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Book review:

Adam MORTON 2013

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## Book Review

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Adam MORTON (2013)  
Emotion and Imagination.  
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The social scientific inquiry into emotions has been rapidly expanding the last two decades. It follows on the cultural turn in social sciences (Kleres, 2009) and reintroduces a much needed awareness of the presence and role of emotions in social life. Canadian philosopher Adam Morton's book, *Emotion and Imagination* (Polity Press 2013), contributes to this development with theoretical explorations on the relations between making sense of the other's actions, emotion and imagination. This is paired with an interest in the moral aspect of emotions, as well as in how we interpret and understand evil or vile acts. Coming from the sociological field of research with an inclination towards empirical applications and developments of substantial theory, philosophical 'pondering' on matters of interest to social sciences do inspire but also tire me. Most tiring is the common lack of communication between the different disciplines, such as between the philosophy of emotions and the sociology of emotions. (The former tends to cross-bread with the psychology of emotions, but neither philosophy nor psychology seems to be aware of the sociological findings.) Nevertheless, *Emotion and Imagination* is an interesting read, and here I will begin with a short overview highlighting some interesting points, and then continue with a selection of themes that in my view contribute to the larger social scientific field of research and theory on emotions.

The book is divided in three parts. Part 1 discusses 'the range of emotions' and introduces the role of imagination to emotion; the relationship between emotion and thought, and categories of emotions. These will be discussed in more in detail below. Part 2, Imagining vile emotions, reflects on how we imagine others' emotions and thereby their motives for action, how we can do this accurately (or not). Empathy and sympathy are also discussed here as well as the 'barrier' that prevents the imagination of other's emotions to spill over into our selves – this barrier saves us from 'being' the other in terms of actually feeling what they feel and acting as they do. This is important for imagining and understanding vile acts as well as others' misery, or terror. In part 3 Morton introduces the concept 'memotions' which refers to 'perspective-formed moral

emotions'. Here he differentiates between what we may also call mature and immature emotional states and indicates that one may choose what emotion to feel towards a given object and that some such choices correspond to more complex moral emotions than others. Shame is for instance a more complex emotion than disgust, which is 'simple', because shame embraces multiple (at least two) perspectives. Morton suggests that choosing the more complex emotion is better, not only for the outcome in the actual situation at hand, but also for the wellbeing of the feeling subject in a long-term perspective; '...one might feel amusement rather than outrage at naughty children, and severity rather than amusement at sexist jokes. These might be good for us, in that we might be generally better off, happier, and less inclined to regret' (p. 121). The idea that we regulate, work on or 'manage' our emotions is broadly accepted in the literature (see for instance the seminal work by Hochschild, 1983), and with this, in the sociological tradition so called 'interactional approach' (ibid), follows that emotions are culturally shaped and created and thus continually constructed and learnt through upbringing and socialization. Morton himself sometimes seems to side with this *partly* constructivist perspective since he often underlines the importance of concepts, i.e. language, to grasp and imagine others' emotions. Without a word for sadness, for instance, it would be difficult to conceptualize what sadness is and means. However, this also means that there may be more to our emotional life than the words we have to understand it – we may feel things that we have no words for, or that we struggle to understand through the constraints of the vocabulary available to us.

On the other hand, Morton's argument that choosing more complex emotional states might be good for us also tinges on ethnocentric as well as class-centric essentialism. Some scholars suggest that emotional reflexivity in the West is characteristic of the middle classes who carry most of the capitalist consumer culture, both as service workers/producers, and as consumers (e.g. Stearns, 1994). Others (e.g. Collins, 1990) discuss the possibility of a more reflexive emotional culture within cosmopolitan groups, while 'local' traditional groups are more prone to what Morton calls simple emotions. Others again are fundamentally critical of the contemporary general increase in – and rising complexity of – cultural emotional reflexivity (Mestrovic, 1997). I completely agree with Morton's underlying assumption that human beings regulate and shape their emotions, and that emotions are experienced in complex bundles or processes making it possible to 'choose' which emotion/s to pick up and follow, *and* that we are likely, with training, to get better and better at doing this in terms of contingent social behavior. But we should be careful in suggesting that some emotions are *à priori* morally more advanced or desirable than others, or that emotional maturity necessarily entails more tempered and controlled emotional displays. All such classifications and beliefs emerge from specific contexts situated in a specific time and place. Moreover, to the extent that classifications belong to dominant discourses, they tend to reproduce and support existing power hierarchies and group specific privileges. It is for instance no coincidence that female anger was and is still in some contexts, considered ugly, unfeminine, and if not ridiculed, associated with hatred of all men (Hercus, 1999; Holmes, 2004; Shields, 2002).

