Perturbations of Desire

Emotions Disarming Morality in the “Great Song” of
The Mahābhārata

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Recently there has been a good deal of interest in comparative philosophy in the treatment of emotions in non-Western cultures. An issue of Philosophy East and West (1991) and, closely following that, a volume of essays (Marks and Ames 1995), were dedicated to the philosophical debate surrounding the nature and ethics of emotion in South and East Asian thought. These forays have addressed the standard questions (even if somewhat alien to these traditions), notably whether emotion is comparable to or competes with reason in moral and social discourses, whether emotion plays a negative or positive role in the “good life,” whether emotion is in any sense itself “intelligent” and therefore an aid to practical judgment, and whether much significant conceptual strides have been made toward understanding the cognitive, conative, and cultural dimensions of emotion.

Such questions have preoccupied South Asian philosophers from very early times. Indeed, on the broad contours, there are immense parallels between ancient Greek thought on these matters (e.g., Stoic) and classical Indian thinking (e.g., Jain, Buddhist). But within the large corpus of Indian philosophical and literary (but also psychology and popular folk) sources, there is vigorous rivalry in respect of the theoretic approach and systematic treatment of the complex range of issues that doubletless arise in such an inquiry. Curiously however, the competing theories (that straddle mythico-ritual aesthetics, dramaturgy, rhetoric, epic lyricism, and moral discourses) tend rather to reinforce two polarized stereotypes in the Western gaze: “Indian tradition presents no deep concept or historical traces of what an emotion is,” and “The religion and philosophy of India keep its people subsumed to an excessively emotional and therefore irrational form of life.”

However, the current direction of research in South Asian philosophy points to the view that, unlike knowing, recognizing, calculating, and other cognitive occurrences, a basic emotion is to be understood not as a singular episodic experience but on a pair with aesthetic reflexivity (rasa), as a mix variously of sentiment (bhāva), affect, feelings, evaluative sense or, better, “moral reserve,” and—most significantly—the raw stirrings of desire (icchā, kāma, kalpana, bhāvanā), which seeks conscious expression by a transformation of the “stuff” of consciousness itself, namely manas (mind as “innersense,” which in its more refined and cultivated extension is called buddhi, or discriminating intelligence). The horizon of emotion that emerges here would appear to be somewhat more radical than those aligned to the triadic divide of the cognitive, conative, and affective, or other departures. I shall explore this refreshing theoretical position and briefly elucidate its reflective insights in part 1 of this essay. I will illustrate these using “narrativized emotion,” with a paradigmatic scenario in an epic literature, the Mahābhārata, that highlights this line of thinking in part 2. The final section, part 3, will argue for a closer link between desire and emotion, and it draws out some key philosophical and moral ramifications of this view.

1.

Discussions of emotion tend to begin with the body as the first stage of emotional enactments. (This is probably why drama, theater, and sublime performatives cannot make do without embodied representations on the stage.) The body is the locus classicus of feelings, sentiments, and affects, and life of the mind or consciousness represents the challenges, exigencies, and stresses of the external world impinging upon the inner phenomenological world. The body marks the limit of the self, if not of the world too. The senses travel out of the body (in one theory literary as agent-extensions of the mind, to make contact with the world of properties and objects, movements and projected affects, and so on). The mind that sits in (or pervades) the body as an inner sense-faculty (sensus communis) assimilates the sensations, impressions, images, and ideas, appropriating them in its own intentional objects and structural or modal transformations, and it sorts the experiences into their different categories for reflection, possible action, storage in memory, or sheer enjoyment of the self. Some encounters and the ensuing experience may give rise to physiological reactions and sensations overwhelming the body: there may be quivering, shivering, giddiness, nervousness, heaviness of reathing, blushing, and infirmity of posture. One also refers to this, especially when appraising or reporting her overall state of being as "feelings." Some feelings are engendered purely by an individual’s state of mind at a particular time, expressing joy or hap-
piness—hence there is a smile and harmonious bodily gesticulations; but when there is utter confusion, the facial expression or body movements appear fear-stricken, anxious, panicly, moody, fickle, ambivalent and indecisive. The Mahābhārata identifies the body as the vehicle of pleasure and pain (1972–80, chap. 174, 21–22).

To be sure, however, “feelings” in themselves are not considered in Indian thought to be emotions in any definitive sense. The feelings are not of themselves intelligent or intellectual states; rather they are manifestations of “movements in [or of] the body,” not unlike the thirst or hunger that accompanies depletion of fluid and solids in the body. And these feelings might only be transitory, as the Bhagavad Gītā puts it: “Material touching (sense-object contact) that gives rise to cold or heat, pleasure (sukha) or pain (dukkha), comes and goes, it is transient, and is to be endured.”

