

Ambiguity of the Emotional Element

by

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Not to be “emotional”: this seems, nowadays, to be the very condition of “objectivity,” whereas in reality objectivity is independent of the presence or absence of a sentimental element. No doubt, the word “emotional” is deservedly pejorative when emotion determines thought, or creates it as it were; that is, when emotion is the cause and not the consequence of thought; but this same word ought to have a neutral meaning when emotion simply accompanies or stresses a correct thought; that is, when it is the consequence of thought and not its cause. It is true that a purely passional opinion may accidentally coincide with reality, but this does not invalidate the *distinguo* we have just established.

The emotional element, when combined with a correct thought that stresses it “morally”, is far from being a mere luxury, otherwise “holy anger” would be a meaningless expression, and Christ would have been wrong in getting angry. This means that there are things which can and even ought to arouse indignation and contempt in the feeling soul—since the soul exists—just as there are—*a priori*—things which quite naturally arouse either respect, admiration or veneration; we say *a priori*, for one venerates the sacred before scorning its opposite. One loves good before hating evil, and this second attitude would not even be meaningful without the first.

Emotivity “perceives” and reveals those aspects of a good or an evil which mere logical definition could not manifest directly and concretely: these are the existential, subjective, psychological, moral and aesthetic aspects, either of truth or of error; of virtue or of vice. Let us picture a child who, through simple ignorance and thus through lack of a sense of proportions, utters a word which in fact is blasphemous; if his father thunders at him, the child “existentially” learns something which he would not have learned had the father limited himself to an abstract dissertation on the blasphemous nature of the word. The father’s fulmination concretely shows the child the extent of the offense and makes visible a dimension that otherwise would have remained abstract and inoperative; the same holds true for opposite cases *mutatis mutandis*: the

joy of the parents makes tangible for the child the value of his meritorious act or simply of virtue.

Contrary to experience and good sense, certain—if not all—practitioners of psychoanalysis consider that one must never punish a child, since they believe that punishment would “traumatize” him; what they forget is that a child who allows himself to be traumatized by a punishment that is just—and therefore proportioned to the fault—is already a monster. The essence of a normal child, in this connection, is respect for his parents and an instinct for what is good; a just punishment, far from wounding the child fundamentally, enlightens and frees him, by projecting him so to speak into the immanent awareness of the norm. Of course, there are cases in which the parents are wrong and thus the child has good reason for being traumatized; but the normal, or normally virtuous, child will not for that reason fall into a vindictive and sterile bitterness; quite the contrary: he will draw out the good from his experience, thanks to the intuition—proper to any normal person—that all adversity is metaphysically necessary, since no man can reach perfection without trials.

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Unquestionably, impassibility has its rights—to one degree or another—but it does not of itself prove the quality of objectivity; what it proves is either a legitimate intention to remain independent of some too human or too earthly *māyā*—an intention dictated by a spiritual state or a given opportuneness or simply by the proportions of things—or else, on the contrary, it proves an insolent ostentation, hence pride or stupidity. If natural dignity requires a certain impassibility—thereby manifesting the “motionless mover” and the sense of the sacred—it does not, however, exclude the natural impulses of the soul, as is shown by the lives of the sages and saints, and above all by everyday experience.

This is not to say that the emotion of a spiritual man is altogether like that of a profane man; the very term “holy anger” shows that a sanctifying element is present in a spiritual man which is lacking in a profane man, namely an underlying serenity which prolongs, so to speak, “the motionless mover,” and which stems—in Eckhartian terminology—from the “inner man,” whereas emotion as such is situated in the “outer man.” In the spiritual man there is continuity between his inward impassibility—resulting from consciousness of the Immutable—and his emotion: when a spiritual man becomes angry, it is so to speak on the basis of his contemplative impassibility and not in a manner contrary to it, whereas a profane man becomes totally enclosed in his anger, and this to the very extent that the anger is unjust or disproportionate; he “becomes enclosed,” that is, cut off from his consciousness of God, hence from his substance of immortality; and it is in this sense—and in this sense only—that theology considers anger to be a mortal sin, without however overlooking that there is a holy anger which reflects and prolongs the Divine Anger. Emotion is profane to the extent that it belongs to man alone, in which case the celestial Archetype cannot enter into play.

All this shows that in the emotion of a spiritual man, the “motionless mover” always remains present and accessible. As the emotion is linked to knowledge, the truth is never betrayed; the mind remains lucid, spontaneously and without pedantry.

