THE DIFFICULTY OF UNDERSTANDING

Mark Lovas

> Adam Smith, discussed the emotions of sympathy and empathy in his book *The theory of moral sentiments*, and thought they were the glue that holds society together. We are able to experience these emotions precisely because our emotions of love, of anger, of sadness, of fear are universal, based on inherited systems of the limbic system; we share them with each other ... A strong argument can be made that morality is based on such empathetic emotions.
>
> Keith Oatley, *Emotions: A Brief History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 97

If emotions such as sympathy are to play the role Oatley envisages for them, they cannot be condescending; they must be based on some real understanding. This is an essay about the difficulty of understanding, and, consequently, the difficulty of sympathy. So, it is a challenge to any philosopher who seeks to understand morality by assigning a strong role to the emotions.

In what sense would or might universal emotions ground ethics? If well educated or properly socialized individuals share the same emotional reactions to the same action, then there would be a common ground for discussion and argument about what should be done. One would also expect a degree of regularity in the actions people took in response to a given situation.

However, the thesis being broached should contain an important qualification. The *basic* ways of responding, or the *basic* emotional reactions are shared. One might ask,

doi:10.1017/S1477175610000357
Think 27, Vol. 10 (Spring 2011)

however, whether emotions do not nevertheless vary between individuals. Are not some people more readily excitable and others calmer? You and I don't have to love the same things or the same persons. Even if the fundamental ways in which we respond to a given situation are the same, where is the guarantee that we share positive and negative evaluations? What we like we move towards. What we hate we move away from. Surely some people love what I hate?

What if two people disagree about what is important, and their disagreement emerges unexpectedly? What if I lay primary stress on the autonomy of individuals, while you value intimacy? The linguist Anna Wierzbicka (*Cross-Cultural Pragmatics*, Second Edition; Mouton de Gruyter: London and Berlin 2003) has suggested that English speakers differ from Russian or Polish speakers on precisely these points. English speakers with our generic 'you' also favor a more generalized friendliness. For Polish-born Wierzbicka, English, lacking the two forms of 'you' common in other languages, fails to provide its speakers with a ready device to mark developing levels of intimacy.

I cannot do justice now to the details and complexities of Wierzbicka's analysis, but let us think, for a moment, about the contrast between the values of intimacy and autonomy. With the stress on autonomy comes a notion of private space, something which can be violated, something we all want and have a right to. Wierzbicka illustrates this difference via a contrast between styles of leave taking: a lengthy process with the effusive insistence that the guest stay, versus a more abrupt and factual departure. Respecting someone's autonomy, we accept their desire to leave. A culture which values intimacy creates lengthy partings with the formulaic, 'Do you have to go?', or the insistent 'Stay longer!'.

Wierzbicka's account raises many questions. By virtue of sharing a language, speakers share certain ways of negotiation in social space, pre-packaged chunks of behavior – how to begin or end conversations, how to come and go

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175610000357 Published online by Cambridge University Press

from a visit, and countless other ways of behaving. Yet we acquire these routines at an early age, in an unquestioning way. We might never become aware of them, or we may only become aware of them when we have moved to another country, or when speakers of another language come to visit us. This challenges our status as free people and self-knowers. An important part of how we relate to other people is acquired thoughtlessly, and without prior evaluation.

As an adult, once one becomes aware of a difference, one can think about it and evaluate it. Wierzbicka reports that at one point she consciously decided that she would not give up all of her Polish ways in favor of Anglo ones. In particular she could not join in the custom of small talk or the custom of asking 'How are you?' without expecting a real answer. So, according to the picture of freedom as choosing between options, in making that decision she became freer – even if she chose to continue what she had previously done without awareness. Apart from introducing the idea of freedom, one might ask: was she better for having learned that English-speakers differ from Poles? If one is going to stick with the customs of childhood anyway, what is the point of recognizing that other people have different habits?

Is it a kind of achievement to recognize that others – others, who, I suppose, one respects and may even have affection for – have had a different childhood, and thus have come to structure their worlds differently? But, is this something positive when one continues to behave in the same way? Can the mere difference in one's thinking itself be a sort of achievement? Perhaps, it undermines a certain naïve certainty. Perhaps it means a kind of tolerance.

But what of people who have not reached Wierzbicka's level of awareness? Are their choices less free? People today move around the world all the time. We are faced with cultural difference both because we move and because others have moved to our homelands.

