Robert Solomon (1942-2007)*

Robert Solomon was Quincy Lee Centennial Professor of Philosophy and Business at the University of Texas at Austin, a valued colleague, an admired teacher, and one of the foremost thinkers on philosophical accounts of the emotions.

If “Emotions and Choice” and The Passions were the only works that Solomon produced, his contribution to thinking about the emotions would have been assured. But there is much more. These early works present significant statements of views that he continued to develop, expand and adapt. Moreover, his philosophical thinking ranged widely, engaging Ethics, Business Ethics, Continental Philosophy, the History of Philosophy, Phenomenology, and Existentialism, as well as Sartre, Hegel, and Heidegger. He published extensively in book and in essay, edited numerous collections, lectured widely, and wrote for audiences at various stages of development and sophistication.

Readers of this journal are apt to be most interested in his contributions to emotion theory, and it is to this I turn.

Solomon is one of the modern architects of what we now identify as cognitive analyses of the emotions. The approach did not originate with him: as he himself saw, it can be traced back to the Stoics. Its current dawning is indebted to Wittgenstein on James’ psychological theorising, as well as studies by Errol Bedford and George Pitcher. But in Solomon’s hands a cognitive approach became a full blown theory, and gained for the emotions a prominence in philosophical discourse that they had lacked.

Solomon argued that emotions are best understood in terms of judgment. An early statement claims: ‘An emotion is a judgment (or set of judgements), something we do.’ The judgments in question he described as ‘self-involved,

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relatively intense, evaluative judgments.'

By attempting to grasp the emotions in such terms, emotion’s analysis moves away from simple introspective psychology or behavioural reduction. By speaking of special kinds of evaluative judgments the subjectivity of the emotions is maintained, but with emotion’s rational nature central. The approach has many advantages. It enables ready explanation of desire and behaviour’s pertinence. For if, say, anger is a judgement (or set of judgements) having to do with being offended, an angry person’s desire for revenge and the taking of it is readily grasped. Again, a judgemental analysis enables one to differentiate amongst emotions by attending to the detail of their constitutive judgments. Further, the place of evaluative judgement allows one to assess the emotions and particular emotions appropriateness or inappropriateness, as well as their appropriateness or inappropriateness to a given situation. On offer is an approach that can explain much about the emotions, and do so in a logical and revealing fashion. Philosophers, with their skills in logical and conceptual analysis, proved ideally suited to pursue these matters.

Solomon’s earliest statements could be audacious, and often contrary to ordinary or theoretical suppositions. Thus, of feelings he wrote:

… it is so important to insist not only that an emotion is not identical to a feeling but that a feeling is not even a component of emotion. Of course, emotions may typically involve feelings; they may even always involve feelings. But feelings are neither necessary nor sufficient to differentiate emotions. An emotion is never simply a feeling, even a feeling plus anything.\(^3\)

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1 *The Passions*, p. 185.
The attack on feelings was a part of a larger argument which held: ‘Emotions are not occurrences and do not happen to us.’ And since emotions are something we “do” (above), ‘we choose an emotion much as we choose a course of action.’

As his thinking evolved, Solomon moderated many of his stronger claims. He came to view his early claims about choice as ‘too glib,’ ‘dramatic overstatement.’ Still, he maintained that emotions are active (rather than passive), and that they remain our responsibility. Regarding feelings he later wrote:

I now agree that feelings have been ‘left out’ of the cognitive account, but I also believe that ‘cognition’ or ‘judgment’ properly construed captures that missing ingredient.

His views were often articulated in a fashion amenable to Analytical Philosophy. Yet, Solomon was deeply influenced by Nietzsche and Sartre, and attempted to integrate diverse “Continental” influences within his understanding of the emotions. His thoughts about emotion and choice, and his suggestions that emotions should be seen as rash or urgent judgements, emergency behaviours when normal means are frustrated seems indebted to Sartre’s thinking about emotions as magical transformations. While these claims did not gain widespread acceptance, they provoked considerable and productive discussion of the connections between emotion, choice, cognition and judgement. At other times, his injection of Continental influences was unsuccessful. For example, his talk in *The Passions* of emotions and surreality had little uptake.

The comprehensiveness in vision, the range of matters integrated into a coherent and encompassing account of the emotions, even in early works, is remarkable. To cite but one example, in a chapter from *The Passions* entitled

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5 Ibid., p. 252.
6 Ibid., p. 276.
7 “Emotions Thoughts and Feelings,” p. 16.
8 Ibid., p. 13.
9 See, for example, “Emotions and Choice,” p. 262.
“The Logic of the Emotions” Solomon provides a schematic understanding of a wide variety of emotions, including anger, contempt, despair, embarrassment, envy, fear, guilt, hate, indignation, jealousy, love, pity, regret, and shame – and proposes a logical machinery with which to comprehend, compare and contrast them. While hardly a full or final understanding of these emotions, the accounts are plausible, and provide extremely helpful starting points for an understanding of these emotions. It is in light of such efforts that one is left thinking that whatever criticisms the approach might deserve, there is something deeply insightful and useful in it.

Of course, criticism abounded. Although we cannot fruitfully raise or appraise all, a few can be noted. Both the sufficiency and the necessity of judgements for the emotions were challenged. Solomon came to be amenable to the former criticism, and began to incorporate various phenomena into his understanding of judgment. Judgement’s necessity he maintained: he doubted that attempts to account for emotion without reference to cognition genuinely spoke of the emotions. Similarly, he continued to oppose the criticism that “judgment” was the wrong conceptual tool to capture cognition’s contribution, arguing for the pivotal place of judgment on some construal of that notion.

Solomon had a gift for adapting to and incorporating developments from diverse fields of investigation. For example, the importance of social construction has become prominent. Solomon saw that his own account of emotion, together with developmental analyses of the sort provided by Ronald de Sousa’s account of paradigm scenarios, enabled one to make sense of the social construction of the emotions, doing so at various levels of generality. Thus Solomon could credit various ways of understanding the implications of social construction, and could do so in a way that keeps prominent a cognitive and judgmental analysis of emotion. One sees, for example, in a more popular work, *About Love*, an attempt to make sense of love across cultures, across times, within our culture, and in personal inculcation – all cast in terms of judgments and their social construction.
More recently, notions of basic emotions, affect programs, the role of bodily response have gained considerable prominence, as has the suggestion of emotion before cognition. Here too Solomon entered the fray, attempting to give science its due, but maintaining that if a response is usefully to be deemed emotional it involves some sort of recognition on the part of the person undergoing the emotion. Solomon takes the recognition involved to be a form of cognition. Thus, once again, cognition becomes central. He then argues that the best way to understand cognition’s role is in terms of judgement.

The notion of judgement offered in later work encompasses judgements that are not necessarily articulate, conscious, deliberative or reflective, that can be episodic or long term, that can include judgements of the body, that can have as their objects propositions and perceptions, that can be pre-conceptual, that can be made by animals other than humans, that are not necessarily propositional or of a “knowing that” type. Whereas his early work had attempted to account for emotions in terms of judgement(s) to the exclusion of other features of human psychology, later efforts allowed for the importance of many of these features, then attempted to account for them in terms of and by judgements. The notion of judgment is significantly expanded. Whether one wouldn’t be better off understanding emotion in terms of diverse phenomena causally and sometimes logically connected, or whether judgments can be properly construed to incorporate all that Solomon hoped it could (and can do so in a fashion that is revealing) remains open to debate. We shall be poorer for his absence, and the loss of his contributions to these and other disputes.

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Works Cited:


