

Chapter 1

The Complexity of Emotions

For every complex problem, there is a solution that is simple, neat, and wrong.
—H. L. Mencken

Emotions are highly complex and subtle phenomena whose explanation requires careful and systematic analysis of their multiple characteristics and components. Before embarking on such a task, I would like to address the reasons for this complexity of emotions and to explain accordingly the methods I use when analyzing them.

Reasons for the Complexity of Emotions

If we only wanted to be happy it would be easy; but we want to be happier than other people, which is almost always difficult, since we think them happier than they are.
—Montesquieu

The major reason for the complexity of emotions is their *great sensitivity to personal and contextual circumstances*. The manner in which we conceive of a certain context or a certain person plays a crucial role in the generation of our emotions. The emotional susceptibility to contextual and personal attributes makes it difficult to define the characteristics common to all emotions; hence, no single essence is necessary and sufficient for all emotions. Classic definitions in terms of sufficient and necessary conditions are not very useful in the study of emotions.

The sensitivity of emotions to personal and contextual circumstances is nicely illustrated by the example of an artist's model who is suddenly made to feel ashamed of her nudity because she realizes that the artist for whom she is posing no longer regards her as a mere model but is thinking of her as a woman. The shift in the artist's attitude has changed from an initially detached, impersonal relationship into a close, personal one. Since only the latter relationship is typical of emotions, the model begins to feel shame at her nakedness.¹ Another example in kind would be that of a man whose wife is a top executive in a large company

and who does not normally experience jealousy. One day he reads in the newspaper about another female top executive who had an affair with her employee and suddenly he begins to feel jealous. In both examples, emotions are generated without apparent difference in “objective” circumstances; the change is in one’s subjective evaluation of the other’s subjective attitude.

In other cases, an emotion may be generated in one situation but not generated in another situation that is identical to the first apart from one aspect: it is not experienced for the first time. Macbeth is horrified the first time he commits murder, but grows increasingly immune to emotional response in his subsequent murders. Similarly, a prostitute may feel shame with her first client, but not with her client number five thousand two hundred two. After participating in an orgy and being invited back the very next night, Voltaire declined with the following explanation: “Once, a philosopher, twice, a pervert!”

Looking simply at the “objective” nature of the situation is not sufficient for predicting the generation of emotions. Such prediction is much more complex and should refer to other personal and contextual features.

Another example of the sensitivity of emotions to personal and contextual circumstances is the pathological case, reported in the psychological literature, of a woman whose prerequisite for falling in love with a man is that he be a widower still in mourning for his deceased wife. Limitations of this kind are, in varying degree, characteristic of emotions in normal cases as well. Thus, something that normally arouses curiosity may inspire fear in an unfamiliar context. Similarly, a dollar attained because of good luck could elicit surprise; a dollar earned by hard work might produce pride; and a dollar received from a friend when in need is likely to beget gratitude.²

Other mental capacities are also sensitive to personal and contextual circumstances but not to the extent that emotions are. Seeing my neighbor remains more or less the same in diverse contexts and is fairly, though not entirely, independent of my personality. My memory of and thoughts about this person are also sensitive to contextual and personal circumstances, but not in the way emotions are.

Another major reason for the complexity of emotions is that *they often consist of a cluster of emotions and not merely a single one*. Thus, grief may involve anger, guilt, and shame; guilt may be associated with fear; love may incorporate jealousy, hope, and admiration; and hate may be connected with fear, envy, and contempt. These connections are not accidental; rather they express the fact that the emotional situation is unstable and that our emotions are directed at imaginary and not merely actual situations. Hence, great love and joy are associated with jealousy and fear which stem from the possibility of losing the beloved.

The complexity of emotions is further compounded when we consider that each separate emotion appears in a variety of forms with great differences between them. There are many types of love, sadness, fear, and other emotions; these types express the variety of emotional circumstances. An emotional term usually refers to a highly complex and interactive cluster of emotional states rather than to a

single and isolated entity. An emotion involves an ongoing activity in which we are constantly evaluating new information and acting accordingly. Being in love or being angry is not an isolated internal entity; rather, it is a continuous state of the person as a whole. Emotions should not be described as pictures inside our heads, but as ongoing dynamic experiences that spread over time and may be modified during the course of that time.

