

Emotional Selflessness

Abstract

From an emotional perspective, selflessness has little to do with philosophical problems of identity or questions about reality. It can be described in terms of the emotions that a selfless person feels, and the kindness a person displays a result of those emotions. So what does it feel like to be selfless? Apart from a change in the emotional "center of gravity" which may result from the shift of perspective from self to other, does selflessness eliminate or increase the frequency of certain emotions? Does it lead to greater equanimity?

The embodied nature of emotions makes them more difficult to communicate about than external objects, as the latter are easily observable and objectively verifiable by multiple people. Perhaps this lack of objective observability of emotional state also leads to a lack of precision in our language and thinking. In any event, because both the experience of emotion and the bodily sensation contributing to them are subjective phenomena, it is necessary to carefully analyze them to prevent miscommunication about them. It may also be necessary to rethink our relationship to emotions: in some cultures, emotions are unfortunately depicted as only as corrupting influences on rationality. Happily, this perspective seems to be changing as we embrace a deeper understanding of emotional intelligence.

This essay focuses on a range of emotions, from those associated with sensation (such as pain and pleasure) to those associated with external objects (which may be mediated by our concepts). To some extent, this range is under conscious control: emotions are based on the content of awareness. This simple claim has far-reaching consequences, since it points to awareness as a principal connection between emotionality and cognition: what we are aware of determines both subsequent cognitive state and subsequent emotional state.

Introduction

As a concrete example of an emotion, consider anger. On a perceptual level, anger is associated with the sensation of heat, and it often seems to be located in the head. On a conceptual level, anger has an object, such as a particularly annoying enemy. In this latter case, the fact that anger is *about* something entails some level of knowing or recognition of

that thing, which we interpret as evidence that anger is based on the object of our awareness. Finally, anger has an energetic aspect that motivates us to do something.

These aspects of anger differentiate it from the *thought* of anger, which has neither sensation nor an energetic aspect. However, thought and emotion are alike in that they are both based on the object of awareness. As awareness itself can be either open (selfless) or conceptually focused (selfish/otherish), awareness is in large part responsible for the nature of the emotional response. On this basis, we can ask: how do the emotions which arise as a result of maintaining open awareness differ from the emotions that arise as a result of object-focused awareness?

The short answer to this question provided here has two main aspects: our emotional response exhibits greater equanimity and valuation of others as equal to oneself (which leads to unconditional love).

Emotion and Object Awareness

If we make the assumption that emotions form in response to our awareness, as opposed to forming directly in response to sensation (which forms as a direct response to the world), we can draw several conclusions about our emotional state which follow directly from the scope or breadth of that awareness.

Mathematically, an emotion can be viewed as a function which operates on the contents of one's awareness. The restriction of that awareness by attention, whether or not that restriction of awareness is guided by conceptuality, alters the domain on which an emotion operates. Less mathematically, attention alters our emotional state because it isolates the thing to which we react. Although emotions may form in response to things of which we are not aware, they form most strongly in reaction to that thing which is the focus of our awareness[Needs scientific support]. Because our awareness of self or other is guided by conceptual thought, emotions form in response to what we think about. Although this statement may not seem surprising, it has significant logical consequences.

If our awareness is tightly focused on an emotion-laden object, our emotional response tends to lack equanimity. On the other hand, if our awareness is centered on the same object but is more open, our emotional response to that object is tempered by the additional material within our awareness. To understand this in terms of conceptual cognition, note that the

cognition of a concept is an act of forgetting: to conceive of a concept, all of the things which are *not* that concept are neglected. For an abstract concept, all the distinguishing particularities that make individualize the object are omitted, and what remains is the general nature of the concept¹. Hence, the emotional response to that single concept (or thing) is likely to be of greater magnitude than to the net emotional response of all possible concepts (or things), since in the later case the emotion response will "average out". Another way of stating this is that the influence of narrowing awareness, because it often focusses on emotionally salient objects, is to make emotions more extreme than they would otherwise be².

It might also be the case that there is an effect of awareness on emotions with respect to the richness of awareness. An awareness which is not tightly restricted has greater variegation, and perhaps this lack of comparative complexity carries over into the nature of the emotions themselves. In particular, emotions which are formed in response to specifically-characterized entities (particulars or svalaksana) are rich in detail, and emotions formed in response to generally-characterized entities (universals or samanayalaksana) comparatively lack detail.

Conditional Love

Conditional love is love for a particular thing or event. Its conditionality is a result of the thing which is loved; our love for pizza may be conditional on the quality of the cheese. If the cheese is good, then we love the pizza, otherwise we dislike the pizza. Some people might say that they unconditionally love pizza; they might not even care if that pizza did not have cheese on top. In general, though, unconditional love cannot be predicated on a particular object such as pizza, because there are identity conditions for pizza itself.

Conditional love is based on (conceptual) awareness of the object of our love. As we become aware of pizza, a loving response is triggered. When our awareness of the pizza ceases as a result of not sensing or thinking about the pizza, emotion fades. However, the love which is a result of pizza may also be a trigger for conceptualizing and/or seeking out pizza. So the conditioned emotion with respect to an object is both a result of the presentation of an object and a cause for further awareness of that object (i.e. such as thinking about it or isolating it in our visual field, either of which may lead to eating the pizza).

