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# Emotion, Agency and Empathy

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the implications of a simplified appraisal model of emotion to show that our emotions can be best understood as the subjective experience of agency. First it is explained how emotions are fundamentally influenced by two main factors: will, defined as value or what is taken to be good; and control, the determination of whether an identified value will be able to be brought to bear in the world. These two factors are then identified as the essential components of agency. Next it is shown that an agent's power to influence extends even to her own emotions, which can be modified by exercising control over circumstances or by changing her will about them. The paper ends with a look at how empathy, the understanding of the emotional experience of other agents--most importantly God as the ultimate all-powerful agent for good, can help to widen an agent's perspective, orient her will to true goodness, and allow her to thrive emotionally in a world which is not fully controlled.

## I. Will and Control in Emotion

The first step in showing the link between agency and emotion is to explain a simple model which shows how emotion is dependent upon will and control. Will should be broadly understood here as whether a person in some sense positively or negatively values an object, and control as whether they have the power to influence the circumstances related to the object or are subject to them. The suggested model fits well with appraisal theories of emotion, but simplifies them a bit by focusing only on these two major factors.

Andrea Scarantino's *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on emotion broadly groups theories of emotion into three major schools of thought: the feeling tradition, the evaluative tradition, and the motivational tradition. These traditions focus on different facets of emotion as primary, either the patterns of physical and associated mental feelings emotions involve, the cognitive value judgements or perceptions that emotions rest on, or the motivational force of emotions for our behavior and action.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea Scarantino and Ronald de Sousa, "Emotion," *SEP* (Winter 2018 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/emotion> (accessed October 21, 2024).

Theories of emotion in the feeling and motivational tradition will also be referenced to support the view of emotion here advocated, but it is conceptually at home with appraisal theories within the evaluative tradition.

Appraisal theories of emotion in their current iterations grew out of the work of Magda Arnold and others in the mid 20th century, as a response to behaviorist conceptions of emotion which were popular at the time and tried to explain emotion as a purely physical stimulus-response phenomenon. Arnold emphasized the importance of cognitive appraisal to the formation of emotions. She claimed that they signify “a felt tendency toward anything appraised as good, and away from anything appraised as bad”<sup>2</sup> and that they motivate us to action in response to the appraisal.

Richard Lazarus, one of the most celebrated appraisal theorists, summarizes, “The premise of appraisal theory is that people (and infrahuman animals) are constantly evaluating relationships with the environment with respect to their implications for personal well being. . . . In effect, appraisal is a compromise between life as it is and what one wishes it to be, and efficacious coping depends on both.”<sup>3</sup> Appraisal theories have taken a place of prominence in the study of emotion in psychology. “While appraisal cannot explain all and every emotional or affective phenomena, few emotion researchers seem to deny that many if not most incidents of emotional experience in real life are based on some kind of appraisal.”<sup>4</sup>

Though there is some variety in the details, appraisal theories have since converged around the combined factors of value (under several names: desire, motive-consistency, will, etc.) and control (power, coping-potential, responsibility attribution, etc.) in emotion. In contemporary appraisal theory there is “significant overlap” in that “most models include some assessment of motive-consistency and of control or coping-potential as key appraisals.”<sup>5</sup>

Scarantino’s clear and thorough review of the philosophy of emotion which opens the *Handbook of Emotion* situates all appraisal theories within the evaluative tradition. He further distinguishes appraisal theories, affirming Agnes Moors’ two “flavors” of causal appraisal theories and adding a third, which sees appraisals as constitutive rather than causative of emotions.

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<sup>2</sup> Magda Arnold, “Perennial Problems in the Field of Emotion,” *Feelings and Emotions: The Loyola Symposium*, ed. M.B. Arnold (Academic Press, 1970), 175.

<sup>3</sup> Richard S Lazarus, “Relational Meaning and Discrete Emotions” in *Appraisal Processes in Emotion: Theory, Methods, Research*, ed. Klaus R. Scherer, Angela Schorr, Tom Johnstone (Oxford University Press, 2001), 41.

<sup>4</sup> Klaus Scherer, “The Nature and Study of Appraisal” in *Appraisal Processes in Emotion: Theory, Methods, Research*, 390.

<sup>5</sup> Ira J. Roseman and Craig A. Smith, “Appraisal Theory” in *Appraisal Processes in Emotion: Theory, Methods, Research*, 11.

