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# Moral Emotions: Reclaiming the Evidence of the Heart. By Anthony J. Steinbock

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*Moral Emotions: Reclaiming the Evidence of the Heart*

By Anthony J. Steinbock

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Anthony J. Steinbock's *Moral Emotions: Reclaiming the Evidence of the Heart*, published 2014 by Northwestern University attempts to construct an argument for the prominence of the emotions in intersubjective experience. Steinbock's stated aim is twofold: offer a more robust account of the human subject in which that subject is not hidebound to its 'perceptual and judicative dimensions, broadly defined (3),' and leverage this account of human subjectivity and the moral emotions to offer a possible solution to the 'problems associated with "modernity" and those encountered at the impasse of postmodernity (3).' He attempts this through a phenomenological approach to the explication of the moral emotions while using 'ordinary language philosophy' to provide him with 'a "leading clue" to the critical elucidation of the phenomena [that is, the moral emotions], (23).'

For Steinbock, the moral emotions are a distinct set of emotions which are fundamentally interpersonal. The moral emotions; pride, shame, guilt, repentance, hope, despair, trust, love, and humility are all 'essentially interpersonal (12)' and take place within the 'interpersonal nexus (12)' of experience. These moral emotions have a normative bearing on our 'moral praxis (13)' due to their arising from, and being lived within our interpersonal experience. 'The legitimacy of norms that emerge (e.g., through shame, guilt, trust, loving, etc.) originate from the experience in which they are given and the interpersonal register in which they are lived (13).'

Much in Steinbock's account warrants praise. His emphasis on, and attempt to reintroduce the emotions into the constitution of the subject, and the bearing this has on the subject as fundamentally interpersonal is welcome and an area where philosophy, specifically phenomenology, can continue to develop. His conception of the interpersonal and his interpersonal nexus in conjunction with our moral practice develops a thought-provoking basis from which to carve out an ethical position. He argues for a thin and nuanced conception of normativity; one that arises contingently out of the lived experience of the moral emotions and that is both constituted and regulated by them (that is, the moral emotions), without advocating moral prescriptivism. Steinbock's alignment of phenomenology and ordinary language philosophy is fitting given his subject matter and the personal nature of their experience, as well as respecting phenomenology's commitment to the evidentiary nature of first and second person descriptions.

Steinbock's distinction between the moral non-moral emotions and each one's respective relationship to the interpersonal nature of experience is central to his argument concerning the robustness of human subjectivity and intersubjectivity. However, it is here that his account begins to suffer. Steinbock intends this distinction to be extremely fine-grained, however he provides little argumentation or explication for how the moral emotions are necessarily interpersonal whereas the non-moral emotions are not. He excludes emotions such as disgust and wonder from the moral emotion because they 'may exclusively relate to an object without

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an interpersonal dimension ever coming into play (14).’ However, this is in direct contradiction to what Steinbock later states about love, which, for him, *does* number amongst the moral emotions. He says ‘[loving] can be oriented toward anything, from persons, to ideas, to a utensil, to the natural environment; we can love wisdom, beauty, truth, and we are oriented toward, and by, the love or hatred of these matters that exhibit these values (224).’ For Steinbock, love, as a moral emotion, is fundamentally interpersonal no matter what one feels love towards (even if this happens to be an idea, object, or an environment), whereas disgust and wonder are not. He fails to fully explicate how these two types of emotions are distinct in relation to the interpersonal sphere. Due to the irrevocably interpersonal nature of experience I would argue that any emotion, including disgust and wonder, even towards an object, would necessarily have an interpersonal adumbration. This is not to say that these emotions need necessarily count as moral emotions or that Steinbock’s account of moral emotions is invalid or inefficacious in shaping our practices in the moral sphere. Rather, Steinbock’s distinction between the moral and non-moral emotions and each of their relationships to the interpersonal sphere of experience needs to be made sharper for the account to work properly.

This lack of clarity with regards to definitions appears again in Steinbock’s discussion of guilt and his claim that there are three distinct types of demands that weigh on the subject; the epistemic, the aesthetic, and the moral (111-13). Steinbock again attempts to draw this distinction along the lines of the interpersonal which is so central to his argument. For him epistemic and aesthetic demands, while qualitatively distinct from each other, both rest on being context dependent (111 & 112). This, in and of itself, seems innocuous enough, except for the fact that when Steinbock turns towards an explication of the moral demands he states that what distinguishes the epistemic and the aesthetic demands from moral demands is that the latter ‘occurs within an interpersonal framework (113),’ instead of just being context dependent. Nowhere does Steinbock spell out explicitly what the difference between a context and an interpersonal framework is, instead relying on the reader’s intuition to make this distinction for him. He separates these three types of demands without clearly explicating or arguing for the differences between a context and an interpersonal framework, while holding that all experience occurs as part of and within an interpersonal nexus. This is not to say that a context and an interpersonal framework are reducible to each other, but Steinbock is not clear on what exactly distinguishes these two, nor does he discuss the connections between the epistemic, aesthetic, and moral demands. A fuller account of all three of these demands, their connections, inter-connections, and how they contribute to the constitution of the self, understood intersubjectively, is called for but not provided in Steinbock’s text.

