The Emotion Police

Agnes Callard

March 14, 2019

If you tell me to calm down, I probably won't. The same goes for: "be reasonable," "get over it already," "you're overreacting," "it was just a joke," "it's not such a big deal." When someone minimizes my feelings, my self-protective reflexes kick in. My body, my mind, my job, my interests, my talents—these are all "mine"—but nothing has quite the power to declare itself as "mine" as a passionate emotion does. When waves of anger or love or grief wash over me, that emotion feels like life itself. It wells up from an innermost core, like my voice, which it usually inflects. And so if you move to tamp it down, I parry by shutting you out: I erect walls around my sanctum sanctorum, to shield the flame of my passion—my life—from your soul-quenching intrusions. Who are you to tell me what I can and cannot feel?!

Now imagine a much more ambitious intervention—someone who doesn't just want to quench some particular bout of anger or grief, but to put an end to anger or grief, *simpliciter*. Who could possibly have the gall to tell the entire human race what it should and should not feel? Philosophers, that's who! Philosophers have been legislating emotional life since the time of the Stoics, and the newest vanguard of the movement is currently at work right under your noses. Allow me to introduce you to the Emotion Police.

First we have Rüdiger Bittner, a philosopher at Bielefeld University in Germany, arguing for the wholesale elimination of regret.[1] Sure, Bittner concedes, you should acknowledge that you did something wrong if you have, do what you can to rectify the situation and commit to future improvement—but what's the point of feeling bad about it? Psychological pain clouds your judgment and misdirects your energies; there's no sense in adding a second, unnecessary pain to the wrong already done: "double misery, the second for the sake of the first."

Second, my University of Chicago colleague Martha Nussbaum, the philosopher and public intellectual, attacks anger—and not only the irrational, unjustified, vengeful kind.[2] Or rather, she thinks that *all* anger is, in the last analysis, of just that kind. Anger, she writes, is "always normatively problematic" in that it disposes one to seek payback, or to raise one's status relative to the wrongdoer. Like Bittner, she thinks one should come to a calm, rational understanding of the wrong done, and then, filled with hopeful anticipation, take positive steps towards redress and prevention.

Third, Stephen Wilkinson, a philosopher at Lancaster University in the U.K., argues that the grief we feel at, for example, the death of a loved one fits the DSM-4 characterization of a mental disorder: "First, it involves pain or suffering. Secondly, it involves some kind of incapacity, or interruption of normal functioning."[3] Grieving

[1] Bittner: "Is It Reasonable to Regret Things One Did?" The Journal of Philosophy 89, no. 5 (May, 1992).

[2] Nussbaum: Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[3] Wilkinson: "Is 'Normal Grief' a Mental Disorder?" The Philosophical Quarterly 50, no. 200 (July, 2000).

people are not productive members of society: they do not experience or generate value. And, just to that extent, there is something wrong with them.

Fourth, Paul Bloom, a psychologist at Yale, has written a book against empathy.[4] Yes, someone can be opposed to empathy; *Against Empathy* is the actual title of the book, the funniest line of which is Bloom's comment on another author's book: "His book is called *Against Fairness*. (Not to pick on Asma here, but can you *imagine* a more obnoxious title?)"

Bloom argues that "the exercise of empathy makes the world worse, [and] that it leads to more suffering and less thriving," in comparison to rational, unsentimental do-good-ing. Empathy is unfair; it is partial; it clouds our judgment. Bloom mines his own experience for evidence: "My worst moments as a father aren't when I don't care; they're when I care too much, when I cannot disengage from my children's frustration or pain."

Satisfying all four philosophers at once requires following one simple rule:

The Simple Rule: Anytime you are grieving, or angry, or pained by regret, or suffused with empathy: calm down, quench your passion, ignore what you feel, be rational and productive instead.

That might strike you as crazy, but one doesn't reject philosophical arguments solely on the basis of their conclusions. These four thinkers rightly point to the variety of ways in which negative emotions turn our lives upside down, make us miserable and divert us from pursuing what is good. To be violently angry with one's mother is for that relationship not to be in a fully healthy state—this much seems true. The difficulty is that terms like "health" and "sickness" often have a double meaning.

Consider a fever. Having a fever means you are sick, unhealthy, not functioning at your maximum. But a fever is also a healthy response—to the presence of a bacterial infection in the body. If you didn't have a fever under those circumstances, you'd be *really* sick. Likewise: bleeding. To bleed is to be in an unhealthy condition, but if you have a cut it would be a mark of even more serious illness not to bleed. Physically speaking, there is such a thing as a healthy way of being unhealthy; likewise, emotionally speaking, there is such a thing as a good way of being bad. This has a whiff of illogic about it, to be sure, but I suspect the ultimate culprit is the imperfectly logical character of life itself.