The model discussed in this paper fits within this third flavor. It describes emotion as constituted by the full cognitive and embodied experience of agents, who are most fundamentally perceivers of value with limited power to accomplish value-driven purposes.

Scarantino explains that this “third flavor” of appraisal theory depends on conceptual rather than empirical definition of emotion. He notes that emotion research need not show empirical evidence that fear involves anticipation of a bad outcome, “fear *must* involve the anticipation of bad outcomes in the same sense in which being a bachelor *must* involve being unmarried. No amount of empirical investigation is required to draw this conclusion, which is available simply by reflecting on the conceptual entailments of the terms involved.”<sup>6</sup>

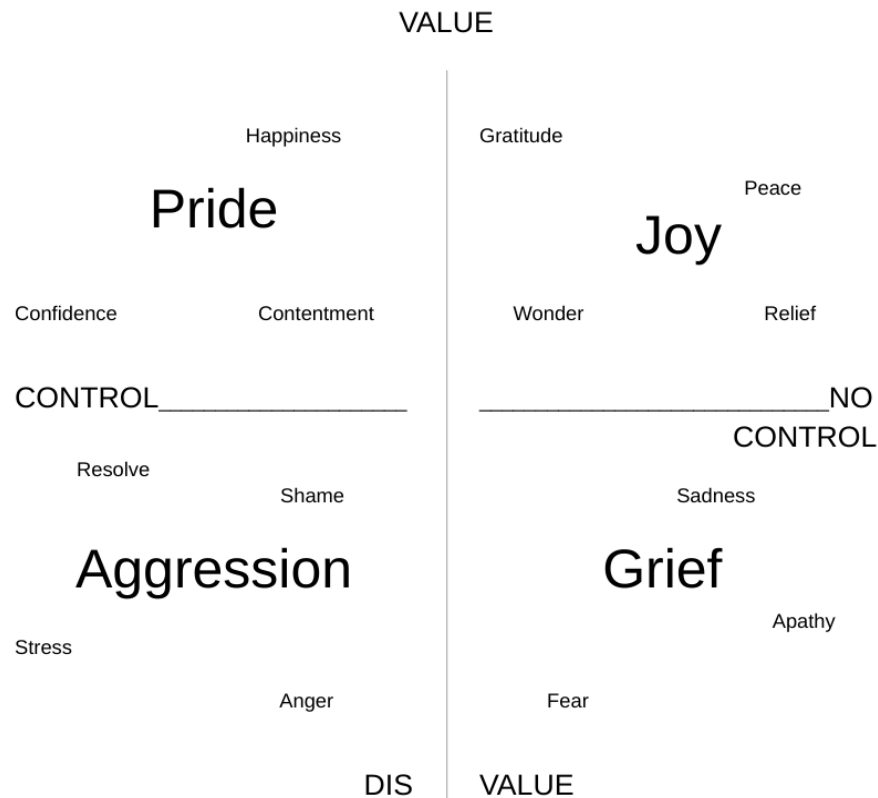
All appraisal theories whether causative or constitutive rely on this intentional and phenomenological understanding of emotion. This type of internal conceptual investigation of the meaning of emotion produces a surprisingly clear identification of value and control as factors which fundamentally constitute our emotional experience. Will and control are at the heart of appraisal theories like Arnold’s, Roseman’s, and Lazarus’s. They are also at the forefront of most people’s intuitive sense of what’s happening in their emotional experience. This is especially true with regard to appraisals of value. Emotions have a readily seen characteristic of identifying an object as good or bad. Appraisals of control may not be as obvious a contributing factor at first, but when positive and negative evaluations are filtered further by distinguishing control and lack of control categories, four major emotion groups are generated into which it becomes relatively easy to sort all feelings. (Using “control” and “lack of control” allows a wider grouping of several different categories named in various appraisal theories which all function in a similar way, for instance, coping potential, present or absent, self or other-caused, past or future.)

These two main variables may be plotted on a quadrant, so that it can be seen on one axis whether a person appraises a situation positively or negatively and, on the other, whether the situation is under the person’s control. This provides a clear pattern and an excellent predictive model of what emotion will be experienced. Figure 1 shows a simple model for how will and control factors determine emotion.

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<sup>6</sup> Andrea Scarantino, “The Philosophy of Emotions and its Impact on Affective Science” in *Handbook of Emotions*, 4th, ed. Michael Lewis, Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones, and Lisa Feldman Barrett (Guilford Press, 2016): 3-39.

