

Rethinking Affects: Towards an Analogical Understanding of Emotions

Fernando Murillo

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

In 1939, Jean Paul Sartre presented a compelling case for the need for a specifically phenomenological study of emotion, as opposed to a psychological/empirical account of particular emotions.¹ This call, which required a close alignment to the phenomenological tradition as established by Husserl and extended by Heidegger, contained an important warning to keep in mind in phenomenological research: to gather and discuss “facts” and “experiences” of emotions is to prefer the accidental over the essential. Phenomenology, on the contrary, relying on the reduction, entails studying affectivity in terms of its existential significance, and inquiring into the structures of the conditions for the appearance of emotion in the sphere of consciousness.

Taking as a starting point Sartre’s emphasis on the significance of emotion over and against facts of behaviours, in this paper I set out to interrogate the significance of the phenomenality of emotion for our process of formation (*Bildung*) by examining the account of emotion in St. Augustine’s *Confessions* (particularly in book 10) in juxtaposition with that of René Descartes in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

Through this examination, I want to propose two main points. The first is that, as a transcendental phenomenon, emotion functions as a mediator between sense perception and rationality, between *Umwelt* and *Innenwelt*, world and self. In its mediating function, emotion appears as a basic condition for the most central aspect of *Bildung*: the formation of subjectivity. Closely related to this regulatory notion, the second point is

that emotion can be further understood as an analogical phenomenon. Inspired in the theological notion of *analogia entis* (the idea that access to revelation of the transcendental comes from an engagement with the things themselves in the world—that is, by analogy), the paper will attempt to delineate a preliminary proposition for the intelligibility of emotion in its formative function as something that, in giving itself, announces and reveals particular aspects about ourselves and the way the world appears to us.

Engaging in this work, one quickly finds that the topic is far from unproblematic. Views on what emotions are and what status they are given have been the theme of passionate disagreements.

In a paper given at the meeting of the Aristotelian Society in 1976, Lois Arnaud reminded his audience that “from the time of the Enlightenment in Germany, the soul was divided into three parts: thinking, willing, and feeling. This third region of the psyche, like Plato’s third class of men, was inferior.”² He further clarifies the status given to feelings: “this bag of feelings was always in opposition to thinking.”³ In contrast to this position that separates feeling from thinking, we know that this was not always the case. As we see in the *Rhetoric* of Aristotle, for example, emotion appears as a constitutive element of the triad of the art of persuasion (i.e., logic, character, emotions). The persuasive effect in oratory is unattainable without recourse to some kind of emotional affectation. “Persuasion may come through the hearers,” Aristotle points out “when the speech stirs their emotions.”⁴ The relation of emotions to thinking is made clear when Aristotle further explains, “Our judgments when we are pleased and friendly are not the same as when we are pained and hostile.”⁵

Facing such opposing views on the matter, one cannot but wonder how it was that the decoupling of emotion and reason became such a normalized attitude in modernity.⁶ In approaching the problem, a first clearing to be done is that the separation of reason and emotion (along with everything that goes with it, including embodiment) is all too often pinned on the Cartesian *ego cogito*. Such is a hasty and simplistic prejudice. On a closer examination of the

passages often partially quoted of the *Mediations on First Philosophy*, one finds that the accusation does not stand. In Meditation III we read: “I am a thing that thinks, that is to say, that doubts, affirms, denies, that knows a few things, that is ignorant of many [that loves, that hates], that wills, that desires, that also imagines and perceives.”⁷⁷ In the original text in Latin, this last term “perceives” is actually “*sentiens*,” as in to feel. Feeling, along with thinking, doubting, imagining, and so on, are all part of the Cartesian “I am.” Even though the unity of the sensual, the bodily, and the rational in the constitution of the person is thus established, the essence of the phenomenon of emotion as such and its relation to intellect remains unclear.

The problem has not remained untouched. It is not difficult to come across approaches to therapy and education that attempt to decipher or rather use emotions. One example is the contemporary rise of the discourse of neuroscience and its possibilities for classroom manipulation. However, as an approach that reduces the phenomenon to a mere physical-psychical synthesis, ignoring its spiritual and transcendental dimension, one can be sure that such explanation is inadequate for an understanding of the phenomenality of emotions and must therefore be ruled out. In contrast, from the descriptive stance of phenomenology, the problem of emotions is necessarily approached in terms of the essence that animates their appearance rather than gathering facts about the particular accidental forms of their expressions.

AN ANALOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF EMOTION

From classic literature on *Bildung*, we are familiar with the distinction between interiority and the external world, and the dialectical relation that must exist between the two for the process of formation to take place. Wilhelm von Humboldt makes it clear when he asserts that *Bildung* “can be fulfilled only by the linking of the self to the world to achieve the most general, most animated, and most unrestrained interplay,”⁷⁸ an interplay through which both self and world transform each other.