Overall Steinbock’s book is well researched; drawing heavily on the phenomenological tradition, psychoanalysis, and the Abrahamic monotheistic traditions. The book’s primary phenomenological inspirations are Husserl, Levinas, and Max Scheler; who receive support from some, perhaps, lesser well known thinkers such as Vladimir Jankélévitch and Eugène Minkowski, as well as contemporary researcher Dan Zahavi. Steinbock also draws on research conducted at the Phenomenology Research Center at Southern Illinois University, of which he is the head. A great deal of the ‘ordinary language’ data comes from the Research Center and one wishes that this was put to more use in the book.

Steinbock’s approach to the moral emotions is one part of a larger phenomenological project he is undertaking to re-establish a more full-bodied notion of self and intersubjectivity and how these can proffer answers to the questions put to the subject by modernism and post-modernism. Whilst this in and of itself is not problematic, it becomes so in *Moral Emotions* because several key terms and concepts are introduced, but not clearly defined or argued for in the book. Terms such as ‘Myself (12),’ ‘inter-Personal (13),’ and ‘vocational self (38)’ are introduced and intended as ontologically distinct categories without an argument for how or why these terms should be understood differently from their mundane usage. Instead, Steinbock repeatedly refers the reader to his other works including *Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology after Husserl* (Northwestern University Press, 1995), *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience* (Indiana University Press, 2007), and *Vocations and Exemplars: The Verticality of Moral Experience* (in preparation) not just for fuller discussions of these concepts, but for their very definitions. If Steinbock wishes these ideas to play a central role in his argument for the moral emotions and their contribution to the constitution of the self he needs to provide the definitions of, and arguments for, these concepts within this book, at least minimally.

Steinbock uses these distinct meanings of Myself, inter-Personal, and vocational self throughout the book to leverage his account of the moral emotions and their constitutive role on the subject as fundamentally intersubjective or interpersonal. It appears that Steinbock intends these terms to fulfil a similar role to the ‘Other’ and ‘infinity’ in a Levinasian sense. This leads to what is the most disconcerting aspect of Steinbock’s account of the moral emotions; they appear to only make sense in, and be efficacious, within a profoundly religious framework. Steinbock’s choice of emotions that count as moral emotions (pride, shame, guilt, repentance, love, etc.) all have long and storied religious histories, and are all exemplars of emotions in the Abrahamic monotheistic religious experience. Steinbock admits as such when he states:

These moral emotions, which have emerged historically and creatively through personal as interpersonal acts, hold essentially for a set of “personal” traditions, for example, the Abrahamic tradition, Western modernity, and so. Indeed, it is also my contention that some emotions may not make sense within a different spiritual tradition, like Zen Buddhism (266-267).

Steinbock’s cross-cultural critique appears to hold, what is problematic about his account is that *within* the Abrahamic monotheistic Western tradition it appears that all experiencers of the so-called moral emotions must participate in this tradition and or have a notion of ‘Other’ and ‘infinity’ similar to that of Levinas for the moral emotions to have an influence on one’s moral practice. Steinbock’s point about the contingency of the generation of the moral emotions is valid, and it cannot be denied that the history of the West is irrevocably structured by the Abrahamic monotheistic tradition. This does not mean that the emotions and the moral emotions can be efficacious in shaping our interpersonal lives only if one participates in the monotheistic traditions or has a notion of alterity as a form of infinite transcendence. Yet this appears to be what Steinbock’s account suggests. There is no denying that the moral emotions have most certainly been generated within the Western Abrahamic monotheistic tradition. However, this does not mean that one needs to be a practicing member of one of the monotheistic faiths or have a notion of alterity as infinite transcendence for the moral emotions to have a bearing on one’s understanding of the self and of intersubjectivity. I contend that emotions, both moral and non-moral, are facets of experience that *anyone* can undergo, and that they do have a bearing on one’s conception of subjectivity and its relationship to intersubjectivity. If Steinbock wishes his account to answer questions raised by modernity and the impasses of post-modernity it needs to remove these religious strictures and be applicable to anyone raised in the Western metaphysical tradition.

This, however, is not a call for a cross-cultural or universal account of the moral emotions. Rather, for Steinbock’s account to be properly phenomenological in relation to the moral emotions it must be able to account for the moral emotions as experienced by anyone *within* the historically contingent, experiential world he is investigating, and his account fails at this. Because of his choice of religious rhetoric and his use of the Levinasian notion of alterity as infinitely ‘Other’, Steinbock’s account fails to capture, in any meaningful sense, the experience of the moral emotions.

This is unfortunate, as Steinbock’s project of recovering a more robust notion of the self and of the irreducibly interpersonal nature of experience, and his attempt at providing a unique answer to the problems of modernity and post-modernity is vital. His attempt to bring the emotions back into our discourse on subjectivity and intersubjectivity and his thin notion of contingent, action guiding normativity that is constructed and regulated by the influences of the moral emotions are both extremely expedient concepts. Ultimately, to be able to fully defend Steinbock’s view, he needs to clear up his distinctions between the moral emotions and the non-moral emotions and the connections between the two in the interpersonal sphere. In conjunction with this, more clarity about the connections and inter-connections between the epistemic, the aesthetic, and the moral demands and how all three of these demands are constitutive of the subject as intersubjective is needed. These issues arise out of an apparent contradiction in Steinbock’s views regarding what does and does not count as moral emotion, and the connections between the subject and the interpersonal sphere. Steinbock also needs to offer a fuller account of how the moral emotions, although contingently generated within a history that is undeniably religious, can now be understood without an appeal to religious rhetoric or to a notion of ‘otherness’ and ‘infinity’ that many living in the post-modern era do not hold.