Figure 1



A thought experiment provides internal evidence for its conceptual accuracy. Anna has an approaching doctor's appointment where she will undergo diagnostic testing for something serious. Her health is the circumstance she is considering. She may receive good or bad news about her health, and she may have control over her health or not. If she receives bad news and knows she cannot control the decline of her health, she will be frightened, and may grieve or despair. If she gets the same unwilled bad result, but instead feels control because she thinks that by using her ability to undertake healthy behavior or treatments will she be able to regain good health, the feeling experienced will instead be stress--she will work to exhaustion to get her health back. If she gets good news from the doctor and thinks that this is a result of her habitual healthy behavior, she will feel proud of herself and maybe even superior to others who suffer but could have avoided it, as she did by hard work. If she gets good results but thinks instead that they are just lucky, she will have very different emotions--she will be relieved, joyful and even grateful. Anna's emotional responses can be compared with what one predicts one's own emotions might be.

Several appraisal theories support or expand the basic scheme inherent in this model. For instance, Ira Roseman offers a chart which on one axis distinguishes positive and negative assessments, and on the other assigns responsibility to ourselves, others, or circumstances. The emotions he posits to be generated by these categories are exactly the same as the ones in the above model, if “other-caused” is combined with “circumstance-caused,” since neither are controlled by the self.<sup>7</sup> James Russell’s circumplex model is more at home in the motivational tradition of emotion, but also takes a similar shape. He opposes pleasure and misery on one axis and arousal and sleepiness on the other. Arousal and sleepiness are analogous to the control category, since control is arousal is readiness to act where sleepiness is passivity.<sup>8</sup> Even the insights of the feeling tradition can be translated to apply to these categories. When Dewey says that emotion is simply feeling ready to run at the same time we acknowledge a dangerous bear, he is also in the vicinity of seeing emotion as primarily about the positive or negative significance of an event and what can be done about it.<sup>9</sup>

Bennett Helm’s insightful piece dealing with “Emotions as Evaluative Feelings” does an excellent job explaining how underlying concern for something as important or valuable is a “focus” for our emotions. This determines which emotions will be felt with regard to many other “target” factors related to the focus. “In short, to feel one emotion is to be rationally committed to feeling a whole pattern of other emotions with a common focus.”<sup>10</sup> Once that value is determined, as other factors threaten or encourage that value (and it is determined what can be done to mitigate the threats and take advantage of the encouragements), emotions change predictably. When considering a specific instance of an emotion, it is illuminating to imagine a change to the control or will variables and notice how the emotion would be affected.

Richard Lazarus captures well the significance of understanding these two factors for clarifying what could otherwise be the extremely murky domain of human emotions. “In spite of the great appeal that blaming human folly on our emotions has had in much of western thought, emotions follow an implacable logic as long as we view them from the standpoint of an individual’s premises about self and world, even when they are not realistic. It is this logic that we need to understand.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ira J. Roseman, “Appraisal in the Emotion System: Coherence and Strategies for Coping,” *Emotion Review* 5(2) (April 2013): 141-149. See Figure 2 for Roseman’s chart of emotions according to causation and value.

<sup>8</sup> James A. Russell, “A Circumplex Model of Affect,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39(6) (1980): 1161–1178. See Figure 3 for Russell’s general emotional categories from this article.

<sup>9</sup> John Dewey, “The Theory of Emotion. (2) The Significance of Emotions,” *Psychological Review* 2:1 (1895): 13–32.

<sup>10</sup> Bennett W. Helm, “Emotions as Evaluative Feelings,” *Emotion Review* 1:3 (2009): 248–255.

<sup>11</sup> Lazarus, “Relational Meaning and Discrete Emotions,” 60.

### *A closer look at value and control*

As explained above, the will component referred to in this model encompasses several related concepts: value, desire, motive-consistency, goals, etc. These all ultimately point to the human attempt to identify and secure what is good, what Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, characterized as the final end to which all creatures are oriented. The relationship between human desire and true goodness is complex. But what is clear is that when emotion is generated, it reveals which desires or values are “owned” as good so to speak. Helm again, “To have your attention be gripped by the goodness or badness of your circumstances, and thereby to be moved to act accordingly, is to be gripped by what *matters* to you, by something you *care* about, and --crucially-- in a way that essentially involves an appreciation of that mattering.”<sup>12</sup> The emotions exhibited pertain to the values a person actually subscribes to. If these differ from an external standard of what is good, an incorrect emotion may be diagnosed. But the incorrectness will be in contrast to the nature of the external standard. The emotion will be an accurate reflection of the value judgment that has taken place inside the person. Emotions follow Lazarus’s “implacable logic” here.

