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Morality Based on Hidden Emotions

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Experts agree that emotion and feeling are important for many reasons. However, there may be a reason little mentioned as yet: emotions can serve to distinguish what is important to the individual from myriads of cognitions that are not. (Nussbaum 2001 takes a different path but also concludes that emotions serve as markers for values.) Many basic problems arise because modern societies give emotions short shrift. What relevance might such ideas have to the study of morality, and toward changing our society?

One basic notion is illustrated by my experiences at an Iraq War Memorial, installed on Sundays by the Veterans for Peace (Scheff 2007). It is set up on the beach alongside the Santa Barbara pier: three thousand crosses representing US military deaths in Iraq. It looks like a cemetery the size of a football field, clearly visible to car and pedestrian traffic on the pier. Most don't stop to look, much less talk. Almost all tourists, they are on the pier for pleasure. The great majority don't seem to know or care that they are passing by a memorial. But a small percentage, stop to look. Of these, some half seek more information.

Most who stop are puzzled. Like the other veterans on duty at the memorial, I try to answer their questions. They are surprised and shocked when they understand what it is they are seeing. Women often cry, and men look sad and may make a donation, sometimes a sizable one. Most then say "I didn't know so many had died," or "Before I saw this, it was just a number to me." The physical size of the memorial has surprised and overwhelmed their customary defenses against feeling.

The implication is that now the number of dead is not just a number, because it now connects with strong feeling. In order to get through the day, we all must carry a vast baggage of cognitions. Modern societies require everyone to know a colossal number of rules, words, phrases, facts and factoids. In addition to what is required, each person also carries his or her own personal mass of thoughts and memories. Most have no meaning at all, being "just a number/ thought/memory," etc.

Emotions and feelings, even weak ones, can serve as tags for what is significant. The visitors to the war memorial already knew that a large number of US soldiers had died in Iraq, but until they felt its meaning, it was just one of many meaningless numbers.

Unlike the intergalactic universe of cognitions, the domain of emotion and feeling is quite small. There may be only a dozen or so true emotions, culturally universal, genetically determined states of bodily arousal (such as love, fear, grief, anger, and

shame). There are more affects, emotion and cognition combinations, with the emotion part strong (jealousy, vengefulness, etc.), say fifty. Finally, there is a still larger domain of feelings, also a cognition/emotion combination, but with the emotion component weak, often a mere tinge (e.g., nostalgia). Perhaps there are hundreds of these.

Yet compared to the “numberless infinity” (John Donne’s phrase) of mere cognitions, even a tinge of emotion may be enough to provide force and significance. Without emotions we would all be adrift in an endless ocean of thoughts and memories, most of them holding little or no meaning. The mind, as we say, is free, but also extraordinarily crowded.

For most people, most of the time, emotions serve as the markers that bequeath value, virtually all value. Of course there are exceptions. Scientific formulae and systems have a value largely independent of emotions, at least for scientists. But in the mundane world for most people, most of the time, value seems to be generated by emotions, even in the mundane life of scientists.

The idea that emotions can serve as tags for meaning suggests a new dimension to the study of morality. Haidt (2003) has proposed that specific emotions and groups of specific emotions play an important part in particular moral issues, each emotion or group encouraging specific kinds of thought and/or behavior. However, this note suggests that there is also a way in which any emotion can function to give intense meaning to a moral imperative, since it marks it off as enormously, fatefully different than moral issues that have little or no emotional underpinning.

These considerations help me now understand the utter boredom I felt in the various church services I attended in my youth in the southern U.S. In addition to the Jewish services when I was living with my parents, I was exposed to a variety of Christian churches at my private high school, since attendance was required every Sunday. Even though I tried, I could never get beyond the words. The one exception was a working class black church that I visited on my own, alive with a community of singing, shouting, and obviously underneath the entire service, feelings.

Emotions point us toward meaning in our lives. Moral codes unaccompanied by emotions, even weak emotions, are apt to become as meaningless as most of the other cognitions we carry around. Such codes become empty husks, leaving their holders without moral direction in real life, or importantly, providing excuses for destructive directions.

Repression of Emotions

If it is emotions that enliven moral codes, then there is a vast problem. In modern societies, spontaneous emotions are systematically discouraged, both in children and in adults. Boys, especially, quickly learn that emotions other than anger are usually taken as a sign of weakness. Women in the workplace know that crying is unlikely to be tolerated.

