

EXPANDING EMOTIONS: THE ROLE OF HABITS IN EMOTIONAL PROCESSING

Ana Romero-Iribas, PhD (Rey Juan Carlos University, Madrid, Spain)

Consuelo Martínez-Priego, PhD (Universidad Villanueva, Madrid, Spain)

Reference:

APA 7 Romero-Iribas, A., & Martínez-Priego, C. (2023). Expanding Emotions: The Role of Habits in Emotional Processing. *Character and Virtues in Professional Practice*, 1-7.

<https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/2976/conferences/character-and-virtues-in-professional-practice>

Chicago 17: Romero-Iribas, Ana, y C. Martínez Priego. «Expanding Emotions: te Role of Habits in Emotional Processing». En *Character and Virtues in Professional Practice*, 1-7. Oxford, UK: Jubilee Center for Character and Virtues, 2023. <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/2976/conferences/character-and-virtues-in-professional-practice>.

1. Introduction

The current situation has led to rethinking of *the professional training* in accordance with the reality of the person. The person is a free and a moral being. In fact, the mere application of professional codes to resolve ethical issues, and subjects' inhibition from assuming responsibilities and risks when faced with the challenges that arise in the workplace and whose resolution goes beyond training in general principles, is not enough. That is to say, the normative or moral dimensions of professional practice are not entirely or best captured by formal codes of practice, but rather call for the cultivation of personal qualities of character or virtue (The Jubilee Center for Character & Virtues, 2022). The present paper follows this approach of cultivating virtue in all those who engage in professional practice, considering the relationship between emotion and habit (Kristjánsson, 2018).

To respond to the need to solve problems related to professional ethics, a professional education that is atomized (purely intellectual, only focused on the technical, etc.) would not be most appropriate, as this is inconsistent with being fully human: a person is a reality that is more systemic than analytic, as well as being dialogic and not isolated (Polo, 2016). Accordingly, it is from this systemic perspective (resembling the organic character wherein all a person's dimensions are interrelated) that we will address the connection between emotions and habits, which is essential to human behaviour.

To some extent, our research is in line with the problem raised by Darnell et al. (2019) regarding phronesis, insofar as it contributes to a subject's emotions being consonant with her interpretation of a given situation, her moral judgement, and her decision, and thus also providing a motivation for the appropriate response. Here we discuss the role of habits and the emotional world in their reciprocal contributions, both in the cognitive dimension and in the motivational-behavioural dimension.

The aim of this work is to theoretically argue for the hypothesis that (1) emotions can be expanded and improved if intelligence and its habits participate in emotional

processing, and that (2) emotions guide phronesis and constitute a confirmation of the correctness or incorrectness of moral behaviour if they are educated. Methodologically, we approach this issue from a perspective that is theoretical and interdisciplinary, since our approach is both psychological and philosophical.

In the first place, our contribution concerns the role that the intellectual-volitional dimension plays in emotional dynamics. This is so because:

- Intelligence and its habits improve and expand one's emotional world inasmuch as they give way to higher cognitive processes that connect an individual with reality. The habits to which we refer are wisdom as a theoretical habit and prudence as a practical habit. As we will see, prudence appears more explicitly in emotional processing.
- In addition, intelligence and its habits, as well as the will and its habits (virtues), expand the impulse of the human tendency, because the will is capable of going beyond the conative or coping capacity of emotion.

Secondly, our reflection concerns the role of emotions in moral behaviour. Specifically:

- We explain that emotions guide phronesis as cognitive precedents for decision-making; that is, they are “really” emotional-cognitive preferences that are prior to the appraisal of practical intelligence.
- Finally, we contend that, once a decision has been made and acted upon, emotions constitute a confirmation of the correctness or incorrectness of one's behaviour, if they are educated.