An emotion has public aspects, expressed in our behavior, as well as private or unique aspects, for example, a certain feeling. Such public aspects of fear as trembling, perspiring, and feeling weak-kneed cannot, of course, be regarded as internal entities. But neither should the private features of the emotions be thus regarded. Private is something restricted to an individual or a group; it is not necessarily something internal to the individual. The existence of emotions, like that of other mental states, is relational: it presupposes the existence of someone who feels the emotion. There is no love without lovers, and no fear without a frightened agent.

In light of the complexity of emotions, everyday language in this regard is not clear either. The characterization of the term “emotion” is disputable and accordingly different lists of emotions have been suggested. It is commonly accepted that fear, anger, and jealousy are emotions, but it is arguable whether surprise, loneliness, or aesthetic experiences are emotions. The everyday broad usage of “emotion” often refers to situations that are actually not at all related to emotional states. For example, the statement “I am afraid I can’t give you the job” does not refer to fear. People use “emotion” with different connotations, and the meanings of emotional terms differ from one language to another. Different languages have a different vocabulary for emotions. For instance, many languages make no distinction between “jealousy” and “envy”, and have no special word for the emotion termed in German *Schadenfreude* (pleasure-in-others'-misfortune). The linguistic diversity is not accidental but expresses the centrality of emotions in our life and the difficulties inherent in defining emotions. Such diversity makes it difficult to identify and understand emotional phenomena.

Explaining Emotions

Mistrust the person who finds everything good; the person who finds everything evil; and still more the person who is indifferent to everything.

—Johann Kaspar Lavater

The diversity and complexity of emotional phenomena have led people to doubt the explanatory value of the general concept of emotions.³ I believe that although the concept of emotions is indeed quite general and diverse, we nevertheless can make plausible generalizations about emotions. This is precisely what I intend to do in this book.

Explaining emotions despite their complexity requires us, however, to adopt certain conceptual tools. Three such tools are the following:

1. prototype categories;
2. various levels of description and various cognitive perspectives;
3. classifying the emotions into general categories.

These conceptual tools are valuable for many, if not most, phenomena. I believe that the combination of all three of them is of particular importance in explaining emotional phenomena. I turn now to a brief description of the relevance of each of these tools in explaining emotions.

The Prototype Analysis

Few things are harder to put up with than a good example.

—Mark Twain

A distinction can be made between two major types of cognitive categories: “binary” and “prototypical.” *Binary categories* provide a clear criterion that constitutes the sufficient and necessary conditions for membership. It is usually an all-or-nothing category (“love me or leave me,” as Elvis Presley said) with two basic attributes: (1) clear-cut boundaries within which the criterion’s conditions are met, and (2) an equal degree of membership for all items. There are no varying degrees of membership in this category because meeting the criterion is not a matter of degree; it is either met or not met. War veterans, eligible voters, only children, and pregnant women are examples of binary categories. One cannot be a partial veteran, a semieligible voter, almost an only child, or a little bit pregnant.

Membership in a *prototypical category*, on the other hand, is determined by an item’s degree of similarity to the best example in the category: the greater the similarity, the higher the degree of membership. The prototypical category has neither clear-cut boundaries nor an equal degree of membership. Some items are so similar to or so different from the prototype that we have no doubt about their inclusion or exclusion; with other items the degree of similarity makes it difficult or impossible to say for sure whether they belong or not. Many of our everyday categories are prototypical, for example, weapons, clothes, birds, and furniture. Prototypical categories are generally more appropriate to the psychological realm which is complex and has no clear-cut boundaries.⁴

