

Solomon On The Passions

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The Passions by Robert Solomon is a defense of the view that our passions constitute our world and our Selves, and that, since our passions are *rational*, we are in control of them, we are responsible for them, and we can change them. Indeed, for Solomon, the subject matter of philosophy are the passions (the subjective), because it is only within subjectivity that we make life meaningful. A meaningful life is one in which we order our passions so as to achieve the ultimate goal of subjectivity, namely, the maximization of self-esteem and personal dignity. Thus, the task of philosophy or Solomon's book is to make people reflect upon the strategies they employ to maximize self-esteem and to change those inconsistent, and self-destructive strategies and employ the "right" ones. The main destructive strategy is "the myth of the passions." This myth teaches us that our reason and our passions are distinct and opposing faculties; that our passions are forces hiding within us building up and bursting into the open when we let go of reason. The myth preserves the *mistaken* belief that our passions are *not within our control*. Once we overthrow the myth and realize that emotions are our own activities and therefore are our responsibility, we have taken the first step toward change.

Solomon recognizes that an analysis of passion as *subjective*, as *self-involved*, and as aiming at *self-esteem* can be made intelligible only if we can offer some theory of Self. His view is that the self is defined subjectively, by self-consciousness, or the passions. "In self-consciousness the Self is the subject, the consciousness, and what the consciousness is about" ([3]: 87). That is, our Selves are at once, both outside our world *and* responsible for our world and our Selves, because what we are cannot be distinguished from our constitutive judgments or the ways in which we structure our world. In other words, for Solomon, the Self is a point of reference outside the world; a "transcendental self" that constitutes our world, but it is also defined by the world into which it introduces meaning and values. Thus, Solomon analyses the Self and hence, the passions that constitute the Self, as sets of constitutive judgments in which the objects constituted and the subject that constitutes them are *one*.

Since the core of Solomon's book is that emotions are constitutive judgments we must ask, what then is meant by the notion of a "constitutive judgment"? Emotions are judgments and as such they "are about something," and "that which an emotion is about is called its *intentional object*" ([3]: 173). Emotions are "constitutive" judgments in that there is no distinction between an emotion and its object. He says,

An emotion is not distinct or separable from its object; the object as an object of this emotion has no existence apart from the emotion. There are two components, my anger and the object of my anger. . . . every emotion has the unitary form of “my-emoting about. . .”, “my-being angry about. . .” . . . The emotion is distinguished by its object; there is nothing to it besides its object. But neither is there any such object at all without the emotion. ([3]: 178)

In so analyzing an emotional judgment into a unitary form in which “the emotion is logically indistinguishable from its object. . .,” Solomon does not distinguish emotions from other judgments, for example, beliefs. The problem that gives rise to Solomon’s analysis of emotions as unitary forms is that of intentionality or non-existent objects. I may be angry with John for stealing my car when in fact he did not, and the problem is how that is possible. For the moment, we need not question Solomon’s account of intentionality. The objection we want to make is that the same chain of reasoning that leads to Solomon’s unitary form analysis of emotional judgments will lead to a unitary form analysis of non-emotional judgments and so there is no distinction between them. Non-emotional judgments such as “I believe that John stole my car” are evidently about something. Yet on occasion such beliefs are false. The problem of the intentionality of beliefs is the same as the problem of the intentionality of emotions. So Solomon has failed to distinguish emotions from beliefs.

Solomon might reply that it is not their unitary form which distinguishes emotions from other entities but rather their special connection with the Self (he writes of “self-creation,” “self-esteem,” “self-involvement”). “Every emotion is an act of self-creation, and the nature of emotion will remain incomprehensible without a theory of Self as background” ([3]: 84). But Solomon’s theory of Self rests on his theory of emotions as constitutive judgments leaving us no closer to the nature of emotion. He writes “The Self, like surreality, is based upon our own ideals and value-laden interpretations, our constitutive judgments—the most important of which are our passions” ([3]: 89).

Solomon claims that the distinction between emotion and non-emotion is grounded in his distinction between reality and surreality. On the one hand, there are facts that are irrelevant to our life; they are part of “an anonymous and scientifically ascertainable reality” ([3]: 176). Consequently, they can be viewed from a detached, objective or non-emotional point of view. On the other hand, the objects of an emotion “are of great personal importance to us” ([3]: 177). Thus, Solomon might say that the difference between emotional and non-emotional judgments consists in their being about different objects.

The above argument raises several questions and is open to a serious objection. It is never made clear exactly what are “the facts” in reality. He tells us that reality is “the lifeless complex of facts and hypothesis, that one finds in science textbooks” ([3]: 19), and that the criterion of reality or objectivity is repeatability, “the need for observations to be *public* and reproducible under various conditions” ([3]: 73). Solomon claims that the objects of emotions are by contrast intentional objects in our surreality.