To develop our argument, it will be necessary to consider the constructs of emotion, emotional processing (that is different to process) and habit from a double perspective: psychological and philosophical. Specifically, the *combined* contribution of philosophy and psychology is required, whereby they illuminate each other: while psychology supplies an analysis of the emotional process, philosophy reveals the specific character and potential of human intelligence and will. First, this helps us to define the concept of intelligence, and second, it allows us to know the process of evaluation and where intelligence can intervene.

2. Improving emotions by including the intellectual-volitional dimension in emotional dynamics

We will now discuss how emotions can be expanded and improved if intelligence and will participate in emotional processing. To do that, we need to explain what emotions are.

As a first approximation from the perspective of psychology, emotion can be understood as a process or a multidimensional response (physiological, cognitive, and behavioural), provoked by stimuli (Fernández-Abascal et al., 2010). Emotions can also be viewed from the philosophical perspective of human operability: taking into account

a person's wide range of capacities, she can carry out a multitude of different operations at different levels (Polo, 2015), that is, cognitive (in several levels), tendential and behavioural operations. Emotions and feelings, then, are states that *precede, accompany or follow* a subject's cognitive-evaluative and coping operations (Martínez-Priego & Romero-Iribas, 2021). Here we are interested in both perspectives.

Why can we say that intelligence improve the cognitive-evaluative dimension of emotion? The answer is that they facilitate the subject's connection with the extra-subjective world, and not only with her present psychosomatic circumstance. As is well known, one's knowledge and appraisal of the stimuli that arouse emotions are carried out from the subject's perspective, according to her experiences and specific psychosomatic situation (Martínez-Priego, 2010). Thus, for example, the appraisal that someone makes of the possibility of spending an afternoon in an armchair varies depending on whether her circumstance is that of being tired, or whether she has spent a long illness in an armchair. In the first case, the subject views the armchair as something desirable, and in the second, as something to avoid; that is, her appraisal is modified according to her specific circumstances.

However, the appraisal of the stimulus (e.g., the armchair) may include intellectual knowledge (viewed philosophically). Intelligence makes this appraisal different and broader: it is not only relevant to my present situation, but also allows me to consider the demands of reality, in relation to others or taken by themselves. We thus move from a knowledge of "the surrounding world" (analogous to the animal world) where things matter only in relation to the subject, subjectively, to "the world", where there is cognitive openness (von Uexküll), and things are valued or objectively matter beyond the subject's needs. The habits of intelligence improve and expand one's emotional world, because they give way to higher cognitive processes and connect the individual with reality (what surrounds her surpasses the status of the environment and becomes the world). Recall that psychology gives us knowledge of emotional processing, as illustrated in the previous example, and as we detail below.

Following Fernández-Abascal et al. (2010), the first level is the *evaluation* of one's situation, which is subjective (concerning only the subject's situation) and automatic (not reaching the brain's cortex), and includes two elements:

- The *novelty* of the stimulus. They can be expected or unexpected, sudden or progressive, familiar or unknown, etc. This modulates the type of emotional response.
- The intrinsic *pleasantness* of the stimulus or affective valence, which leads to approaching or retreating from the stimulus. That is, it modulates the behavioural impulse of the response.

The second level of emotional processing, called the *appraisal* of the stimulus, concerns the meaning it has for the subject. The difference with the previous step is that the appraisal includes *learned elements* and can be improved with intellectual habits, which allow one to take charge of reality itself, regardless of its relationship with the subject. The three variables that allow an appraisal to be carried out in emotional processing are:

- *The meaning un relations to goals (Significance)*. Frijda (1988) explains this through “the law of situational meaning” and “the law of what is concerned”. According to these, the significance of a stimulus allows it to give more or less motivation to the subject. What then is the contribution of habit? The answer is that significance can be more adjusted to reality if intelligence participates in its theoretical dimension. For example, consistency or inconsistency with one’s personal desires and goals. The appraisal of a stimulus depends on variables such as one’s prior interest and motivation in solving a problem, one’s sense of responsibility (which may result from one’s natural inclination or be cultivated by habits), etc. Practical intelligence, or phronesis, can better adjust this filter, concerning one’s previous motivations, to reality.
- *Coping*. If a subject feels powerless to confront the challenge presented by the stimulus, then the emotion that is triggered and the impulse to action will be different from what they are when one views oneself as capable of confronting it. The relationship with the virtue of fortitude, guided by phronesis, seems clear. The theory of causal attribution occupies a similar position.
- *Norms*, which also intervene in the appraisal of the stimulus, including social norms, one’s preconscious moral principles, one’s sociogenetic inheritance (not genetic, but learned in early childhood), one’s style of social adaptation and one’s ways of resolving conflicts, among others. Behaviour in accordance with these norms is better adjusted to the demands of the subject’s particular reality when habits intervene.