Emotions in general, as well as each particular emotion separately, constitute prototypical categories. Inclusion is determined by *the degree of similarity to the most typical case*. Hence, there is no single essence which is a necessary and sufficient condition for all emotions, and no simple definition of emotions or even of one type of emotion exists. Membership in the general category of emotions, as well as membership in the general category of a particular emotion, is a matter of degree rather than an all-or-nothing affair. Accordingly, each category has a certain

internal structure, and no sharp boundary separates members from nonmembers. Thus, the boundaries between romantic love, liking, and friendship are fuzzy, as are those between envy and jealousy. Different phenomena can be reliably ordered from better to poorer examples of the general category of emotions or of categories of particular emotions. The typical aspects of emotional experiences are fully manifest in prototypical examples; in less typical examples, these characteristics occur in a less developed form and some may even be absent.⁵

Within the prototype framework, emotions are analyzed *as if* they were context-free. For example, the characterization of typical envy is supposed to be valid for all instances of envy. Indeed, in psychological experiments when subjects are asked to describe prototypical categories of emotions, they are left to imagine whatever contexts they like. The sensitivity of emotions to a particular context is not to be found in different characterizations of typical envy, each suitable to a different context, but rather in the flexibility of a single characterization of typical envy. Not all instances of envy have all features of typical envy, nor do they possess these features in the same intensity. Each person may have a somewhat different version of typical envy; the membership of the particular instance in the category of envy is determined by its similarity to the typical case. This manner of analysis can provide general characteristics common to the diverse instances of emotions, while preserving their contextual sensitivity.

I would like now to briefly discuss some of the *difficulties* in using the prototype analysis. A major difficulty in this regard is to define clearly the central notion of "typical." There are various senses which are not always compatible with each other.⁶ For our purpose, it is important not to confuse descriptive terms, such as "common" and "frequent," with normative terms, such as "typical" and "extreme." In the terminology used here, "common" and "frequent" are descriptive terms, referring to the distribution of different items. Common cases are the most frequent and widespread cases of a certain category. "Typical" and "extreme" are terms referring to the structure of a category. Typical cases are those exhibiting significant characteristics of a category. An instance is typical of a category if it has the essential features that are shared by members of that category and does not have many distinctive features that are not shared by category members.⁷ Extreme cases are those having an excessive measure of a property which is by and large diagnostic of the category, but usually appears in a much more moderate form. Generally, typical cases are more common than extreme cases, and common cases are more typical than extreme ones. Common cases are not disproportionate, like extreme cases, but are sometimes not as complex as the typical ones.

Typicality tends to covary with frequency; common instances are generally more typical than unusual instances. A warm and sunny day is both typical and frequent in the summer. Similarly, the typical and common American family has two children. There are, however, circumstances in which typicality is at variance with frequency. This occurs if an attribute is typical of a class when it is highly

diagnostic, that is, when the relative frequency of this attribute is much higher in that class than in a relevant reference class. For example, in one experiment most people stated that it is more typical (or, rather, representative) for a Hollywood actress "to be divorced more than four times," than "to vote Democrat." However, most people from another group stated that, among Hollywood actresses, there are more "women who vote Democrat" than "women who are divorced more than four times." Multiple divorce is diagnostic of Hollywood actresses, but having so many divorces is neither typical nor common among them. That *X* is diagnostic of a category does not mean that an excessive measure of *X* is diagnostic, typical, or common.⁸

Quite often, extreme cases constitute the public image of the category and are mistakenly *perceived* to be both typical and frequent because, like other abnormalities, they are more noticeable than the typical or the common. Indeed, the media are more interested in unique, abnormal cases than in common, normal ones; only the former are exciting to most people. Take, for example, jealousy. The public image of male jealousy invokes the picture of a husband killing his wife because of her infidelity. Yet it is obvious that murder is neither the common nor the typical behavior found in jealousy. Far less than 0.01% of the U.S. male population commits murder in response to adultery.⁹ The typical case of jealousy includes some kind of revenge, or at least a desire for revenge; however, this does not usually take the extreme form of murder. Jealousy encompasses a host of other kinds of more moderate attitudes and activities. The common case of jealousy may not include all components present in typical cases, but includes many of them, and these are not present in a disproportionate amount. Despite the widespread belief that jealousy is a destructive, unacceptable emotion in close relationships, empirical findings indicate that in general, couples both understand and forgive each other's occasional jealousy. Similarly, perceived typical anger is more violent than the actual common and typical anger. Typical cases are often perceived to be more intense than they actually are.¹⁰