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A generalized sympathy alone is not going to overcome the potential conflicts Wierzbicka is highlighting. On the contrary, other emotions come into play when two people with different routines of conversation or parting meet. The characteristic expression of a discovery here is the phrase 'How rude!'. So, from this point of view, emotions are not the basic level where we find human universals – unless we speak of a universal reaction of hostility or discomfort in the face of a different culture.

I may, on the whole, sympathize with a friend, but fail to see that in a particular case, we differ because I value privacy where he or she values intimacy. In my relations to the friend there will be a mixture of incomprehension and goodwill. How far can the goodwill carry us? The case of different styles of leave-taking involves habits which are largely not conscious. What of our conscious thoughts and judgments?

I need not know what another person is thinking in order to sympathize with them – though that can be a source of sympathy. However, it seems wrong to suppose that another person thinks a thought, a proposition with a determinate content, and that I grasp exactly the same proposition. For an example, let the thought contain a demonstrative: 'That was unfair.' I may know an action was unfair, and the immediacy with which I grasp its unfairness naturally leads us to say that I *saw* that it was unfair. Perhaps I see that the person who has experienced the unfairness equally well recognizes its unfairness. So there is a common point of reference for us: the unfairness of that act.

Sometimes our ability to feel sympathy is possible because we share a context and a judgment about what happened in it: we both saw the act and saw that it was unjust. Both of us being sufficiently sensitive to what was going on, there were no questions about whether we were responding to an indication of injustice which might, in another context, have been overridden. There is a kind of variability of the connections here which is a necessary

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feature of the very abstractness and undefinability of moral notions.

This variability might equally be spoken of in terms of infinity or creativity. Normally, I prefer to be kind, but, perhaps, with some friends or some students, if I am kind, then they will not understand the importance of some issue. So, on that occasion I must adopt a different posture, perhaps I must be stern. And my sternness will not be anger, though some might think it to be. My sternness might well be, with that particular person, on that particular occasion, just what is needed to do my duty by the person, and so to act fairly or justly.

And what happens if two thinkers fail to be present at the same time, in the same situation, and so fail to share a context? I must represent to you, my audience, sufficient details to allow you to come to see what I saw when I was in the context. That does not require that you come to the injustice of what was done through exactly the same path as I did. My words do not reproduce a second event of the same sort. They focus your mind upon salient features of the original event.

But is there mutual or common or universal salience? The features we care most about are abstract, hence can be reached from countless paths. Can I actually communicate to you what happened in the fullest sense so that you agree with me, so that your agreeing is substantial? You do not merely nod your head in order to move the conversation forward or because you are my friend, but because my account seems reasonable to you: you find it plausible that A did this to B, and you honestly believe that A's doing this was a bad thing.

Here is a sort of doubt: not everything that I am in the habit of finding salient need be salient for you. We can perfectly well say as a matter of theory: two virtuous individuals will both recognize that something is bad. However, this ignores questions of variety and diversity. I make an assumption that some might challenge. I assume an important part of moral evaluation involves our emotions.

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In deciding what to do, I try to imagine how my actions will impact upon other people. I don't wish to cause a friend needless embarrassment. I don't wish to offend someone. But there is a question of emotional indeterminacy. One and the same event can be classified differently. There are psychologists who claim that neither facial expressions nor physiological reactions correspond in a one-to-one fashion with emotion terms of ordinary English. This places them at odds with psychologists and the philosophers influenced by them who suppose that universality is to be found in physiology or facial expressions. It also raises the question, as the psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett has stressed, of why we are so sure that our emotion terms fit. ('Solving the Emotion Paradox', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 206, vol. 10, pp. 20–46.) Barrett herself introduces language to explain how we do it, but that solution itself will imply a degree of indeterminacy or miscommunication when people of different language backgrounds meet.

In the UK and the USA people appeal to the categories of privacy, private space, invasion of privacy. They can use these categories to explain what people do: 'She moved away from the man on the park bench because he was too close. He was invading her privacy.'

If the linguists Aneta Pavlenko ('Emotions and the body in Russian and English', *Pragmatics and Cognition*, vol. 10 (2002), pp. 207–241) and Anna Wierzbicka are to be believed, Poles and Russians don't appeal to privacy in explaining or justifying behavior. They place a higher value upon other sorts of relationships between people. Where Anglo-American culture places a stress upon the value of autonomy and independence, Polish culture prefers intimacy and cordiality. Perhaps the clearest expression of this difference is in the Anglo-American ideal of emotional neutrality, something which Pavlenko and Wierzbicka agree is lacking in Russian culture, which likes unrestrained public expressions of emotion.

If we grant that this difference is real, are we thereby committed to skepticism about the objectivity of morality?