Part 4 'Families of emotions' discusses groups of related emotion words, most notably shame-guilt-regret-remorse; pride-smugness, and humour.

Morton argues throughout the book that vile emotions and acts interest us more and consequently we also have more words, at least in the English vocabulary, for 'negative' emotions and emotional states than for 'positive' ones. His attempt to deconstruct *pride* in this vein is promising, separating an all too compiled and under-nuanced emotional process into *self-regard* (one imagines one's own society praising one for a particular act or quality, p. 185) and *self-respect* which he understands as more insightful of the self in relation to others – for instance the feeling that one has avoided to harm others. As Morton argues, the opposite of self-regard would then be shame. Following the widely adopted definition of shame as the feeling that I have violated a norm and is therefore unworthy of the status I claim in relation to others (e.g. Barbalet, 1998; Scheff, 1990) this juxtaposition is clarifying of the nature of self-regard. The opposite of self-respect Morton continues would be guilt and remorse. Guilt according to sociological literature is the emotion that signals the abuse or misuse of power over another (e.g. Kemper, 2006) , so again this coupling of concepts is clarifying in my view. Morton however does not end here but continues to say that shame too can be the reverse of self-respect, if the shame is 'unlinked from the attitudes of actual people' (p.187). This shame would then be 'an abstract, or timeless one' (ibid). As a sociologist I have difficulties following this argument; firstly because shame is always and per definition linked to the attitudes of others, whether these are specific or generalized others (and if they are generalized the imagined negative attitude nevertheless builds on experiences from interactions with specific significant others), and secondly because, I argue, it is in the nature of emotions, and in particular of those encompassing multiple perspectives, to originate in real or imagined interactions with others. This is but one example of arguments that to the sociological mind beg the question of contextualization. After this brief overview, let us look closer at some interesting themes and potential contributions to the social scientific theory of emotions.

## **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMOTION, IMAGINATION AND ACTION**

One of the most interesting points of Morton concerns the relation between imagination and emotion, although his reasoning here is unnecessarily opaque and sometimes contradictive. Imagination according to Morton is the production of mental representations of the environment, as well as possible actions given these representations. *Emotion*, on the other hand, shapes imagination and links imagined representations to action. Out of multiple representations we 'choose' a course of action, often without conscious thought, but guided by emotion. What then, is emotion?

*An emotion is a state which generates a range of representations on a given theme, usually with respect to particular objects. These include representations of actions towards the objects, representations of situations that might develop, and representations of results that might be produced. It is crucial that the representations concern both facts and actions. Emotions are like little belief-desire packages, with linked effects on how one interprets the environment and how one acts*

*towards it. This is why a single emotion can serve as short-cut version of a complex system of motives. (p.14)*

An emotion thus generates imagination/representations, but an emotion can also be representations. On page 61, Morton writes: 'A pattern of representations of facts and actions, a selective emphasis on things perceived and actions considered... that's an emotion.' So although imagination and emotion both are, and are about, representations of the world and how to act towards it, the imagining function can analytically be separated from the emoting, which function it is to help select and focus on particular streams of representation. Emotions 'filter information and options by making some more salient than others' (p.16) and 'link representations of real situations to representations of various possibilities arising from them' (ibid). Though similar and intrinsically entangled, emotion *orientates* imagination/representations.

This orientating function of emotion, making it work as a replacement for logic calculation and rational choice, is well described in the sociological literature by for instance Randall Collins (1993). Morton however highlights imagination and its role in the relation between emotion and action, which is intuitively obvious and theoretically interesting. On the other hand, by saying that imagination does not have to be a conscious act of imagining with accompanying mental images, he also collapses the distinction between emotion and imagination.