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On the one hand, we rightly admire something because we understand it; on the other hand, we understand something admirable in admiring it, which is to say that our admiration widens and deepens our initial comprehension. Emotion or sentiment in this case is a mode of assimilation;¹ it is thus a subordinate mode of knowledge, which logically intervenes *a posteriori*, but which in fact may coincide with physical or intellectual perception. Thus nobleness of character, or virtue, is primarily a predisposition to quasi-existential adequation, parallel to knowledge properly so called; it is a manner of being objective, of being in conformity with reality. And, according to the case, this requires a certain abnegation; to be perfectly objective is to die a little, as we have written elsewhere.

Nowadays, one praises the “objectivity” of a man who calmly and coolly asserts that two and two make five, whereas the man who indignantly replies that two and two make four² is accused of subjectivity or of being emotional; one does not wish to admit that objectivity is adequation to the object and not a mode of expression; that the criterion of objectivity is reality and not the tone or the facial expression; nor above all an artificial, inhuman, and insolent placidity. Also, and above all, one forgets that emotion has its rights in the arsenal of human dialectic, and that these rights—since they are rights—could not be contrary to objectivity; even the most strictly objective thought—whether intellectual or rational—is accompanied by a psychic, hence subjective, factor, namely the sentiment of certitude; lacking which man would not be man. Now man is “made in the image of God”; this is the very reason for his being; to blame man for a natural and fundamental characteristic amounts to blaming not only the creative intention, but the very Nature of the Creator.

Anti-emotional and artificially impassive “objectivism” betrays its falseness by the following contradiction: those who make themselves the spokesmen of an imperturbable and impertinent rationality are at the same time those who proclaim free love—they have no taste for asceticism—or who flare up as soon as one speaks of politics—to mention some inconsistencies among others. This proves that their “objectivity” is no more than error and ostentation, and is related to pride and bitterness; from which comes the propensity to whitewash vile men—unless

1. Which brings us to the principle: *Credo ut intelligam*.

2. There is a popular French saying: “He gets angry, thus he is wrong,” which is always applied the wrong way round. In reality, this saying refers to people who become angry because, being wrong, they run short of arguments; anger thus makes up for the lack of proof and of right.

they happen to be political adversaries—and to blacken men of good will, calmly and without passion, at least without visible passion; this being just one example of that one-sided morality so characteristic of all kinds of hypocrisy. Be that as it may, one has to react against the widespread psychoanalytical opinion that indignation as well as enthusiasm always reveal prejudice or partiality; this simplistic opinion is related to another, no less stupid, error, namely that in an argument no one is ever altogether right, and that whoever becomes angry is always wrong.

It is important to be aware of the way words are used: when the terms “objectivity” and “subjectivity,” or “rationality” and “sentimentality” are juxtaposed—in the sense of a qualitative opposition—it goes without saying that the second term is pejorative, since it is supposed to denote a privation; but it is not pejorative in itself, for it refers a priori to a phenomenon which in itself is neutral, hence possibly qualitative. No doubt, the conventions of language do not allow us to treat “subjectivity” or “emotivity” as a quality, as they do with “objectivity” or “rationality”; on the contrary, when we wish to express the positive aspect of sentiment, these conventions oblige us to specify the content, thus to speak of “nobleness of character” or of “virtue,” virtue being the complement of “truth.” Sentiment in conformity to truth is by that very fact noble and virtuous; nobleness is an adequation, as we have said before; there is nothing arbitrary in it, contrary to the case of sentiments that are inadequate or disproportionate and thereby opposed to beauty of soul.

No doubt, the loftiest ideas, notably metaphysical truths, do not necessarily entail emotions properly so called; but they necessarily confer upon the soul of the knowing subject not only the sentiment of certitude, but also serenity, peace and joy;³ fundamentally, we would say that where there is Truth, there also is Love. Each *Deva* possesses its *Shakti*; in the human microcosm, the feeling soul is joined to the discerning intellect,⁴ as in the Divine Order Mercy is joined to Omniscience; and as, in the final analysis, Infinitude is consubstantial with the Absolute.

3. In Islamic language, knowledge in fact brings about a “dilation” (*inshirāh*).

4. “It is not good that the man should be alone,” says Genesis. And let us recall that there is no *jnāna* without an element of *bhakti*.