emotion: fear often motivates a quick exit, anger a confrontation, disgust a recoil, surprise a leap in the air. And even if emotions don't necessarily motivate action, it is plausible to think that emotions typically involve the subject being *primed* to do something in response to the relevant object or event. I might not actually confront you when angry at your sarcastic remark, but my anger prepares me or readies me for a confrontation. So the practical response involved in an emotional reaction can be plausibly viewed as the mobilization of behavioural resources, which prepares the subject for action in response to the object or event, and which often or perhaps typically results in behaviour. Of course, as was clear from my earlier remarks, this platitude, and the idea that emotions have the role of preparing an appropriate behavioural response to important objects and events, does not imply that the behaviour that emotion motivates (or primes us to enact) will always be appropriate. Perhaps my behavioural response to your sarcasm is disproportionate, as when I punch you; perhaps my attempt to make a quick exit

[4] Cares and concerns are standardly understood not as emotional attitudes themselves, but as values or goals that underpin emotional attitudes. Thus, Gerald Clore writes: "[t]he idea is that one has a variety of general goals, standards, and attitudes. These are cognitive prerequisites for emotion because without these structures nothing matters to the person." 'Why Emotions Require Cognition', in *The Nature of Emotion*, Ekman, P. and Davidson, R. (eds), Oxford: Oxford University Press (1994), p. 188. And Richard Lazarus claims that "the bottom cognitive line that must prevail for an emotion to occur is that a goal is judged at stake in the encounter, which is called goal relevance. If there is no goal at stake, and none emerges from the encounter, there is no possibility of an emotion taking place." In Lazarus, R., 'Appraisal: The Long and the Short of it', in Ekman and Davidson (eds) (1994), p. 211.