## **EMOTION CATEGORIES**

In the social scientific literature on emotions there are multiple and sometimes contradictive attempts to create conceptual clarity. Given that our empirical material consists of human beings who interpret the world around them, such attempts may often appear forced and highly theoretical, and when empirically applied they force the data even more. Therefore, although we need to have clear study-specific definitions that allow us to understand how key concepts, such as 'emotion' are operationalized in the collection of data and analysis, we should be skeptical in the face of attempts to generalize such definitions and assume that they can be 'found' in the world. There is for instance not much differentiation, in the everyday use of the words, between emotion and feeling, although some scholars denote 'sensation' when saying feeling (e.g. Fineman, 2000), while emotion is reserved for the more full-fledged social construct including evaluation, sensation, display rules and feeling word (e.g. Thoits, 1989). Such a distinction may work analytically in spite of not making much sense to our study objects. To the extent that we do try to work with general categories emerging from theory and data, it seems reasonable that these resonate somehow across the field of social scientific research. In this respect, Morton does not problematize the word feeling but appears to use it as synonymous with sensation, while he does insist on a distinction between emotion and mood that contradicts at least sociological literature on the topic. While a *mood* in the sociological (quite often empirical) literature is associated with long-term and lingering (Bloch, 2002) or background emotions (Barbalet, 1998), Morton claims that it is 'typically passing' (p.46). But he follows the literature in claiming that moods are abstract feeling states with no clear objects, while emotions are always related to a particular object and often short-term (but can be long-term). Furthermore, Morton introduces 'sentiment'

in his list of categories as denoting 'a judgement-linked long-term emotion, such as disapproval' (p.45). Passion he understands as an impulsive and obtrusive emotional state (for instance being overtaken by anger, which does not mean that anger is a passion, as it can also be a sentiment). As is the case with 'feeling' Morton does not explicitly include 'attitude' in his list, but the way this word is frequently used in the text it seems to denote something similar to sentiment. My reading here may be colored by my own thinking on the subject influenced by Jack Barbalet's (1998) theory of emotions. According to Barbalet, emotion is ever present and guiding our action but we are quite often unaware of it. A background emotion tends to go unnoticed yet orientate action (as all emotion does). A background emotion can thus be understood with Morton's categories as a mood, a sentiment (and an attitude). But more importantly, according to Barbalet, a passion can also be a background emotion, a quiet but intensely burning passion for rational thinking, for instance.

Following Morton, an emotion can take the form of sentiment or passion (anger for instance as we saw above), and both emotions and moods exert pressure on our thoughts and actions. The distinction between mood and emotion sheds some light on how emotional states shape imagination, thought and action. For example if one is in a fearful mood one is likely to be easily scared (an emotion) and if one is scared one is likely to see the environment as threatening. On the other hand, different emotions can be present simultaneously and exert pressure in opposite directions. The example Morton gives here is when a person negotiates the fear of jumping from the diving tower against the humiliation of walking back down the stairs and not daring to jump.

## **THE ACCURACY OF IMAGINING OTHERS' EMOTIONS**

In discussing how people make accurate interpretations of other people's motives (and thus acts) it becomes clear why *emotion and imagination* are analytically kept separate. Imagining the other's emotions explains Morton, contains three key elements:

1. *Perspective*: Taking the perspective of the other and his/her imagined reference points is essential. '[O]ne person's imagination of another's mind is perspectively accurate to the extent that it represents the thinking of the other person in terms of a perspective like that which the other person is in fact using' (p.79). Getting the perspective means also getting what emotions the other is experiencing.
2. *Thought*: Imagining the thoughts that an emotion leads to. Say for instance that the perspective entails fear, then the other's thoughts may be imagined as both how to escape and how to defend one-self. According to Morton, imagining multiple possible thoughts 'makes for a more vivid and interesting imagination, and one that is potentially more useful in anticipating the person's actions' (p.80), but accuracy is also imagining only a small part of the thoughts and get that right.
3. *Pressure*: the pressure of an emotion is what it 'feels like' (experienced by the subject) and this pressure should be decisive for what thoughts and action actually take place. Pressure influences thoughts and imagination, emotion and action and it is all but impossible to imagine the full range of

targets that the pressure gives rise to. We may imagine pressure accurately but incompletely by a) considering only some of the targets, and b) imagining pressure without its objects, i.e. the urgency and rhythm of the pressure. This is 'to imagine the music of the emotion alone, in its tempo, polyphony, and trajectory to resolution' (p.81). Usually we combine a) and b) when imagining the pressure. 'Quite clearly, if one imagines the pressure of someone's emotion, represents to oneself the pattern of tendencies of different strengths to different kinds of thought and action, one is imagining something pretty fundamental' (p.81).

