
The Emotions of Justice

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This essay attempts to defend the centrality of emotions in our sense of justice and the importance of empirical research into the emotions in the development of philosophical theories of justice. It includes a defense of the "negative" emotions as well as a preliminary taxonomy of the emotions involved in justice.

KEY WORDS: justice; emotion; revenge.

Is the hatred of evil a negative emotion?—Shula Sommers

PREFACE

For Shula Sommers

It was like her to capture a profound insight with a question. "Is the hatred of evil a 'negative' emotion?" That captures in an ironic query so many of her doubts and suspicions about the way we—that is, many Americans and American theorists of emotion in particular—think about emotion. Even granting that such dicotomies have centuries-old roots and traditions, why are we so fixated on the distinction between "positive" and "negative" emotions? And why are we so cautious, even fearful, about the latter? Why do we think it wrong to have negative, even hostile and aggressive emotions? Indeed, why are we so often timid about expressing (as opposed to merely talking about) our most positive emotions—romantic love, religious rapture, political and moral indignation? And, more philosophically, why do so many Americans shy away from talk about and the recognition of evil (notwithstanding the political

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abuse now suffered by that ancient term)? How is it that we so readily endorse
the Manichean dichotomy between the “good” and the “bad” emotions but then
shy away from the honest acknowledgment of the bad and, perhaps, even the
good emotions too?

Shula Sommers’ psychological investigations were, for her and for those
who knew her, also a political philosophy. Emotions were not for her
epiphenomena in our mental lives, merely curious intrusions that escaped the
usual cognitive and motivation categories. Passions were a way of living, the
very essence of a life well-lived—to love, to hate, to feel about life and not just
to study it. True, most of us would readily agree to this. We praise enthusiasm—
so long as it does not get embarrassing. We praise personal warmth—so long
as it stops short of overt expressions of affection. In private, most of us hope
for and even invite the most violent passions, if only for a well-contained mo-
ment or two. But what Shula lived and believed in was sustained, intelligent,
cultivated passion, above all moral passion, the hatred of evil and injustice as
well as the love of love and justice. It was in this regard that she often pointed
out, in her analyses of popular film as well as in her scientific studies, how
uncomfortable most Americans feel with such emotions. Even in our best
theories, justice tends to be an abstraction, a matter of proper policy, an ideal
function of rationality. For Shula, the concern for justice was first of all a pas-
sion, which emphatically did not imply that it was uninformed or ineffective.
Accordingly, her own theories of emotion evolved along the lines of what are
now too-cooly called “cognitive” theories of emotion, emotion as a form of
intelligence, emotion as cultivated and enculturated, emotion as our first line of
recognition of right and wrong, justice and injustice. For Shula, there was never
any question but that emotions—that is, the right emotions—were personal vir-
tues, and the scientific study of emotions had a moral dimension; it was not, as
in the awful jargon and mythology of the last half century or so, “value-free.”
Shula’s scientific work was continuous with her social work, sorting out the
passions and supplying moral passions of her own—something too rarely seen
in social sciences. Her work was an expression as well as an important con-
tribution to the study of the intimate linkage between emotions and justice. Her
life was a demonstration of the importance of that linkage. This essay, in her
memory, is an attempt to further that appreciation of the essential role of emotion
and to urge interdisciplinary cooperation in the pursuit of justice.

WHAT IS JUSTICE
(FROM PHILOSOPHY TO PSYCHOLOGY)

Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling in
a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get in