A question one might ask is how that interplay is experienced existen-

tially. Furthermore, one wonders if there might exist something in-between the exteriority of sense perception and the interiority of rational cogitations that modulate the transitions between the two, defining the particular mode in which the encounter is experienced, or rather, felt. After all, we can usually define our engagements with the world and with others in terms of varying degrees of pleasure and displeasure. The question for what might be in-between begs for an answer, particularly when the lines of demarcation between sensing and thinking seem to be blurred. In Meditation II, Descartes affirms that “having sensations... understood in this precise sense, is nothing other than thinking.”⁹ Is feeling simply a particular way of thinking? The notion seems to find confirmation in St. Augustine’s *Confessions* when, in Book 10 section XIV, he declares that “desire, joy, fear, and sadness are four movements of the mind.”¹⁰

Faced with such evidence, one must first elucidate whether it is actually the case that affects are indistinguishable from mind or reason. In other words, do they have existence in themselves? Then, one must be able to determine what is the nature (essence) and function of affects in relation to thinking. In section VI of Book 10 of the *Confessions*, we find evidence of Augustine establishing a distinction, one which he quickly qualifies with a normative evaluation: “Clearly there is a body and a soul in me, one exterior, one interior... but the interior part is better.”¹¹ The evaluation of interiority as better is given in that it can interrogate, judge, and keep in check the messages delivered from the outside world through bodily senses.

We encounter once again an inside/outside distinction towards the end of Book 10, when Augustine introduces an important new element he refers to as the “emotions of my spirit.”¹² In section XXXIII, Augustine shows that emotions are stirred from the outside, and they have a very particular role: to aid reason. This notion has an antecedent in Aristotle. In Book II of the *Rhetoric* he defines emotion as “all those affections which cause men to change their opinion in regard to their judgments.”¹³ Described as an entity distinct from the senses of the outside and from the judgments of reason, emotion appears then with an ontological affirmation of its being: it exists. In existing, emotions must be made to accommodate to an order in relation to other things. In the

same way in which a carriage must be placed after the horses, emotions must follow reason and not the other way around. When the reverse order happens, they become problematic. Augustine warns that the emotional charge of the senses “does not accompany the reason as following after in its proper order, but having been admitted to aid the reason, strives to run before and take the lead. In this matter I sin.”¹⁴

If subjectivity is in fact formed in a process of synthesis (outside/inside, *Umwelt/Innenwelt*, self/world), I claim that such synthesis operates in and through the analogic mediation of the affects. What we gather from the accounts seen so far is that the transit between body and mind, senses and reason, cannot in and of itself contain the complexity and the lasting impressions that such dialectic leaves on the self. The fact that we experience enjoyment or repulsion to what we encounter in the world shows that there is a third element that mediates the relation self-world. It is the affects. Seen as such, the linking of the self to the world is then not a dialectic as it first seems, but rather a trinitarian phenomenon.

This third element appears in the description with which Augustine speaks of the affective imprint that the senses leave on the mind. In Book 10, Section XXXIV we read: “Light ... entices me as it flows before my sight in all its variousness ... it works its way into me with such power that if it is suddenly withdrawn ... and it is absent too long, it saddens my mind.”¹⁵ The relation of the outside of the senses with the inside of the mind is mediated by a phenomenon that, in this case, entices and saddens: the phenomenon of the affect. Our subsequent encounters with objects or situations perceived as similar to previous ones will be treated by analogy according to the predominant affect with which we first encountered them. Anyone who presently feels uncomfortable with numbers, for example, can likely trace such discomfort or sense of inadequacy back to an early form of suffering under a math teacher in primary school who lacked a sense of humanistic vocation.

But beyond aspects pertaining to learning, the analogic function of affects has other and perhaps more important implications for the process of subjective formation, as they relate to transcendence, desire, and love. In the letter of dedication with which Descartes first presented his *Meditations*, he

makes a literal reference to the book of Romans, Chapter 1, a key passage that provides the foundation for the doctrine of *analogia entis*—the notion that we gain access to the transcendent by paying attention to the things themselves. The meditations are thus framed in an ontological and metaphysical inquiry, an elucidation of what Descartes calls the “mysterious I.” When Augustine declares that interiority is better than exteriority, he invokes the same text from Romans to affirm the responsibility that we have in interrogating and judging inwardly the information from the senses, since “man... should be able clearly to see the invisible things of God understood by things which are made.”¹⁶ In this task of discerning what lies both within us and outside ourselves, emotions play the role of announcing something about the world and also about ourselves. Emotions, like symptoms, demand recognition, and can thus be interrogated about consciousness, analyzing our own being-in-the-world.