The background taxonomy presupposed in this analysis comes from the ancient Caraka-saṃhitā (India’s encyclopedia medica), which operates on the (yin-yang-like) duality of the harmony and disharmony of bodily humors (flatulence, bile, phlegm) that result in pleasure and pain. In themselves these physiological movements or modes (when stable) are not emotions but rather are their correlates or symptoms, according to the following seven “insights” into the nature of emotion.

1. There sometimes develops, according to the theory of the ancients, an attachment to pleasure or an aversion to pain. It is then that mere feelings become transformed into a corresponding mental mode (with one or a mix of three attributes, namely tamas, “heaviness/dross”; rajas, “strident/restless”; or sattva, “lightness/purity”), such as excitability in the case of pleasure and perhaps fear and despondency in the case of pain. This distinction between feelings and emotions appears to be quite categorical. In Buddhism, feelings (vedanā) also mark the “entry points” at which dispositional states get transformed into emotions (sankhāra): for instance, pleasant feeling may rouse latent sensual attachment (rāgānusaya), painful feeling may rouse anger (patigānusaya). And this has implications for the analysis of their differential nature and treatment.

2. Emotion invariably registers a sentiment (bhāva) that is not unlike what June McDaniel has curiously called “inspired thought.” This bhāva is born from a crossing of “culture and personality.” The bhāvas are almost invariably subject to refinement and cultivation, or attempted suppression, in any given cultural or ideological environment. The context-dependence and historical, or in the case of literate cultures, intertextual development of certain “extraordinary” (ālaukika) emotions (especially those of the refined aesthetic categories, which possibly follow from a single “original” impulse, such as erotic love, quiescence, or aggression) has been increasingly iterated in Indological inquiry. That is to say, within the context of a particular tradition, religion, or spirituality there is an evocative disposit-

3. Returning to basic emotions, emotion is characterized as being intentional—that is, an emotion is directed toward some object or event. A mere feeling may be an elementary sensation that is not intentionally directed toward some object or other, and it may be a mere reflex or “kneel-jerk” reaction at first blush. Similarly, fear and disgust have identifiable objective correlates, even if the precise objects of these bhāvas remain unnamed or uncharacterized. When one hears the cry, “Wolf! Wolf! Beware . . . run!” the fear that wells up is not identifiable with the “meaning” of the utterance heard as such but is a sentiment in which this meaning transparently tends toward a reference (viśayānusṭu) that is in this instance an animal known to cause harm. Intentionality is a very significant feature of emotion in this theory, on the epistemic motivation that a psychic or inner disposition need not be reduced to itself, hovering without clear regard to its subjective and objective contents (prakārāta, viśayātā).

4. This affective directness or intentionality is marked by concern, rather than appearing as some sort of abstracted and detached apprehension, as in impersonal cognitive intentionality. This defines the ambience in which the object or situation is held or is beholden to the subject as par-
participant in the experience. The example in the above paragraph illustrates this aptly, as in addition to assimilating the propositional content of the utterance—that is, a linguistic-cognitive content capable of being represented in detached analytic symbolism—there is an extracognitive immediacy (parokśahāvārtha) that has the function of raising an alert, cautioning the other to be careful, to flee to safety. Another example is the aura of romance surrounding the attention of a loved one. If the object of attention is threatened, one becomes anxious in relation to the object (another subject), perhaps even paranoid. Indeed, frustration of the object of desire (ichchā or kamā), to which one has attachment (rāga) or a bond results in dejection, or longing and pining.

(5) Implicit in emotion is a deeply subjective dimension with a strong evaluative sensibility, from which certain judgments about good and bad, desirability or undesirability, approval and disapproval are projected onto the object, the act, the “other” event or situation in the awareness field. One might call this evaluative aspect a belief—that is, the subject believes some state of affairs to obtain. However, I do not see any compelling reason why a strict cognitive model of belief, with the strictures of truth-conditions, has to be extended to emotions as characterized here. This might arise as a second-order judgment when passion has delivered its own verdict to reason, as when one rhetorically thinks: “I am an idiot; why did I react in anger? But I did feel right about it at the time…” This evaluative stance is considered to be a significant ingredient of emotion as it is an important (though not the only) way by which a culture grounds its citizens’ responsive sensibility toward personal and social values, ethical imperatives, shared experiences, and moral recollections of tradition (or transcendental valuing). For this reason moral dilemmas and conflict of values are able to evoke such strong emotions; conversely, emotions articulate these moral perturbations, and this is the theme of the next insight.

(6) The point preempted above is that emotion reflects the moral repertoire of the community or culture of which the person is a significant member, in that conflicts may begin to surface when there is clash between an emotional response or sentiment (bhāva) in the subject and certain moral principles enshrined in the culture (the “horizon” or “background moral knowledge” of the tradition). Thus, suppose that after the Buddha and by the time of the epic tradition (or even as late as Gandhi facing the colonialist General Dwyer), the principle of āhimsā or noninjury becomes part of the cultural self-understanding and the moral order, but the calling to war is considered to be a great virtue and the need of the day: duty as virtue. As a result, a citizen may feel immense tension welling up inside her because her emotional response suggests a negative moral evaluation of the consequences of war, the value of which she thought her community had valorized and which she had indeed internalized. The absent loci of a strong corresponding bhūva for the latter virtue (āhimsā) and its surrogate bhūva of nonaggression bhūva of nonaggression are being usurped by the more threatening virtue of āhimsā, violence, with its surrogate bhūva of aggression: this inversion may now stand poised as the “intimate enemy,” the scourge of the “bounds of righteous duty.”