Imagination becomes here the capacity to 'read' and make meaningful interpretations of people in our surroundings, necessary for navigating in social life, or what sociological and psychological literature present as the evaluation (Thoits 1989) or appraisal aspect of emotion (Oatley, Keltner, & Jenkins, 2006). An interesting contribution then is that Morton highlights the fact that our moods and emotions put pressure on our imaginations so we do not, and will not, imagine more than is necessary for our own needs and purposes.

## **EMPATHY AND IMAGINING VILE ACTS**

The entire discussion on imagining the other's emotions naturally brings us to the question of empathy, because this is what empathy is generally taken to mean (e.g. Iacoboni, 2009). But since imagination and emotion are distinct, the relationship between one's own emotions as one imagines the other's, is not a one-to-one relationship. Morton mentions 'real' emotions a couple of times (e.g. p.18) implying by this that the imagining subject imagines his/her *own* actions as 'being' the other. This line of reasoning returns again on page 32 where Morton discusses the difference between moods and emotion. A 'useful cautious thought' is to be careful not to hit your thumb when you are hammering a nail, but if you imagine the hammer hitting the nail you will feel the pain and anticipate the consequences and then the useful thought has become fear. In other words, the 'real' emotion is triggered by the subjectification of an imagination; this is *happening to me*.

It follows that in so far as the imagining person does not go that far in his or her imagination, the imagined emotion of the other, necessary for interpreting the other's motives and action, is not entirely real, at least not to the imagining subject (e.g. p.61). The imagining subject can 'feel' the other's emotion in various ways without slipping into it as if it was a real one, or in other words; the imagining subject can keep a distance between him/her-self and the other, yet get an accurate understanding of the other's experiences. Moreover, as Morton points out the imagining subject will feel his or her *own* emotions in *response* to the *situation* and to the other's emotions. We will return to this but first let's take a look at Morton's brief discussion of empathy and sympathy.

According to Morton the literature is fuzzy on the distinctions between empathy and sympathy and he therefore does not insist on one, but this is a mistake. Both sociological and psychological literature are rather keen on the distinction and it makes sense if we consider empathy not as an emotion but a vessel or a capacity to connect to the other emotionally and feel what he or she feels. Sympathy is then rather a real or expressed emotional response

to the imagination, at least if we define sympathy as feeling sorry for or with another's misfortune (Clark, 1997). Leaving his conflation of empathy and sympathy aside, Morton does say something quite interesting about empathy. To Morton, empathy is an emotion (felt when faced with another person's situation) encompassing three different processes; resonance, appropriateness and identification. *Resonance* means role-taking by imagining what it's like to be the other and thus what s/he 'really' experiences – her/his perspective on the situation; appropriateness is framing the other's experiences correctly and identification means linking one's own emotions to the other's emotions, thus feeling the other's emotions *through ones' own* emotions. One process may very well take place without the others, for instance identification may take place without resonance and appropriate framing. Alternatively, resonance takes place without either appropriate framing or identification, e.g. one can imagine that the other feels terror or pain without an impulse to help because terror might be exactly what one wants the other to feel. Or a framing can take place that does not really resonate i.e. one can imagine someone suffering and express sympathy but the other might not be experiencing suffering and be annoyed by the sympathy. On the other hand, an appropriate framing may occur without neither resonance nor identification, as when witnessing someone's distress and framing the situation as embarrassing but without feeling sad for the other or taking the step to imagine what s/he actually experiences. What it will be in the end, Morton argues, depends on the 'framing emotion' of the imagining subject. By the concept of framing emotion Morton refers to the mood and/or emotion that pressurizes imagination into a particular shape. i.e. 'aimless affection' or curiosity may pressurize towards resonance, while 'feeling helpful' pushes towards identification. Again, imagination has a purpose and the purpose comes with a framing emotion (p.110). When imagining the other's experiences and situation, one experiences own emotions in relation to the situation and the other. The imagining subject thus feels both her/his own emotions and imagines the emotions of the other, which, unless if identification takes place, are two different sets of emotions. It is likely that these own emotions also function as framing emotions, orientating selective imagination.