In conclusion, the main elements of the process of appraising the stimulus allow us to see the connection between two epistemological levels, the psychological and the philosophical, *without leaving behind emotional dynamics*, but rather expanding their cognitive dimension through intelligence and its habits. It should be noted that the inclusion of intelligence does not occur outside the cognitive dynamics of emotion, but rather expands and perfects them. As a certain Spanish philosopher would say, the ladder cannot be thrown away (Polo, 2015).

What is the reason for affirming that including will in the emotional process improves emotions and feelings? Because they improve one’s motivating capacity, from impulse to behaviour, which is one of the functions of emotion (Berridge, 2018). Viewed philosophically, they expand the impulse of the human tendency through habits. That is, habits improve one’s emotional world in one of its functions, the motivating function, which is prior to behaviour. This also has consequences for the type of interpersonal relationship that can be established (for example, disinterested ones).

The key for emotions to be expanded in relation to motivated behaviour is that this does not depend solely on one’s capacity to cope (called one’s “irascible appetite” by philosophers) and one’s desire for gratification (one’s “concupiscible appetite”) (O’Dowd et al., 2018; Frijda & Mesquida, 1994). If the habits of fortitude and temperance coincide with coping and gratification, then one’s capacity to act is expanded. Where the capacity to cope sees an impossibility, the virtue of fortitude can see a possibility, and when gratification seeks to be satisfied immediately, temperance allows it to be delayed.

In short, moral and responsible behaviour attends to both the emotional and the rational dimension, neither of which should be underestimated. Moral and responsible behaviours require intelligence and will, but these faculties do not act from the outside as something extrinsic to emotional dynamics, but are rather included within them, and this is what we want to highlight. Thus, we might suggest that *intelligence and the will do not control or manage emotions as extrinsic instances*, but rather improve one's emotional dynamics from within.

A broader explanation of this issue can be found in the hierarchical distinction of emotions (self-oriented emotions, other-directed emotions, other-oriented emotions, and finally, the bonding feeling), which we make elsewhere (Martínez-Priego & Romero-Iribas, 2021), and which justify the existence of disinterested personal ties and relationships, including those that occur in the professional field, especially if they are a direct service to other people.

3. Emotions in moral behaviours

So far, we have talked about how intelligence and the will improve emotional dynamics, making it more adjusted to reality and increasing the impulse to action. Now we will highlight the other level: how emotions contribute to rational and voluntary actions.

First, educated emotions guide phronesis as *cognitive precedents* for decision-making. In other words, emotions carry out a prerational and preconscious appraisal, which is the basis on which phronesis acts. That is to say, phronesis knows on the basis of what is sensibly given, not from nothing. How does psychology explain this? Due to the development of the cognitive preferential system that begins to develop in childhood (with the development of neuroendocrine structures related to the amygdala and above all to the reticular formation) (Rof Carballo, 1952). Moral judgements are made on the basis of those preferences that are the first intuitions that come from previous experiences and early learning. In this way, an educated emotional world (expanded by intelligence and the will) facilitates moral judgement about the concrete, moving from applying laws to know reality connaturally (Pero-Sanz, 1964).

Finally, once the decision has been made and the action has been carried out in the corresponding context, one's emotions constitute a confirmation of the correctness of the behaviour, if they are educated.