(7) There is a show of altruistic compassion (daitya, lokakṛpā) reinforced by seemingly dispassionate but patently consequentialist appeal to adverse outcomes if some other sentiment or “calling” is heeded rather than the one “appropriate” to the occasion. Thus the warrior-citizen described above might be led to construe her existential state as being one of intense depression and she is therefore provoked into fearing the consequences of the pending encounter. The dispassion may be expressed through a story about the disastrous state of affairs the society will be plunged into in the aftermath of the battle. In other words, utilitarian and consequentialist considerations are searched out and appealed to in order to reinforce the fledgling moral judgment, but more importantly to determine the correct emotional response to the case in hand. How should one act under the circumstances? An engaged response might be the first step in working out the procedural directive, by allowing greater scope to “intelligent sentiment” than a mere reliance on the cool, detached, dispassionate aloofness of reason. The “rational,” or what would be considered reasonable in real-life responsiveness, is not a prerogative of reason alone (as in most theories of rationality, or economic rationalism).

2. MORAL DILEMMAS AND EMOTIONS

I will now introduce briefly a paradigmatic illustration from the battlefield scene in the epic The Mahābhārata, which is narrated in the book famously known as the Bhagavad Gītā, which I shall render as the “Great Song.” My intent is to explore the ethical discourse undergirding the narrative in the background of the general points considered under the seven insights outlined in part 1.

Moments before the assault is launched, the warrior Arjuna shows signs of fatigue and loss of strength, letting the powerful Gāṇḍiva bow slip from his hands. His half-muttered request to brake on the wheels takes Krishna, his charioteer friend, by surprise. Arjuna is palpably troubled by something (the intentional object) and his judgment appears to be hazing over: there are more components to it than his regular cognitive percepts would indicate. It is a matter of (his) mood. His “inner sense” is thrown into a state of confusion, panic, and deep pity (kṛpā), with verbal evocation that his limbs have become weak, mouth dry, body trembling, hair standing on end, and skin erupting in a burning sensation. He confesses that the once cherished desire (kāṁśe) for conquest and aligned convictions appears shaky; he wonders aloud whether there is any joy at the end of this bloody
journey—or even in living (I.32). Expressing a deeper fear for the death of his kinsfolk at his own hands, he preaches to Krishna: “Therefore there is no justification in killing our own kinsfolk” (I.37).

Arjuna continues his disquisition, underscoring utilitarian appeals to the evils of warfare and a plea toward altruistic compassion, speaking of “the rescinding of family laws, ancestral rites, and timeless traditions, with the ultimate consequence of the collapse of society and descend into hellish chaos” (I.40–44). He can no longer stand by his earlier resolve to fight now that the “moral emotion” that he is struggling to articulate appears to be inconsistent with the “moral duty” he was brought up to believe in.

Fallen into self-pity, the despondent warrior pleads to Krishna to make sense of his woeful plight. But in this petition is Arjuna appealing to the pristine virtue of reason over emotions, or is he, instead, asking Krishna to tell him if his emotions are serving him well? Can emotions prefigure morally appropriate, “objective,” and reasonable responses, even if they appear to elude his cognitive or rational discernment? He has not yet discerned clearly whether he feels shame, guilt, regretful, remorseful, or a combination of these: or none of these but something else. Krishna, for his part, proceeds cautiously in helping Arjuna unearth his deep perturbation.

Krishna plays the dual role of a guru and an analyst rolled into one. The guru can, with measured smirk and laugher (häṣṭā), rebuke his honored friend for losing heart at a critical moment. As an analyst, though, he implores him to search out reasons for the fragility of his judgment. Arjuna’s objections to engaging in war appear to be based on well thought out and firm ethical grounds, but when he sets out to articulate the “inspired thought” intelligently his arguments emerge as being scarcely coherent, and the appeal to his own conscience is minimally illuminating. But he is concerned that he is not able to see justice in this situation. In other words, he gives vent to a moral sentiment that he has arrived at as though intuitively (as Hume might also put it): his arguments, it will be noticed, are tangled up in his intense emotional reaction, the source of which he is not able to discern clearly. We can wonder why Arjuna remains perturbed by his emotional condition despite Krishna’s ironic reason. Why would Krishna want to seemingly dismiss his friend’s condition? Is it a socially improper or morally unworthy state to be in? Perhaps it is psychologically or psychosomatically painful and therefore bereft of utility? Or is such an emotional state simply irrational because it fogs well-intended judgment and vitiates the Rawlsian equation, as Matilal has argued elsewhere? But what if emotions have other values and efficiencies (bhāvaka), for example, if a “moral emotion” goes against the grain of cherished religious mores that might, in themselves, be irrational? Have not his emotions made Arjuna a little more reflective, muddled though he is now, than he might otherwise have been about his proper duties? Is he not, as a result, at least “talking it out” with his friend? Indeed, might there not be an obligation to have such emotions, just as there is duty on Arjuna’s part to engage in an action? Might it not also be a person’s inalienable right—on a par with aesthetic or dramatized emotions, whose value no one really questions in the comforts of a theater seat or the civic sponsored museum and art gallery?