Hospice workers report that most families quickly become intolerant of normal grieving, to the point that mourners may be given psychiatric drugs to stop their crying. In the huge realm of medical research, emotions are usually portrayed as the enemy. Not just anger, but also grief, fear and shame. A new diagnostic label, Emotional

Lability, is applied to what may be normal emotions. An even more belittling label is Emotional Incontinence. Perhaps these terms should make us more thankful for the diagnostic label of alexithymia (emotionalessness), which is probably far more widespread than too much emotion.

In the fast pace of hypercognized societies, one learns that there is “No Time to Cry” (Iris Dement 1993).

My father died a year ago today, the rooster started crowing when they carried Dad away

There beside my mother, in the living room, I stood
With my brothers and my sisters knowing Dad was gone for good
Well, I stayed at home just long enough to lay him in the ground
And then I caught a plane to do a show up north in Detroit town
Because I’m older now and I’ve got no time to cry
I’ve got no time to look back, I’ve got no time to see
The pieces of my heart that have been ripped away from me
And if the feeling starts to coming, I’ve learned to stop ‘em fast
‘Cause I don’t know, if I let them go, they might not wanna pass
And there’s just so many people trying to get me on the phone
And there’s bills to pay, and songs to play, and a house to make a home
I guess I’m older now and I’ve got no time to cry.

The intolerance of authentic emotions and mass hypercognition together may be the main reason that the need for meaning can be exploited by emotional stimuli. In mass entertainment, pop music and commercial films usually follow mechanical formulas that arouse emotions. Most pop songs attract a following not because of their art or useful guidance, but because they manipulate unresolved emotions, feelings of love, infatuation, love, anger, and shame. Horror films, similarly, arouse fear. Action films both arouse and justify the affect of vengeance. Mass entertainment seems to be popular to the extent that it arouses emotions, no matter how mechanically.

Political exploitation of the need for meaning through emotion may be a similar device. The fraudulent marketing of the Iraq war may have been successful because it played on and amplified the fear and vengefulness in the public that resulted from 9/11. Perhaps manipulation of the public will continue as long as authentic emotions are lost in a sea of cognition.

Haidt (2003) discusses the possibility that one emotion in particular, shame, might be important in the moral universe. But it seems to me that he doesn’t give this possibility nearly enough consideration. In my view, it is almost always involuntary experiences of shame, or the anticipation of shame, that gives morality its force. A society that represses most emotions, particularly shame, would therefore in grave danger of being morally rudderless.

There is another issue that makes shame important, even, one might say, the master emotion. It is the emotion that serves to regulate all the other emotions. Men don’t cry because they are ashamed of being seen as weak, and don’t show fear because they have learned to equate being fearful with cowardice. (For a brilliant and detailed description

of the catastrophic effects on an individual of insufficient and ineffective suppressing fear in the military, see William Styron's (2009) story, which seems to be based on his experience as a Marine during WWII.

In his brilliant study of the modernizing process in six European countries over a period of five hundred years, Elias (2000) found that in the movements toward modern societies, shame not only became more and more important as a guide to social life, but also became more and more repressed. These findings support my sense that something needs to be done before our civilization collapses entirely.

Are There Any Remedies?

The completely repressive attitude toward emotions (except anger) in modern societies makes most moral codes problematic, mere trappings or lethal ideologies, and creates many other dysfunctions. Changing this attitude would be extremely difficult, since it is instilled in each of us from childhood. As adults it is a powerfully intrusive social institution, yet is more or less hidden from view.

To encourage discussion of the larger problem, the rest of this note will concern a remedy that I have been developing, on a small scale, for many years. It has two parts: first, high school and college classes that teach young people about the emotional/relational world by using pop songs lyrics, and secondly, if the classes catch on, a national contest for writing song lyrics that would appeal to the graduates of the classes. Before outlining this plan, I will first describe my experience, in some detail, with an earlier class of this type, which I called Communicating.

I have taught college freshmen classes whose goal was practical learning about emotions and relationships for many years. Because my intention was to help male students particularly, it was obvious early on that if the seminar title had the word emotion or relationship in it, male students wouldn't enroll. So I called it "Communicating." The new title picked up a few males, but not nearly enough for gender balance. Because this problem touches on central issues, I will describe two further steps I took to get male involvement.

Some time after the title change, a colleague suggested a more drastic step: for registration, divide the class into two, one for men, the other for women. But arrange that the two classes meet at the same time and place. This step proved to be effective. It apparently corrects for the different amount of interest in the seminar between men and women. It seems to be a first option for many women, but a last option for many men.

The splitting of class registration keeps places open for the slow moving males, because the fast moving females cannot take their slots. Actually, it doesn't work perfectly, because some women sign on in the men's section. Even so, with the system as it was, the gender balance was close enough, usually a ratio of some 8 or 9 men and 12 to 15 women.