Consider, for example, anger. We are not perfect; we let each other down. When we do, anger gives us a halfway point between the joy of harmonious union and the indifference of permanent disunion. Anger is how love survives the bumps and bruises of innocent misunderstandings and the gashes and lesions of less innocent betrayals and disappointments. Anger is precious as fevers are: without them, the road from infection to death would be much shorter. The same basic argument applies to regret, empathy and grief—yes, they are ways of being psychologically wounded; and no, that

[4] Bloom: Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion (New York: HarperCollins, 2016).

is not a bad thing. When invulnerability is not in the cards, vulnerability can be a form of health.

But I am torn here. Although I can't get on board with the Simple Rule, in spirit I am very much with Team Emotion Police. What is even the point of doing public philosophy if you don't get to tell people what to think, do and feel? So I propose a new target—an emotion that is all bathwater, no baby. I suggest we philosophers adopt a united front in opposition to the emotion of hatred. Hatred has no redeeming qualities. It is a bad way of being bad. We should excise it from the human soul.

Philosophical surgery, like all other forms of philosophy, should begin with definitions. Here goes: to hate something is to have an emotional apprehension of it as bad, without thereby apprehending anything else about it as good. Hatred responds emotionally to badness as such, and we ought not to have any such response. Wallowing in badness—even by way of rejecting it—is a sickness of the soul.

The contours of hatred are made clearer by contrast with anger, which, I contend, always ultimately springs from a place of love. Consider the whole story of anger—getting close enough to let someone make you angry, revealing your anger to them, facing the anger your anger invariably elicits, the struggle to return to equal footing. Working up to and through anger constitutes a delicate and difficult interpersonal negotiation.

Hatred is painless anger; anger without vulnerability; anger without love. It offers us the opportunity to get good and enraged without exposing ourselves to all those difficult conversations, all that loss and pain and—perhaps worst of all—the potential of being called upon to acknowledge ourselves as having been the bigger jerk. Hatred holds the badness of the other at arm's length from oneself. It is condemnation without involvement or investment.

This emotion is bad news, and in some way we all know it: we are furtive and careful in our hatred; we try to cover our tracks. "Who can I hate?" is the simple bully's question. "Who can I hate while maintaining my own lovability?" is how the sophisticated bully puts it; the answer is often "the simple bully." My kids' school has managed to clamp down on bullying so effectively that when I walk down the hallways, the need for a target one can lovably hate is almost palpable. Or consider how, amid the waves of righteous indignation that accompany news stories of prominent people misbehaving, there is a note of relief: finally, someone has screwed up enough that we can unleash on them the full force of our unlimited rage.

Everybody has somebody they feel they can safely hate: if it's not Republicans, it's people who hate Republicans. Billionaires, tourists and politicians are popular targets. Or, safer yet: sexists, racists. Safest of all is to depersonalize one's hatred: I don't hate X, but rather what X did; or how selfish X is; or the way that X-ish people tend to be ignorant of Y; or the fact that X, through no fault of his own, embodies or acts

out the sexist/racist/homophobic norms embodied in social and cultural institutions that have informed his worldview. Or I hate those norms themselves. Or stupidity. Or communism. Or hatred. Or suffering. Or myself.

We know hatred is bad, and search for workarounds: "I am a good kind of hater, because I only hate bad people." Or: "I am not a dangerous hater, since I hate only those more powerful than myself." Or: "I am a philanthropic hater, since I hate ideologies and actions and afflictions, not people." Or we use a different word, such as "disgust," as in "I am disgusted by corporate greed." Only the simplest bullies are capable of honest hatred.

Each of us is on the lookout for safe spaces in which we can allow our hatred to flourish; we cultivate our garden of contempt, we surround it with walls of self-righteousness. If you think I'm wrong, ask yourself: why do Hitler-comparisons continue to flourish in political conversations? What other thought do they express but "this person is so bad, we are allowed to hate him as we hate Hitler"...?

Wait.

Am I saying you cannot even hate Hitler?

A person who murdered millions of people?

Speaking both as the grandchild of four concentration camp survivors, and as a philosopher, I say: you cannot hate Hitler. Or Nazis. Or Nazism. Nor can you hate anyone you think is Hitler-like.

How's that for emotional policing?

Agnes Callard
The Emotion Police
March 14, 2019

The Point Magazine, Examined Life.
<www.thepointmag.com/examined-life/agnes-callard-the-emotion-police/>