In the next section we shall take these reflections a stage further by looking at a theoretical ramifications in the broader context.

3. VARIETIES OF EMOTIONS

According to the Mahābhārata (1985, books 4–5, 289), there are twelve negative emotions or vices that stand in the way of self-control and so are to be avoided: “anger, desire, greed, delusion, possessiveness, non-compassion, discontent, pride, grief, lust, jealousy, and abhorrence.” It is interesting to note that anger and desire head the list. Indian yoga thought has a term stronger than emotion (as bhāva) for these modes: they are called klesās. The Abhidharma Buddhist school has a similar theory about klesās functioning as emotional predispositions or tendencies (anusaya), which lie “dormant” or latent at the unconscious level. The klesās are regarded as forms of psychic sedimentations, which give rise to mental disturbances or excitations.

Desire as lack, then, is a prime suspect heading or enveloping all klesās: it colors all our emotions from beneath, and its frustration translates more readily into obstructive anger than into pleasure (though perhaps both), unless a morbid pleasure (desire as plenium) might be seen as more obstructive than “righteously felt indignation” would be in some contexts. Thus, while Arjuna could be said to have harbored a desire for the kingdom in dispute (at least until the moment of his emotional collapse), he appears not to have expressed any anger. This is rather puzzling, given that he seems to have been overwhelmed by just about every other major negative affect and to have taken some pleasure in the positive affect of generalized compassion (kṛpa). I want to dwell on this issue a while.

It appears that the Mahābhārata’s “Great Song” is open to alternative perspectives to the stark ascetic or stoical tendencies of the ancients. As we saw earlier, Krishna, although apparently denigrating, did not really deny or show utter disrespect for Arjuna’s revaluations of his calling to war, his duty, and so on. In point of fact, Krishna listened intently and recognized a touching concern. He rebuked Arjuna, or rather questioned him, only regarding the grounds on which he was making his revaluations, just as Arjuna could expect to be questioned were he making them in a perfectly regular (or “normal”) rational state. Is he sure that he is not simply projecting his own self-pity as generalized sympathy or altruistic compassion onto others? And whence did he convert to being a singular (crypto-Buddhist) utilitarian and not an Epic/arian Kantian?
Nevertheless, Arjuna proved right in the long run in his prophylactic emotional response. Everything the beleaguered warrior suspected in his apparently confused, fearful, semimorbid and besotted state—the destruction of the kingdom, the carnage of the elders, the collapse of family and tradition, the ruin of his Gāṇḍiva missile, the demise of his invincible golden chariot, and so on—did actually come to pass according to his prediction during the tragic course and untriumphant conclusion of the war. It was a veritable anticlimax. Thus the evil Arjuna had portended in his seemingly tepid turpitude, and the reasons he proffered for his fears in that most despondent and emotionally charged condition (1.31, 36–40), played themselves out in the real world. Although, to be sure, the moral judgment he ventured in his perturbed state was not what the society, consistent with the norms of the time, was prepared to contenance, as we can observe in hindsight. So why did Krishna believe that Arjuna’s appraisal of the impending crisis, and not his own wisdom on the matter, was misguided, erroneous, and amoral? To answer the question one must accept the presuppositions informing Krishna’s assessment of Arjuna’s condition. The first is derived from the following Upanishadic dictum.

A person is what he desires

desires affect his resolve (bratu)

determines action ...

good action makes one good

bad action evil. (Radhakrishnan 1975, IV, 3–4: II, 2, 12)

It is clear that consequentialist appeal, whether by the agent or the theoretician two millennia on, will not suffice to justify a particular emotional response. This is the first register. The second point here pertains to the relation between desire and karma or action. Karma is necessarily conditioned by an antecedent kāma (desire) and ineluctably followed by a corresponding phala (fruit), either in this or in a subsequent life-world (prakṛtīvanam) (De Smet 1977, 59). Hence all actions are binding and also delimited by their outcome: good ones to (and by) a pleasant fruit; bad ones to (and by) a painful one. Without trading in casuistry, if I helped an elderly neighbor cross the street in Melbourne, I might be helped out in Soho to find my way around the Park Place conduit to Chambers Street, although the airless tunnel might make me feel sick.