The confusion between extreme, typical, and common cases of a mental category confounds not only the public image of these categories but also the public image of psychologists whose patients represent extreme, pathological cases. Indeed, much of the research on emotions has focused on their extreme manifestations, in particular on depressed individuals.¹¹ The tendency to confuse extreme with typical attitudes is greater with regard to perceived morally negative attitudes, such as hate, anger, pleasure-in-others'-misfortune, jealousy, gossip, or revenge, than with perceived positive attitudes, such as happiness, gratitude, or friendship. The reason may be that an excess of negative attitudes is more threatening to the individual and society than an excess of positive attitudes; hence, it is more noticeable. Although there are circumstances in which negative attitudes are valuable, their absence in these circumstances is less damaging than the presence of their excessive forms in other circumstances.¹² The confusion between extreme and typical also prevails regarding attitudes whose definition includes a

subtle equilibrium between various factors; this equilibrium can easily be distorted, turning the typical attitude into an extreme one. As we shall see, this is particularly true concerning gossip and pleasure-in-others'-misfortune, but it is true of all emotions in general.

A typical case is, then, one that exhibits the significant features of the given emotional category and has but a few distinctive features that are not shared by category members. How can we determine what those significant and distinctive features are? One way is to ask people to describe typical cases. Another way is to discover by conceptual analysis the significant features that are related or unrelated to a certain emotional attitude. The first method is common among psychologists, while the second prevails among philosophers. In this work, I use both methods since I consider them complementary. The description of typical cases by laypersons gives us an initial and broad outline of such cases. This outline should, then, be supplemented by a more precise and detailed analysis discerning some underlying characteristics and relationships. Using both methods may prevent confusing a distorted public image with a typical case; it may also ascertain that typical cases are usually common.

The use of prototypical categories may draw the criticism that there can be no counterexamples to the prototypical characterization, since any such example may be regarded as atypical. It is true that confirmation and falsification of a prototypical category are more complex than those of the ordinary binary (all-or-nothing) category, but so is their characterization. Working with categories which have clear-cut and definite boundaries is easier, but they do not adequately represent reality. Since in reality there are usually no such clear boundaries, working with prototypical categories is often more to the point. In light of the prototypical nature of emotions, we should frequently use terms such as "usually," "typically," and "often" while characterizing emotions. Although employing such terms will make it harder to refute the suggested claims, it is implied by the use of a prototypical category. Various instances of emotions are not as nicely divided and clearly arranged as we would like them to be. The refutation of the suggested characterization is still possible, but it cannot consist of describing one isolated case which seems to be an exception; it would have to show that most phenomena are different from the suggested characterization or that the conceptual analysis is inconsistent.¹³

Levels of Description

We don't see things as they are, we see things as we are.

—Anaïs Nin

Any given event may be described by referring to various levels of description. Aristotle argues that anger can be described on two major levels. A scientist may describe anger as a boiling of the blood and the presence of heat around the heart,

and a philosopher may describe anger as the desire to retaliate by returning evil for evil.¹⁴ The desire to retaliate cannot be found in the boiling blood, which is, however, a necessary supporting basis for that desire. To explain the desire we have to refer to the evil that was inflicted and not to the boiling blood. We cannot understand the nature of higher-level phenomena—for instance, the emergence of social movements—by merely studying discrete lower-level entities, such as individual persons; nevertheless, understanding the latter may be relevant to understanding the former. A clear distinction between the various levels of descriptions is essential to dealing with complex phenomena in general and with the emotions in particular.