Here lies the potential for the phenomenologizing of emotions understood in their analogic essence. In their manifestation, they give themselves as truth about the state of our inner selves in relation to the world, showing aspects that reason does not yet know. In appearing as a pre-rational phenomenon, emotions can have a pedagogical role in making manifest to reason that which produces suffering, resistance, enjoyment, and love.

It is in this light that we can begin to appreciate that the analogic impressions that emotions establish in the self can be an aid to reason. At the same time, however, they can also be an impediment and a resistance that precludes our own subjective reconstruction and perfection. This is what Augustine experienced when, in his effort to focus on hearing the voice of Truth, he confesses that he could “scarcely hear it for the tumult of my unquieted passions.”¹⁷ The Augustinian notions of order and measure apply here to engagement with the affects. As Scripture warns, “the heart is deceitful above all things,”¹⁸ something that Descartes also registered in Meditation I, when he verified that the senses are deceptive.

Our capacity for sound judgment and for responsible decision-making cannot be taken for granted when we are overconfident with joy, or when we feel we are at the end of our rope. Anyone who has experienced having a

broken heart can attest how easily reason gets overwhelmed. That is why we need *Bildung*, the discipline of learning academic knowledge *and* the discipline of regulation of the affects, so that we can discern the invisible movements of interiority and ascend to a refinement of character that is enabled to, above all judgment, love.

METHODICAL IMPLICATIONS: A RETURN TO LOVE

The phenomenon of emotion reveals the inner state of our being, the stance from which we engage or disengage with the world, the other, and with ourselves. The movement of emotion through which, in given situations, we experience affects associated with pleasure or displeasure points to inner dispositions that are often unconscious or unknown, and does not relate to the situations or objects that supposedly produced them. Emotion is the royal road to the repressed. In this sense, as an analogic phenomenon, emotion is always a manifestation of something else. Like a symptom, it points to a meaning that, taking on the form of a sign, wants to be recognized. This is why, returning to Sartre's warning, when it comes to the study of emotion *qua* phenomenon, it is a mistake to remain content with a compendium of facts or definitions about different types of emotions and the way we perceive or experience them. A phenomenological understanding of emotion requires a descriptive engagement with the universality of the phenomenon as such. Such engagement, however, is demanding and potentially uncomfortable and even painful. The universal aspects of emotion, such as desire, the erotic, aggressivity, and suffering, eventually place me right in front of a reality that is my own. Facing such reality demands openness to the potential consequence of a hermeneutic stance, or what Jean-Luc Marion refers to as a "*conversion* of one intentionality into another."¹⁹ Having the openness, indeed the courage, to take this risk of formation and change is an act of love.

Out of all possible affects, the only one that is given primacy in Scripture is love. As it is written in the book of Songs, "stronger than death is love."²⁰ This is perhaps not too surprising, considering that love is the one affect that,

transforming the self, shows a true mark of transcendence into perfection and the absolute realm of spirit. In the process of formation of subjectivity to which *Bildung* thrusts us—a process that inevitably entails moments of devastation, heartbreak, and subjective shattering—it is the eros of love and its affects that bring our pieces back together, reconciling us with ourselves and with the other.

It is in this radical understanding of love and its relation to reason that one can say, along with Augustine, that after all is said and done in our process of education, “*Nemo est qui non amet*”²¹—without love, one is nothing. Without the erotic power of the emotion of love there is no self, and no education. Love is the affect that edifies, that endures all, that hopes, that is patient, that remains perseverant. It is, in synthesis, the emotion that makes *Bildung* possible in the first and last place.

1 Jean Paul Sartre, *A Sketch for a Theory of Emotions* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

2 Louis Arnaud, “Feeling, Thinking, Knowing,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 77, no. 1 (1977), 165.

3 Ibid.

4 Aristotle, *The Rhetoric and the Poetics* (New York: Modern Library, 1984), 25.

5 Ibid.

6 Consider here the value that positivistic science gives to the elimination of any trace of “subjectivity” in data, or the sheer absence of any mention of emotional aspects in international educational policy and standards, such as those from the World Bank.

7 René Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 12.

8 Wilhelm von Humboldt, “Theory of Bildung,” in *Teaching as a Reflective Practice: the German Didaktik Tradition*, eds. Ian Westbury, Stefan Hopmann, and Kurt Riquarts (New York: Routledge, 2015), 58.

9 René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 21.

10 Augustine, *Confessions* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006), 201.

11 Ibid., 194.

12 Ibid., 216.

13 Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric* (London: William Heinemann, 1926), 173.

14 Augustine, *Confessions*, 216.

15 Ibid., 218.

16 Ibid., 194.

17 Ibid., 266.

18 Jeremiah, 17:9 (NIV).

- 19 Jean Luc Marion, *Givenness and Revelation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 42.
- 20 Song of Songs, 8:6 (KJV).
- 21 Jean Luc Marion, *In the Self's Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine* (California: Stanford University Press, 2012), 96.