This view about karma can be rephrased in the “Great Song”’s terms as follows: Let a person but think (dhyāya) of the objects of the senses, attachment (saṅga) is born; from attachment springs desire (kāma); from desire is indignation (krodha, i.e., when desire is frustrated); from indignation (krodha) comes bewilderment (samścāra); from bewilderment wandering of the mind (sṛṃti-vibhrama); from wandering of the mind destruction of the intellect (buddhi-nāśa); once intellect is destroyed, impatience of memory and judgment ... and the person is lost (II, 62–63). The view expressed overlaps with the Buddhist treatment of action, with the difference that the “Great Song” situates kāma (desire) and krodha (indignation) as the paradigmatic passions and holds them in mutual tension (kāma esa krodha esa; III, 37). In this respect also, therefore, Indian thought is closer, on the one hand, to Aristotle and the European schoolmen’s doctrine of desire, and, on the other hand, to the psychoanalytic focus on the link between libido and aggressiveness. Kāma with krodha is characterized as the “timeless foe (nityavairāṇī) of the wise man” (III, 39) lurking in subterranean regions of the self to whiten: “Senses, mind and intellect, they say, are the places where it lurks; through these it smothers wisdom, foiling the embodied self” (III, 40–41). This is its link with unsatisfactoriness—the pervasive instability that manifests variously as doubt, confusion, deceit, distracting thoughts, and, last but not least, erroneous beliefs about reality. It is interesting to note that a voracious term for desire is bhāvam, as a voluntary wish or covert expectation (sankalpa), achieved through adding a suffix to the root word for emotion (bhāva). This etymological link is a reflection of their deep epistemic and phenomenal relation.

Arjuna is said to have been lured by kāma, desire that accentuates attachment to things. While renouncing, in the spirit of dispassion, all remaining desires for joy and power—desires to which he is entitled as a warrior—he retains other desires, or passionate attachments, or rather disinterested passions, which occlude his vision. By rights, the frustration of these desires should evoke a rage of anger in him, not just resentment.

It would seem in theory at least, should come naturally to Arjuna, for in his present constitution the attributes (guna) of rajas (movement) and tamas (heaviness) mutually reign in excess of sattva (lightness), which are key attributes of just about all mental modes with corresponding emotions that divide somewhat neatly into three clusters. This surely in part accounts for the weakness of his will and the lack of resolve in his determination (vyavasthā). However, nowhere in his introspective ruminations does Arjuna once give any hint of being seized by anger.

There is one apparent exception: after having sketched the dire consequences of the impending war, and as if throwing his arms up in the air “hot and cold,” he exclaims, “Ah! alas! mighty evil (pañca) to perpetrate has been our resolve!” (I, 45). But this posturing is followed immediately by delivery of rather fragile moral good by the desire “in the mind” (buddhi, as “conscience”) that stands perturbed. But this “good” is also in a sense empty of substantive contents, for its value is not in the parts or particular acts it sets off but rather in the “whole” sense of life’s accomplishment from a future standpoint. Arjuna is thus happier to be judged by this fragility rather than by the number of violent acts and beheaded “enemy trophies” he can display at the endgame. And this negative good that has emerged from the deep well of the will (vyakta-buddhi) as his intelligent resolve consists in disarming himself, forfeiting the valorized virtue of courage, and submitting to death by the other (I, 46. 47). This is not the way...
of an angry, livid person: rather, again, stoicism or śrāvaniṇī resemblance aside, this appears to be the posture of a timid, humiliated, and withdrawn man.

The explanation I favor is that anger, with the concomitant expression of aggression, is theatrically or visibly a greater embarrassment and threat than the disruption or frustration of desire (which can be kept as part of one’s personal or “private language,” suppressed and sublimated in other ways). But anger is a consequent rather than the antecedent of the perturbation of desire. For this reason some traditions would rather suppress anger “in the bud” or at every opportunity. Also, anger, much like pain, is an occurrence that need not last for too long, while desire is seen as being deeply entrenched, as advanced cancerous cells, or at least pervasive across a good part of the individual’s psyche and “subtle” body corporate. True, there are numerous incidents and situations, before, during, and after the war, when rage (kapota) and anger expressed by members of the feuding parties appear with some prominence. But these incidents merely exemplify the theory of self-control that the Mahābhārata adopts from the yoga tradition. At no point does Arjuna’s “blood boil over”; he seemed too “coolheaded” and in a more pensive mood to suffer any indignation or afflict the same upon others. Moreover, he was not given a voice of rightful indignation to express his sense of being morally affronted. If Arjuna had allowed himself to become angry, he might well have judged differently, and he may even have felt sufficiently empowered to resolve his dilemma in a different direction that could have resulted in a more radical action. One cannot escape the conclusion: “righteous indignation” fails to receive the regard in this tradition accorded it by, say, Aristotelian ethics, or in Buddhism, as de Silva (forthcoming) has forcefully shown.