This cognitive-emotional cycle strongly conditions both our emotions and our cognition until it is satisfied by (either temporarily or permanently) removing the object from our awareness or removing the emotions with respect to that object. In the case of pizza, either removing the pizza or distracting us from the thought of pizza might cause us to cease to maintain the concept of pizza. The emotion with respect to the pizza might be tied in with the physical sensation of hunger, and so it could be temporarily removed by eating something. Such as pizza.

Emotion and Open Awareness

As noted in the previous essay, cognitive selflessness can be seen as dwelling in non-conceptual (or intuitive) cognition as opposed to conceptual cognition. In terms of awareness, a selfless awareness is wide-open: it does not isolate a particular self. Emotional selflessness is a reaction to selfless awareness; as a result, the emotional reaction is not a reaction to a (single) self. This wide-aperture of emotional awareness results in an equanimous (net) emotional response.

With respect to selflessness, the lack of a restricted (selfish or otherish) focus for emotions would tend to create more equanimity in an individual. In other words, the emotional consequences of a tragic act befalling a single individual are obviously more significant when one is aware of only that individual, as opposed to the consequences when one is aware of many individuals. Stated in terms of an outward focus, because open awareness does not focus on a particular object, it produces equanimity in virtue of the relative numerosity of its objects. If we did focus our awareness on a particular object, our emotional reaction tends to be more dramatic and less equanimous. As an example, awareness of only ourselves and something that threatens us creates more tension than if we are additionally aware of the beautiful diamond pattern on the snake, a nearby flowering cactus, or even which chalk outline shape might cause people to chuckle.

It is important to recognize that the equanimity we are advocating is not equanimity with respect to an individual object: individual likes and dislikes continue to be liked and disliked, and therefore our behavior with respect to them will not be indifferent. However, those objects remain contextualized in a wide field of awareness instead of being isolated by our attention, and therefore our emotional reactions to those objects entail only a small contribution to our overall emotional state.

Unconditional Love

There are at least three ways in which emotions are transformed through selfless awareness. First, as discussed previously, the amount of equanimity increases. Second, selfish emotions are transformed into selfless emotions. Third, any remaining cognitive-emotional cycles³ are removed. As the first and third points were discussed previously, we will address the second point here.

There several ways in which a selfish emotion can be transformed into a selfless emotion. First of all, let us clarify why we say that selfish emotions are transformed, rather than eliminated. As mentioned previously, emotions are energetic responses to the content of awareness. Even if they are selfish, they have a reason for existing which cannot be simply denied. In other words, even if they are selfish, they are still expressions of emotional intelligence. What the selfish emotion lacks, however, is the otherish emotion. So instead of removing the selfish emotion, we need to add the emotions that were not being considered by the selfish perspective. The augmentation of awareness transforms conditional emotions by causing the cessation of focus on the object of attachment. This transformation involves greater equanimity, as mentioned previously, and a transformation of the selfish emotion.

So which emotions are transformed, and what they are transformed into? In practice, it is difficult to be certain which emotions remain in a selfless mind: most spiritual traditions hold that there is a great deal of unconditional love, and that emotions such as hatred disappear. We will present a logical argument for the presence of unconditional love, however, based directly on the notion of selflessness.

A sentient being *inherently* wishes to increase the happiness of, and decrease the suffering of, its self. As intuition does not have a notion (or at least a single notion) of self/other, however, intuition simply wishes to increase feelings of happiness and decrease feelings of suffering: its desire to increase happiness and decrease suffering is not inherently restricted to our selves, our bodies, or any other way: it is simply not restricted. Our perception of pleasure and pain however, which are a primitive indicator of happiness and suffering, do have a certain locus. Although emotions are wired to others through mirror neurons just as they are wired to us through local connections, they may differ in their neuronal density or synaptic strength.

When intuition is augmented with dualistic reason, which carries with it objective knowing

and thus knowing of others, the mind becomes both nondual and objectively knowing (i.e. it knows of non-subjective being through communication). In other words, it is an intuitive mind which has been conditioned by empathy with others, and therefore it is an intuitive wisdom which cares for others. We will refer to the wish to increase happiness and decrease suffering for all sentient beings as love. Because there is no self which conditions this love, we will refer to it as unconditional love.

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to explore the emotional aspect of selflessness. To do so, emotion was analyzed with respect to the object of awareness; as attention creates either awareness of an object or open awareness, so emotion is a reaction to the focus of that attention. This distinction between object awareness and open awareness parallels the distinction between conceptual mind and intuitive (or non-conceptual) mind.

Selfless awareness was identified with open awareness: an awareness which is both unconditional (non-focused) awareness and absent of a self. The lack of a particular focus entails emotional aggregation, which results in greater comparative equanimity. The lack of a self entails that the desire for happiness and the aversion for suffering that naturally characterizes all beings extends without bound as universal empathy, which we identified with the emotion of unconditional love⁴.

¹ as a concept is simply a generalization.

² just as conceptuality makes knowing itself more black-and-white.

³ These cycles are associated with, if not identical to, the notion of kleshas.

⁴ In the Christian tradition this would be identified with agape, and in the Buddhist tradition this would be identified with the first two of the Brahma Viharas, loving-kindness and compassion.