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Do these views assume or imply moral relativism? The short answer is that the recognition of cultural differences is not identical with moral relativism. No one is saying that the Russians do what is 'right for them', and that Americans do what is 'right for them'. However, our linguists do claim that there are differences in what is valued, differences in the role of emotion, differences in the importance given to the open display of emotions.

It might help to consider an example inspired by the research of Aneta Pavlenko. Here are two different reasons:

(A) I want to be left alone with my emotions.
(B) I want to be left alone because I have a right to privacy.

With (A) goes a further thought:

(A1) People need sometimes to give in to their emotions.

With (B) goes a further thought:

(B1) Everyone has a right to privacy. There are some things we need to do away from the public eye.

Now, here is a question. What difference does it make if we are avoiding the public eye or simply giving in to our emotions? It is not simply one situation or one particular explanation that is different. The difference is a broad one influencing a host of thoughts and a host of individual actions and every relationship. The difference is a fundamental one.

Even more troublesome from the standpoint of universality, if our linguists are right, then one culture can lack a concept that another has. Poles and Russians and many others don't have the Anglo concept of privacy.

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We lack a Russian concept which Pavlenko attempts to capture with the phrase 'soul space'. (However, we shouldn't think that 'soul space' is identical with 'privacy'. They just happen to play a similar role as a reason in the example above.)

A quick response is to say that all such complex concepts can be de-composed into simple units, and that such units are universal, and so comprehensible to us. The problem however is Humpty Dumpty's: all the king's horses and all the king's men cannot put the concept back together again once we've taken it apart.

The Anglo perception is not of a world with a special place for exemption from the public view. It is the default setting in our Anglo conceptual scheme. To add it on as an extra is a distortion.

What is at issue here? Is it a question of privileging one's own way of viewing things? As if I must be right when I say I feel *this* way? That is not the issue. I am not claiming that particular individuals have error-free access to their own emotions and thoughts. Nor am I claiming that if a given language contains certain categories that those categories must correspond to a deep, metaphysical reality. On the contrary, it seems clear from history that people can have false categories – e.g., 'witch' or 'phlogiston'.

The point is that speakers of different languages can differ about what is important – and that the difference might be invisible. Had Wierzbicka never moved to Australia and started to ask questions about why people reacted to her as they did, she would never have recognized her habits.

Wierzbicka claims that Polish speakers value a certain intimacy, whereas English speakers value non-interference. This is a real difference, and if we attempt to parse Polish behavior by saying it is just like what we Anglo-Americans do/feel, only more so, we distort both what Polish speakers think and feel, and we miss a chance to notice that they really do live different lives. Culture makes a difference to how people live.

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There is as well a sort of compromise position: With respect to these matters, you always win something and lose something. Or, there are always opportunity costs. Maybe that is illusory. Just maybe, when we do the right thing, there really was no other possibility – and no real possibility was missed. That is, in fact, I think a consequence of taking seriously the idea that there are moral facts and that there is moral knowledge. At a less grandiose and abstract level, maybe the Poles and Russians have noticed something that English-speakers tend to miss. Maybe they've developed a way of relating that is better. How would one know?

Perhaps there is a sort of subconscious argument here: If doing the right thing means not missing a possibility, and if I've never thought of a world without privacy, then I've missed a possibility, and maybe, just maybe I've been in some way wrong? But surely I couldn't be wrong about *that*!

The question of simple ideas is a question of understanding. Can I understand the other culture? I wanted to insist that simple paraphrases fail to capture the original thought. If the Japanese have a special way of relating to intimates and have given it a name, we cannot understand it simply by saying that it is like our friendship only more so. Why do I insist on keeping things together? I hinted at my reason above: it runs the risk of a sort of emotional imperialism or condescension. 'Oh it's just like our desire for intimacy, but more intense.' But, no, it's not as if there were some switch that was moved forms setting '8' to setting '12'. That is a misrepresentation of the difference. Perhaps an analogy can serve: contemporary dance is not simply classical ballet with looser rules about where the arms, shoulders, and torso can be located; it is a different style of dance, with different expressive possibilities.

Earlier we saw that Keith Oatley claimed emotions such as sympathy are central to morality. Oatley, a psychologist and novelist, has been inspired by the novelist George

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Eliot. Now, I would like to shift gears and consider just a bit of what George Eliot has to say about the emotions.

George Eliot wrote of the importance of living a life '... vivid and intense enough to have created a wide fellow-feeling with all that is human.' (*The Mill on the Floss*, Oxford UP: Oxford and New York; 1860/1996, p. 498.) This does not seem to be the Anglo view that our linguists find among Americans and English. Eliot is saying that if we have had an intense and vivid emotional life we become capable of expanded sympathy. In fact, one of the central tragedies of *The Mill on the Floss* is Tom's incapacity to share the feelings of his sister, Maggie.