The objects of the emotions are objects of *our* world, the world as we experience it ([3]: 176). That which the emotion is about is called its *intentional object*

([3]: 173). *An intentional object is nothing other than an object, as subjectively experienced, whatever its status or basis in the “real” world.* ([3]: 177-78, italics added)

But if the world as we experience it contains the objects of our world, then the objects of our world are the objects of our experience. It appears to follow, that for Solomon, we cannot experience objects in *the* world (reality), but that we can only experience objects in our world, in *our* surreality. Again, if the only intentional objects are the objects of emotional judgments then the objects of non-emotional judgments are not intentional objects. But then, since the objects in reality are not intentional objects, what then are they? Thus, the distinction between emotional and non-emotional judgments cannot be supported by the distinction between reality and surreality since that distinction is questionable and itself in need of support.

Although Solomon’s unitary form analysis of emotions is the central thesis of this book, he offers only one argument in support of it. He writes,

This technical point [the unitary form analysis] can support and be supported by an immensely practical consideration. A change in beliefs typically inspires a change in emotions. . . . The relationship between belief and opinions on the one hand and emotions on the other is not a matter of coincidence but a matter of logic. The emotion is logically indistinguishable from its object. Once its object has been rejected there can be no more emotion. ([3]: 179)

In other words, since beliefs and emotions are logically connected the unitary form analysis of emotions is true.

The weaknesses in this argument can be seen if we suppose that emotions and beliefs are different judgments. Now, either the objects of beliefs and emotions are the same or they are different.¹ If they are the same then the difference between the two kinds of judgments must be based on the different *subjective* elements in each. However, that account of their difference is self-defeating because then judgments are not unitary forms. On the other hand, if the objects of beliefs are different from the objects of emotions, then it does not follow that a rejection of the object of belief will logically entail a rejection of the object of emotion, and consequently Solomon has not proved that emotions are unitary forms. Thus, if we assume that emotions and beliefs are different, then Solomon’s argument to establish the unitary form analysis is either self-defeating or unsound.

In Chapter 4, “Self and Others,” Solomon emphatically rejects Sartre’s view that “conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others” ([1]: 364). In love we achieve the ideal of intersubjectivity in which there is “a sharing of Selves” ([3]: 104) and “a maximization of self-esteem” ([3]: 106). Solomon says about love:

“To be in love, is to see the world through the eyes of another.” It is in this sense that we want to characterize the ideal of intersubjectivity. Metaphysically, of course, the notion is suspect, if not undisguised nonsense; but *where there is exact coincidence of judgments and attitudes*, does it really matter, metaphysics aside, whether there are two heads or one? ([3]: 105, italics added)

But there never is an “exact coincidence of judgments and attitudes” because on Solomon’s view our identity is determined by the judgments we make about *our* Selves and *our* surreality. But if personal identity is analyzed

in terms of constitutive judgments, then there cannot be *two* people with the *same* constitutive judgments. Thus, either Solomon fails to refute Sartre's pessimistic view of human relationships, or he must give up his thesis that emotions are constitutive judgments.

An important thesis of *The Passions* is that "The goal of philosophy is wisdom; but wisdom is. . . the realization of what we have called self-esteem" ([3]: 411). But only once does he tell us what he means by "self-esteem". He says,

Our paradigm for self-esteem. . . should be that glorious feeling we occasionally enjoy upon getting up in the morning, alone or together wholly refreshed and feeling very beautiful, satisfied with ourselves and our existence even before we have had a moment to reflect upon who we are. ([3]: 100)

From that passage it is neither evident what self-esteem is nor obvious that the goal of philosophy is to realize it. Perhaps Solomon structures *his* life so as to attain self-esteem in the sense he describes, but he gives no argument to prove that either *we* do or should structure *our* lives in that way.

Solomon's book is an attempt to explain and defend many of the theses that are central to existentialists.² It is, however, more than that since it contains a chapter, "The Logic of Emotion," in which he describes the various structures that are common to each emotion, and a chapter, "The Emotional Register," in which he discusses the particular logical structures of almost every emotion. It also contains several sections (the best in the book) where he criticizes the James-Lange, the Freudian, the feeling, and the Rylean theories concerning the necessary and sufficient conditions for the occurrence of an emotion. On the whole, however, we would judge the main weakness of this book to be Solomon's failure to adequately defend his central thesis that the passions in general, and the emotions in particular are subjective, self-conscious, constitutive judgments.

REFERENCES

- [1] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by H. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956).
- [2] ———, *The Emotions: Outline of a Theory*, trans. by B. Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948).
- [3] Robert C. Solomon, *The Passions* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1976).

NOTES

¹If Solomon were to reply that the objects of emotional and non-emotional judgments are ontologically the same yet somehow phenomenologically different, then we doubt that such a difference could be an intelligible one in light of Solomon's view that emotion and object are not distinct.

²Solomon shares Sartre's aim of establishing a voluntaristic theory of emotion in [2], and his account of intentionality resembles Sartre's in [1].