As mentioned in the beginning of this review Morton is interested in how we can understand evil, or vile, acts. To begin with, he argues, we (in the Western world?) tend to be more interested in evil acts and 'negative' emotions, thinking that they require more complicated roads to understanding than admirable acts or quite ordinary everyday acts; perhaps this is also a reason why we have a more nuanced language for 'negative' emotional states than for 'positive' ones. According to Morton, however, vile acts are just as simple as ordinary acts and in essence all acts can be imagined and understood with the same matrix, employing 'the general dynamic template of pressure' (p.98). Beginning with the example mentioned earlier of jumping from the diving tower, continuing with a beaten wife pulling the trigger against her abusive husband, Morton argues that '[t]he pressure is similar: in both cases we have...the uncovering of a list of hazards, then an alternating consideration of bad consequences from two sources, and then the summoning of resources to confront one of them while fleeing from the other' (p.98). He then gives a somewhat awkward example 'with another kind of motive', trying to understand a father's drinking and copulating while his infant freezes to death in the car, by comparing it to

an ex-smoker who relapses into smoking again, enjoying it so much that she forgets all about quitting. While I think the latter example is obscuring rather than illuminating it does help to explain what Morton means when he says that we can imagine awful acts and vile emotions by trying to imagine something similar but different. We need to do this because in spite of our interest in awful acts, we resist imagining vile emotions and we want to keep a distance between ourselves and those 'bad' persons, which raises obstacles to accurate imagination. To overcome this, the vile emotion of hatred, for instance, can be imagined but not felt by: 1) Imagine hating something different, i.e. directing hatred at a different object; 2) imagine a different emotion but with a similar rhythm and tension, e.g. imagining the pressure of hatred by imagining the pressure of feeling humiliated; and 3) imagine fearing or defending against hatred to trace out its object and pressure. Of the three, it is only the first one that appears intuitive and commonly employed in every-day life. The other two appear as more theoretical exercises.

What I find truly interesting in this discussion is not so much the technicalities of how to understand vile acts, but rather the emotional complexity that surrounds the imagination of those acts, in spite, perhaps, of Morton's attempt to render it simpler. The emotional *resistance* against imagining 'evil emotions', at least in relation to a specific and particularly horrific act, is intriguing. At the same time, as Morton points out, we are also spurred by curiosity and interest in finding out more about the evil. We want to make an effort to understand, much more than we do with admirable acts. So evil has an ambivalent and inherently self-contradictive emotional dynamic attached to it. Where do these different emotions with their opposed pressures come from? Why are we afraid of imagining the 'evil other's' emotions as if they were our own 'real' emotions? And why are we so fascinated, attracted, and puzzled by evil in the first place? Is it because we are to some degree biologically hard-wired to find out more about potential threats, in order to defuse the threat? This seems to be food for interesting discussions around the role of emotion – of *what* we feel – for our perception of self and identity; *who* we are. And why not also discuss the fundamental orientating role of emotion for the emergence and continuous making of morality?

## CONCLUDING COMMENT

To sum up, I would not recommend *Emotion and Imagination* to the beginner in the field of social science of emotions; both because it is a rather abstract and opaque presentation of emotion (and imagination), and because it makes only sparse and in my view rather narrow references to the field. Of course, my own background in sociology plays a role in this judgement. There is in the social scientific theory and research into emotions a tendency to sustain a watertight bulkhead between the rapidly expanding field of sociology of emotions on the one hand, and the rather more mutually integrated fields of history, anthropology, psychology, and philosophy of emotions on the other. This is highly unfortunate, since it means that the skills and expertise of sociology in terms of studying natural situations and the social and interactional aspects of emotions are repeatedly overlooked.

Context is also what I miss most in the book. Morton's emoting and imagining

subject often appears cut off from it most of the time, observing others from an isolated, timeless and neutral position. But we have emotions because we are part of complex social patterns and interactions, and to understand better how they help us navigate through this tricky social landscape we need to attend to the emergent character of emotional processes; how managing and acting on emotions is contingent on the situation and constantly shaped by others, in response to others, and in anticipation of others' actions. This being said, I was positively surprised by how useful and inspiring Morton's reasoning turned out to be in feeding into the emotion analysis I am presently working on, and I can therefore warmly recommend *Emotion and Imagination* to scholars who are already familiar with the topic of emotions. I am sure others will find many more interesting and challenging ideas in the book than those highlighted here.

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