And now we are near a quite pretty suggestion. Earlier I seemed to be skeptical about the universality of emotion because I accepted the claim that different cultures might place different values on emotions or value different emotions, and that this difference might be reflected in language. Yet, now we see that a difference in language is not needed to produce an emotional and moral gap, a failure of human understanding.

Tom lacks the emotional capacities needed to understand his sister. And, to make the point more dramatic, we might say: it's not just the psychopath who fails to feel what one would need to in order to act rightly. Tom is a character who satisfies certain social standards of respectability and is praised by his community, but he is often cruel to his sister. Moreover, it is Maggie's moral and emotional depth which makes her a target of community criticism. Like Tom, Maggie's community is, for the most part, simply incapable of accepting the complexity of her character. Toward the novel's end, after hearing Maggie's story, Dr. Kenn advises her,

> The people who are the most incapable of a conscientious struggle such as yours, are precisely those who are likely to shrink from you; because they will not believe in your struggle. (*The Mill on the* Floss, p. 496)

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Here in her narrator's voice, Eliot describes how Maggie responds to Tom's words:

> There was a terrible cutting truth in Tom's words – that hard rind of truth which is discerned by unimaginative, unsympathetic minds. (p. 393)

And here on the same page are Maggie's thoughts about Tom:

> . . . she said inwardly that he was narrow and unjust, that he was below feeling those mental needs which were often the source of the wrong-doing or absurdity that made her life a planless riddle to him.

If we return to my earlier example, where two people can agree that something is unfair, the very schematic account I proposed there seems hollow. Maggie and her brother Tom might well agree that many things were wrong or bad, yet the grounds of their judgments would be different. For Tom there is the powerful force of public reputation. For Maggie there is always something like a primary ground of emotional sympathy. Maggie and Tom's father goes bankrupt. For Tom this brings shame. For Maggie, there are fewer thoughts about how this will influence her life than there is sympathy for her father.

So too, if we recall Wierzbicka's account of the Anglo mind, we can see Tom as the sort of person who will care about privacy in a formal way, while Maggie will be in need of a space where she can experience her emotions. That suggestion turns things around once more; even two people who share the same language and have shared childhood can be emotionally separated. Maggie's emotional life looks more Russian than Anglo-American. Her misfortune is that her brother is closer to Wierzbicka's portrait of an Anglo.

Can we draw any conclusions? No language or culture, and, indeed, one might add (though we have not discussed

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this point) not even the most creative and competent of teachers or mentors can give us some form of automatic and privileged insight. Your language may require you to notice some things and not others. But making a life for one's self that is just and happy is so complicated a process that no matter what one's initial endowment, there will be dangerous decision-points where the initial advantages come to seem quite trivial.

In Maggie's case, she was condemned by people who, like her brother Tom, lacked imagination and sympathy. To see Maggie's tragedy as solely or primarily due to some excess in her character is to ignore the role played by the community. Eliot knew well the power of community judgment:

> Sane people did what their neighbors did, so that if any lunatics were at large, one might know and avoid them. (*Middlemarch* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1871/1996) p. 9)

We have touched on the ways in which language and culture can create difficulties or complications which hinder understanding. I have also suggested that people who share a culture and early childhood experiences may yet differ in the emotions they feel in ways that matter for moral judgment. Maggie is closer to moral reality than Tom. Her greater sensitivity brings with it a perception of what is important which Tom lacks.

Perhaps, too, we can derive another moral. If emotions matter to morality, it is not merely because they are universal and serve as a kind of foundation. There is as well a question of the depth or quality of emotion. George Eliot thought that art must enlarge one's capacity for sympathy, or it would be worthless.

Mother Nature may have endowed us with the emotions which make morality possible, but their final destiny lies in cultural institutions which can develop those energetic creatures in diverse directions. That insight can already be

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found in Plato. What is new in the contemporary thinkers I have mentioned is an appreciation for the surprising granularity of the social or cultural. Society influences the individual not merely at the level of macro-institutions such as schools and political systems, but equally at the micro level of parting rituals and small talk.

I would like to thank Aneta Pavlenko for email discussions about her research; she has reservations about the way I have interpreted it.

Mark Lovas is an Independent Philosopher, formerly Visiting Assistant Professor at University of Toledo (Ohio), and a member of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Institute of Philosophy.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175610000357 Published online by Cambridge University Press