This is so because one aspect of emotional education consists of the proportionality between stimulus and response (felt emotion). As noted, emotions precede, accompany, or follow performances, as pointed out by some of Frijda's laws (Frijda, 1988). Thus, when emotions are educated, they confirm the proportion between the situation judged by phronesis (corresponding to the reality of the stimulus) and ethical behaviour (followed by one's emotional response). A simple example is that when faced with the horrible, one feels horror. One may also feel guilty after a dishonest behaviour. These feelings do not replace the intelligence that judges the situation and one's own performance, but rather confirm it. If an educated emotion involves a response, that is adjusted to reality, then when that emotion follows an ethically correct behaviour, we can say that the emotion is also correct, and vice versa.

4. CONCLUSION

In short, intelligence (together with the will) and emotions help each other; they do not cancel or contrast with each other. Moral behaviours demand intelligence and will, but these faculties do not act from outside as something extrinsic to emotional dynamics but are rather included within it.

This has been explained in four stages of the emotional process:

1. Emotional processing (evaluation/appraisal) is perfected when intelligence allows one to have a better knowledge of reality, and we have detailed the places in processing where this can occur.
2. Emotion has a motivating function that leads to action. The virtues of the will (fortitude and temperance) allow the subject a broader range of action.
3. The judgements of phronesis are more accurate when one's cognitive-emotional preferences are educated, that is, adjusted to reality.
4. Educated emotions confirm whether a moral behaviour was correct or not.

Emotional education is worthwhile for many reasons, but we want to highlight that educated emotions become reliable indicators of what is right and what is wrong.

REFERENCES

- Berridge, K. C. (2018). Evolving Concepts of Emotion and Motivation. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01647>
- Darnell, C., Gulliford, L., Kristjánsson, K., & Paris, P. (2019). Phronesis and the Knowledge-Action Gap in Moral Psychology and Moral Education: A New Synthesis? *Human Development*, 62(3), 101–129. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000496136>
- Fernández-Abascal, E. G., Rodríguez, B. G., Sánchez, M. P. J., Díaz, M. D. M., & Sánchez, F. J. D. (2010). *Psicología de la Emoción*. Editorial Universitaria Ramon Areces.
- Frijda, N. H. (1988). The Law of Emotions. *American Psychologist*, 43(5), 349–358.
- Frijda, N. H., & Mesquita, B. (1994). The social roles and functions of emotions. In S. Kitayama & H. R. Markus (Eds.), *Emotion and culture: Empirical studies of mutual influence*. (pp. 51–87). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10152-002>
- Kristjánsson, K. (2018). *Virtuous Emotions*. Oxford University Press.
- Martínez-Priego, C. (2010). Personalidad. In A. L. González (Ed.), *Diccionario de filosofía* (pp. 867–871).
- Martínez-Priego, C., & Romero-Iribas, A. (2021). The emotions behind character friendship: From other-oriented emotions to the 'bonding feeling'. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 51(3), 468–488. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12277>

- O'Dowd, E., O'Connor, P., Lydon, S., Mongan, O., Connolly, F., Diskin, C., McLoughlin, A., Rabbitt, L., McVicker, L., Reid-McDermott, B., & Byrne, D. (2018). Stress, coping, and psychological resilience among physicians. *BMC Health Services Research*, 18(1), 730. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-018-3541-8>
- Pero-Sanz, J. M. (1964). *El conocimiento por connaturalidad, la afectividad en la gnoseología tomista*. Universidad de Navarra.
- Polo, L. (2015). *Curso de Teoría del Conocimiento (I). Obras Completas (IV)*: Eunsa.
- Polo, L. (2016). *Quién es el hombre. Presente y futuro del hombre. Obras Completas (X)*: Eunsa.
- Rof Carballo, J. (1952). *Cerebro interno y mundo emocional*. Labor.
- The Jubilee Center for Character & Virtues. (2022). *Statement on Character, Virtue and Practical Wisdom in Professional Practice*. https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Statement_Character_Virtue_Practical_Wisdom_Professional_Practice.pdf