Stocker (1996, 253) considers detachment in the exemplary lives of, say, Zen masters, and he wonders whether such affectivity can be devoid totally of passion and anger, especially when one’s sensibility (such as religious identity) is slighted. If so, Aristotle might be mistaken in holding that anger is essential to a good human life. But I think the kind of dispassion that Krishna is preaching here is really in relation to personal affront rather than slight to one’s group, clan, or communal identity—for which the reaction is more structured and where the respondent at large is the tradition. Hence Brahmanic and upper-caste vituperate anger was never seriously in doubt, except in the minds of marginal players, the oppressed, and outsiders (where women more often than not belonged).

Nevertheless, the discourse of desire receives a great deal more attention than anger does in the “Great Song.” Krishna has not denied Arjuna’s inherent capacity to make fair judgment of the situation; he has simply cast doubt on Arjuna’s ability to reason and correctly evaluate his situation while in the grips of desire. This is indeed a paradox: Arjuna believed that he had come to the point of relinquishing all desires—the desire that attaches itself to glory, to fame, to booty from war, to a share in the disputed kingdom, to the fulfillment of caste duty and so on. His desire has been disrupted by his emotional response in the situation. Krishna, on the other hand, tells Arjuna that he is afflicted with desire, and attachment to desire causes other kinds of perturbations, not least frustration, anger, sense of unsatisfactoriness (duṣkṛta), and undignified death at the journey’s cruel end. Only if a person would rid himself of all desires and remain content within himself will he be called ceteris paribus, a person of “steadfast constitution” (sītyupratīṣṭha; II.55). Time and again Krishna’s sermon underscores the negative aspects of emotions such as anger, fear, passion, and egotism rooted in desire, unless moderated by the cool judgment and dispassion of buddhi and resolute will steeped in wisdom and ethically fine-tuned action (II.56, V.26, V.28).

In practical terms what is expected of a person is not the willingness to forfeit or relinquish these emotions in their entirety—and desire is no exception here—but rather to exercise equanimity or a mean sense of balance, an equilibrium, dispassion or disinterested passion (niṣkāma) toward and between the extremes, so that karma does its work. Krishna preaches even-mindedness (samata) toward pleasure and pain—in general, indifference toward pairs of opposites (I.57, II.38, II.45)—as well as not being too excited when experiencing joy, nor feeling ruffled when facing sorrow (V.20).

“Balanced reason,” whose mark is “steadfast constitution,” is then the virtue most exalted—definitely above self-pity and self-concern, and even over altruism and self-enlargement (read self-realization)—for the objective is to let truth (not self or one’s god or the aura of a beloved) shine through the emotions, as much as in cognitions and hermeneutical acts. The seat of reason is buddhi (or bodhi in Buddhist rendition), the intelligent will, and it is toward a stabilization and refinement of the latter that the qualities and virtues being inculcated here are intended. While one can use yogic methods to withdraw from the objects of sense in order to prevent further sensations from arising, it is not so very easy to curb inner and unconscious perturbations born of klesas (“psychic black mirror”) and other sedimented (inverted memory) traces. Tranquility, achieved through prolonged practice of concentration of the mind, or meditation, may be necessary for the “cessation of all sorrows” (II.65). Disposition toward nonviolence, veracity, absence of anger, compassion for all beings, and freedom from the thirst of either extreme are among the highest virtues inculcated through the pragmatics of yoga; but virtues can never take the place of experienced or felt affectivities themselves. The ideal is a mere surrogate for the real (thing).

If one could cultivate the alternative emotion of detachment (asukti; III.25), freeing oneself from the temptations of kāma and also anger, then one would achieve a state of reasonable intelligence (vyavahāràtmika buddhih, II.41) and in this resolute state determine the best course of action.
Such actions would be niskāma—that is, empty of desire—and sthitaprajñā, “of steadfast constitution.” This is a normative heuristic, not a categorical imperative, for emotions cannot be prescribed, they can only be cultivated in a cultural setting. Actions carried out in this state do not bind one; that is to say, karma no longer accrues, for one no longer expects rewards from one’s action (II. 39: VI.14). Desire and self-interest bracketed, one is left in a state of freedom to perform actions from a sense of duty (rather than by compulsion).

The moral import of emotions is not, then, on this view, undermined in the interest of emphasizing the obligation in respect of duty. Indeed, duty is understood, appreciated, and reappraised through insightful emotional response. This response is modulated on the one hand by self-love and on the other by regard toward the wider horizon of cultural sensitivities. At the very end of their enchanting though exhaustive colloquy, Krishna does not issue an unmitigated command to Arjuna; rather, he leaves it to his own better judgment, with these telling words: “Having reflected on this [my words] in all its ramifications, do as you desire” (XVIII.63). In short, you are never implored to (1) eliminate all desires. (2) perform your duty regardless of desire, or (3) simply do my bidding because I am your god. I stand by my earlier hunch that the “reasonableness” so understood means that religion can essentially be reduced to the psychological and cultural, the images of the divine presence and theophanic exuberance to little more “than a rhetorical slide show,” “a heuristic move,” which “psychoanalysis might recognize . . . as an act of positive transference” with hopes of transformation of desire and the possibility (in deference to Matilal and the Mahābhārata’s recalling of the trope) of “moral love.”