An emotion is a complex phenomenon describable on different levels, for example, physiological, biological, psychological, sociological, or philosophical. The physiological level, for instance, consists of neurotransmitters and autonomic and somatic activities of the nervous system involving changes that are primarily associated with the flow of adrenaline, blood pressure, blood circulation, heart rate, respiration, muscular tension, gastrointestinal activity, bodily temperature, secretions, and facial coloring. On the psychological level, an emotion consists of feeling, cognition, evaluation, and motivation. For example, fear is associated with the feeling of dread, some information about the situation, the evaluation of the situation as dangerous, and the desire to avoid the peril. The philosophical level of description considers issues such as emotions and morality and the rationality of emotions.¹⁵ My discussion focuses on the psychological and philosophical levels. This, of course, does not imply that the other levels are of less importance; it merely means that discussing other levels is beyond the scope of this book.

Although each level of description provides us with a unique cognitive perspective, we can also use several cognitive perspectives within the same level of description. Thus, the psychological and philosophical levels can utilize many nonscientific and nonphilosophical sources. Commonsense knowledge, works of art, and other nonscientific sources are quite useful in understanding emotions. There are no robust scientific findings concerning the explanation of most emotional phenomena and general philosophical discussions may not be relevant. The mixture of sources is therefore not indicative of methodological confusion but rather expresses a firm attitude concerning the value of these sources.

Systematic Classifications

When women hold off from marrying men, we call it independence. When men hold off from marrying women, we call it fear of commitment.

—Warren Farrell

The complexity of emotions require us to be highly systematic when describing and classifying the emotions—otherwise, we may become lost in this complexity.

Discussions of emotions are often reduced to either a collection of interesting stories about emotions or a general, vague discourse about some essence of emotions. Neither is satisfactory. The former approach ignores general aspects of emotions, leaving us with some interesting trees but no wood. The latter ignores significant particulars, leaving us with vague general formulas and very little knowledge about actual emotional phenomena. What is needed is a systematic search for general patterns throughout the primeval jungle of emotions. One of the challenges of studying emotions is to formulate a comprehensive conceptual framework that can adequately explain the subtlety of emotional phenomena in all their enormous complexity. I hope that this book will provide an adequate explanation of specific emotional phenomena without obscuring the overall general regularity that is typical of the emotional realm.

All approaches to the classification or analysis of emotions strive *to reduce complexity and heterogeneity*. This simplification has been organized in two major ways: (1) all emotions are classified by referring to elements that are not themselves emotions—for instance, aspects of the feeling dimension or intentional components; (2) all emotions are classified by reference to a few simple emotions which are considered to be basic. Although I believe that the first approach is more useful, the second has an explanatory value as well. The use of different types of classification is not problematic as long as the perspective of each classification is distinguished from the others.

In this book I classify and explain in a systematic manner many aspects of the emotional realm; for example, the characteristics and components of emotions, the affective phenomena related to emotions, the types of emotions, the intensity variables, and the ways of regulating emotions. Such a systematic explanation will help us to better understand the complex emotional realm.

Summary

The truth is rarely pure, and never simple.
—Oscar Wilde

Describing the emotions is a very complex task. Emotions are something people think they can recognize when they see them, yet it is difficult to define them unambiguously. Emotional complexity stems from the fact that emotions are highly sensitive to contextual and personal factors; emotions do not appear in isolation, but in a cluster of emotional attitudes; and the linguistic use of emotional terms is confusing.

In light of this complexity, it is useful to describe emotions by using prototypical categories in which membership is determined by the degree of similarity of an item to the best example in each category. These categories have neither clear-cut boundaries nor is the degree of membership equal. Each emotion can be

analyzed on some level of description, for example, physiological, biological, psychological, or sociological. This book concentrates on the philosophical and psychological levels. Another way of dealing with the complexity of emotions is to use various systematic classifications of different emotional aspects and components. Such systematic classifications facilitate the understanding of emotional regularities.

Due to the diverse linguistic usage surrounding the emotions, any discussion of them calls for an explanation of the way the author uses the term "emotion." Since I believe that emotions constitute a prototypical category, it is not necessary to present a precise definition of emotions, but only a characterization of typical cases. Such a characterization, which is presented in the next chapter, may yield an approximation of what an emotion is. Finer distinctions are provided in the following chapters.