The last problem I faced in teaching the seminar concerned differences in continuing involvement in the class. Most of the men in the class liked it so long as we were discussing student's real life difficult dialogues. In the language that students use, emotions are seldom mentioned. When references are made, they are usually indirect. For example, there are many metaphors that refer to embarrassment indirectly: "It was

an awkward moment for me.” As long as the discussion of emotions implied in the students’ dialogues was absent or indirect, the men were involved as much as the women. The class discussions were linked to learning communication skills that the men seemed to appreciate.

However, when discussion turned to open references to emotions, such as anger, grief, fear, or shame/embarrassment, most of the men slowed down. Although the women were vitally interested, at least half of the men would grow silent. Occasionally one of the more vocal men complained about what seems to him excessive attention to emotions. Most of them just withdrew. What to do to get this group involved again?

It took some fumbling, but I found a way. The first time a dialogue led to direct discussion of emotion, sometimes halfway through the quarter, I gave a five-minute talk on the topic “How Emotions are Like Sex” This sentence alone seemed to remove the glaze from men’s eyes. I said that the major emotions are not only signals, but also states of bodily arousal. Each of these states, I continue, has a climax or orgasm. For example, crying can be the orgasm for grief. In the classes where I used this tactic, it drew the recalcitrant men back into discussion. In this way, these classes became as beneficial to men as they are to women.

Although the classes were wildly successful, the scale was so small as to make little difference in the larger society. The freshmen seminars were so small, by rule, that even if I taught in all three regular quarters, I would have dealt with only 60-80 students. So I began to think of a different format for that might enlarge the effect of such a class by extending it to a national level.

A New Class: Pop Songs and Life

A class about pop songs might do the job. At any rate, I will be teaching the first one in the coming Fall quarter. It would probably work best with high school seniors and college freshmen. My experience with college freshman clearly showed that most were deeply interested in pop songs. Their interest came very close to being a religion with many of them, since pop songs have intense personal meanings; they are, so to speak, sacred.

The purpose of the new class would be to help the students compare the songs they love with real life, and in doing so, learn about real life emotions and relationships. In particular, the class would teach how alienated and repressive most Top40 songs have been in the past, and still are in the present. Even students who are not particularly interested in pop songs might be attracted to the course as a vacation from the usual classes. It would be an accessible introduction to the social science of the emotional/relational world.

Ideally, the class would have a discussion format, with no lectures. The main class activity would be an open discussion of the lyrics of pop song lyrics that the students choose. The students could email the teacher one of their favorite romance lyrics before each class meetings. The teacher could select the lyrics that are most popular and/or would be the most useful for comparing songs with their own lives. It would be important that the names of the students who contributed the lyric be strictly anonymous. Because of the searching nature of the class discussions, if students’ choices were identified, they might become anxious about contributing lyrics that they actually liked.

The teacher would help the students to bring out the implications of the lyrics, especially the way emotions and relationships are represented, and how the situations described might be changed in real life. In the lively discussion that would probably ensue, the students might get ideas about the realities of love and romance.

My forthcoming book on pop love songs (Scheff 2010) could serve as a manual for the teachers, but a much shorter and simplified booklet could be available as a reader for the students. It would briefly outline the basic lyric patterns on the Top40 and the representations and distortions of emotions and relationships in most lyrics. In this way, popular songs could become learning songs, as well as being popular. Or at least, this possibility could be discussed in the classes.

Over the years, the students in the many classes I taught on Communicating, which were also a way of teaching about emotions and relationships, were surprised and grateful about what they learned about real life. A constant refrain in their course evaluations was that the class was unlike anything they had ever learned at home or in a school, since it had immediate value for them in their own lives. A pop song class could fill a similar function, but for a much wider audience.

The courses described above could lay the groundwork for a yearly national contest for new song lyrics. Cash awards would be made, of course, for the most creative and attractive lyrics. Guaranteed airtime would also be part of the prizes. The winning lyrics would need to be creative and attractive. Yet they would also point toward unalienated love and acknowledged emotions, in a way that the overwhelming majority of past lyrics have not. The classes and the contests could reinforce each other, spreading new ideas and practices in real life.

Conclusion

This note has proposed that emotions might play a major role in morality by serving as markers that distinguish important cognitions from the mass of unimportant ones. To the extent that this proposition is true, then we are facing a vast problem. Most emotions are thoroughly repressed in modern societies, emptying moral codes of sources of meaning, and creating havoc in individual and collective relationships. For the purpose of discussion, two suggestions are made for programs that might begin to lift repression. These programs or others for a similar purpose would require great effort, but our survival may depend on change from the discouragement of feeling in modern life.

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