CONCLUSION

While desire as lack is everywhere sought to be bracketed and sometimes even extinguished (perhaps a legacy of the ascetic ascendency), in the Indian approach to emotion, it nevertheless is acknowledged to be among the more significant component of the mental and spiritual life-world. And unlike the earlier śrāmānic or ascetic traditions, the yoga praxis does not aspire to the total eradication of desire; a complete dispassion, though desirable, becomes merely an ideal or a limiting concept after the Epics. For this reason, the “Great Song” offers a different avenue to dealing with desire, which admittedly has not been entirely uprooted and may never be. The sermon preempts a Freudian insight into the jouissance of sublimation.

The energy (śakti) of desire can be redirected to another object of focal concentration and thereby transformed into another passion, such as love, or loving compassion (in modern Buddhist parlance). When the intentional structure of this transfigured passion is constitutive of a transcendental object as other, this particular love-passion is called bhakti, prema, or devotion. Sexual or erotic libido likewise can be refined and turned into a channel of love, devotion with jouissance, in intimate comport with the imagery of a chosen, gendered, or nongendered deity, as cultivated in Vajrayāna Buddhist and Hindu Tantric (particularly Bengali Vaiṣṇava Śūfi or Baul) practices. The transformative praxis requires vigilance against obstructions and ego-satisfaction or fetish and boredom overrunning the passions.

In this context desire takes on a different dimension and color. The symbiotic relationship between the subject and other has the capacity to elicit the sublime enjoyment or bhaktirasra, and a tremendous sense of communitas or prassāda (Pali passāda) in the company of the sugha or congregated community. In this identification, love, the most passionate of passions, is reorientated back to the individual: “I return my love in the same way that people bequeath theirs to me” (bhajāmāva: IV.11). The objective of this “grace” (Irigaray’s “gift”) is to increase the individual’s self-esteem and, hence, ability to be responsible for his or her own ethical guidance. So that this transferred “love” does not become egotistic, pace the Buddha’s sermon to the birds; the next moral move has been to disperse much of it toward others; “moral love” has come to be called karuna or “compassion,” “loving kindness,” and so on. But does compassion diminish as the circle expands where equal sympathy for unpreen hordes of sentient being vie for recycled birth? Regardless of these contingencies, compassion is indispensable as a virtuosity for the would-be bodhisattva, arhat, and avatarā, or sage, nearly enlightened beings. For this is a special emotion and its cultivation is a good (śreyā) in itself. The bodhisattva would beam, with the same degree of compassion in all possible worlds whether frothy to the Spinozian brim or empty as the Nāgārjunaian sky.

It is important to understand the psychology here. While compassion for others is in many ways different from a one-to-one relationship between, say, two human individuals, the motivation is nevertheless somewhat similar. The net effect is that of transforming one passion, such as selfishness, into another, such as love, which makes one “intent on” the other (II.61), “trusting-and-loving” another (VII.16). Love (bhāva) engenders firmness (dhrstī) in the mind, thus returning one integrated in mind and body, to the field of dharma or the ethical life-world. Alternative to theistic images, the bhāva that is summoned up here bears comparison to the kind of loving attitude or deeply encompassing, self-effacing, respect some Levinasian ecologists have called for in another context.

This, then, is South Asia’s way of rekindling passion by arresting emotionally depleting passions born of desire and reorienting the perceptual or symbolic field (kyetiśrija) toward a more rationally balanced and passionate window on the world. The end result is to surrender neither to the dictates of a despotic orthodoxy, or orthopraxy, hitherto bridled to the fruits of sacrificial action (yajña), nor to the world- and self-denying tendencies
of stoical asceticism, with its diminution of the role of emotions and passions and the feminine in the life-world. Rather, the tradition settles for something of a middle position that attempts to reconcile the two opposing strands.

But to accede to this fact is also to recognize that reflections on emotions cannot proceed without paying specific attention to the general ethical framework or moral discourse of the culture in which these have their bāhū or topos. Likewise, reflections on the ethical norms and morality of a culture cannot proceed without revaluation and critique that is instigated by emotions, which propels and guides rational deliberation on the pertinent and disturbing issues that might escape mere abstractions. Which emotions are to be cultivated, how many (all forty-eight as in the rasa dramatics?), and how these are used for adaptive and energizing purposes depends upon the mores of a culture at any given point in historical time and geocultural space.

NOTES

1. See Masson 1981 for discussion of the first view, and Nussbaum 1995 for discussion of the second view. Nussbaum charges that non-Western traditions, such as Islamic, Chinese, and Hindu, judge women (among other subjects) to be given more to the emotions than to reason, and Western gender-based and ethnic denigration of emotion intersect with colonial perception, according to which people of developing countries are excessively emotional and normatively irrational, hence their economic plight.

2. Śrīmadbhagavatīgītā, II.4, Śrīmadbhagavatīgītā, in the shortened form The Bhagavad-Gītā (sometimes just The Gītā), is a book within the Mahābhārata, or the Greater Story of the Descendants of Bīrāra (inhabitants of an imagined greater India), the largest continuous poem in world literary achievement. The Bhagavad-Gītā is usually translated in various languages and vernaculars as the "gracious god's eulogy" (referring to Krishna's dialogue with Arjuna), or, after the eighteenth-century Orientalism, simply as the "Lord's Song." The "song-like" here is sharper and rather more philosophical than much else in the Mahābhārata, although a certain moral turpitude is expressed throughout the entire corpus. I am taking an unpoetic license to call this mellifluous book, a moving deliberation that was purportedly "sung" by the legendary scribe Vyāsa of the Mahābhārata, as the "Great Song." I provide my own translation of the verses cited and, no available translation is entirely reliable because the cultural context and moral frames are lost (see n. 16). A good bilingual rendition I have consulted is The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahābhārata (1985).

3. For more on these attributes, see part 3 below.


5. See McDaniel 1995, 41-42. Although McDaniel is using this characterization only in unpacking bāhū in Hindu thought. I think it can be generalized to emotion across the board (without reducing all emotions to bhāva, of course, as some writers tend to).

6. Sheldon Pollock in Chicago has been working on this in the works of Bhoja, an eleventh-century cultural aesthetician. Suthar Visuvallam writes on Abhāvanagupta's reduction of all aesthetic emotions to sāntarasa; see his thesis at www.svahinavas.org.

7. See McDaniel 1995, 46-49. Although McDaniel's goal seems to be to highlight development of bhātirasa, devotional sentiment in Vaiṣṇava tradition.

8. In Indian theory of perception (pratītyasamutpāda), sensations are described as being nirvīna lāpaka (experience); a buzzing, bubbling, inchoate, undirected, hazy cloud that floats into a barely gathered awareness field (kṣeratājñāna). However, even in their prelinguistic givenness it is believed that "strong" experiences that turn out to be cognitions or sentiments, or even memory recognition, are already restructured and therefore expressive at a later moment. In a "this-as-that" form, resembling a propositional attitude. Thus, "this" experience (anubhāva), phenomenologically present, is of that property marking (attached to or instantiated in such and such an object, whose exact identity may still be at large), as in the "blob" I see as "round red-patchiness" out there (and, in the next moment, I mutter, "Ah, it's a tomato").


10. The Rawlsian type of equation that Matilal had sought between "rational frustration" and "appropriate moral repertoire" just does not apply in cross-cultural contexts (or perhaps anywhere except in Cambridge, Massachusetts). See Matilal 2003.

11. Although grief and remorse there were aplenty, but not just these. See the Mahābhārata, book V onward. See also essays in Matilal 1989.

12. See also Bhagavadgītā in the Mahābhārata, VI.41-45, IX.20-21, XVI.19-21.


14. I am grateful to Alan K. L. Chan's laudatory review of Marks and Ames 1995 and succinct extraction from the dense passage in an earlier version of my essay in that collection (1998, 179). This review (more than an anonymous referee's ignorant reading for the Australasian Association of Philosophy's proposed symposium on East-West philosophy, 1995) helped me revise and focus this treatment of emotions in Indian thought.

15. Matilal derives his argument and understanding of "moral love" from the Śrīmadbhagavatīgītā as a corrective to the more pessimistic reading (particularly in the hands of nineteenth-century European philosophes, notably Schopenhauer and Hegel, who penned a commentary of his own on Humboldt's German translation of the text) of the depressive tracts between categorical exhortations to "just war" via caste duty or Bhrāra's vision of natural law and universalized love of others as a matter of self-duty (svadharmā). See Matilal 2003 and the discussion in Bili-maria 2002, 166. Spitko 1999 (45, 46, 50, 310) discusses Matilal on "moral love." (The title is an amartya [immortalizing] deference to the "Third Critique," via Sen.)


17. The ever smiling Dalai Lama, whom Renuka and I went to hear speak...
on the Buddhist philosopher Atiśā. appears to have perfected this wondrous art of beaming back the "loving compassion" he is able to generate in his audience by his majestic presence and constant reference to the pervasiveness of suffering among all sentient beings—the Chinese regime included—which can only be countered, according to the wisdom, by practical application of the values of nonviolence, compassion, and caring responsibility in all possible worlds (bodhi-lokas).

VII

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