The will, or value, component of emotion becomes more than cognitive and causally connects to the physical world because of physical embodiment. This allows human beings the ability to control some things, as desires are translated into motion that may bring them about in the world. Giovanna Colombetti’s theory of enactivism describes emotion as a complex function of the embodied cognitive existence of human beings. In her view the cognition that allows the appraisal of situations as good or bad cannot be separated from the bodily feelings that, together with the cognition, constitute the emotion, and lead to action in the world. She writes, “the bodily aspects of emotion are constitutive of the sense of personal significance traditionally provided by a disembodied appraisal.”<sup>13</sup>

When values are experienced bodily they prompt action, often the attempt to exercise control over a situation. In the model advocated here, control is defined as a person’s power to influence the external world through actions that cause effects, as a free-willed (in the libertarian sense), value-oriented break in the otherwise closed causal chain. A complete argument for libertarian freedom cannot be made here.

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<sup>12</sup> Helm, “Emotions as Evaluative Feelings,” 253.

<sup>13</sup> Giovanna Colombetti and Evan Thompson, “The Feeling Body: Towards an Enactive Approach to Emotion,” in *Developmental Perspectives on Embodiment and Consciousness*, ed. Willis F. Overton, Ulrich Müller, and Judith L. Newman (Erlbaum, 2008), 58.



However, the fact that the cognition behind our emotions so thoroughly assumes the reality of our limited control could be taken as evidence that the rejection of free will would result in great difficulty making sense of emotion.

It's important to note that some emotions are generated specifically by the understanding that action would be futile. In *The Heart*, von Hildebrand distinguishes between “tender affectivity” and “energized affectivity,” noting the depth of emotion which is felt when one can only respond by valuing or devaluing circumstances rather than acting to change things.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps because of the incapacity for action it is associated with, in tender affectivity the feelings are stronger and more overwhelming as they are received. “It is in taking the objective situation seriously, in being concerned with the question of whether the objective situation calls for happiness, for joy, or for sorrow, that the great, superabundant spiritual affective experiences are engendered.”<sup>15</sup>

The assessment of whether one has the power to change the world to make it the way one wants it to be makes a crucial difference in one's emotional response. The reason appraisal theories work better than other evaluative theories of emotion is that they don't neglect the importance of a person's own ability to influence the world as a factor in emotion formation.

## II. Emotion and Agency

Section I of this paper has shown that personal values are combined with understanding of what can be done to bring those values about, and together these generate the experience of an emotion. Emotion, having these conceptual roots, drives human beings from mental activity to physical action. This ability to produce goal driven action is agency, which directs everything human beings do, and orders their whole lives according to their values and abilities.

Using the conceptual organization of will, control, and emotion here advocated, the internal experience of human agents can be situated within the wider external world in which perception and action occur. A basic picture can be sketched, in which the two main features of perceived reality are causation (which is the currency of control) and value; and their combination, emotion, is experienced by agents who value and cause.

Human beings awake in life and find themselves within a world which asserts itself on them without their initiative and sometimes against their initiative.

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<sup>14</sup> Dietrich Von Hildebrand, *The Heart: An Analysis of Human and Divine Affectivity* (St. Augustine's Press, 2007), 43.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.



They fundamentally react with some level of like or dislike to just about anything they pay attention to, and they learn that they are able to do things to attempt to get more of what they like and less of what they don't. In other words, they have values and they can cause things. As they begin to act, they learn that the world is partly moldable, but also pushes back. They can also tell when causation is happening around them, and when it is being interrupted by other beings who are also able to function as causes. These are other agents. Eventually they learn that agents respond to them, but not in ways as predictable as non-agent responses become. They piece together a world that they can influence according to their values, but with many features clearly not controlled or generated by themselves, which is full of other similar value-exhibiting influencers. The fundamental factors of their world turn out to be value, causation, and agents. If these are the domain of emotion, it is no surprise that emotion is so essential to the human experience. To borrow the common phrase used in philosophy of mind to characterize qualitative experience, emotion is the "what it is like," of agency.

A fascinating outworking of this is the fact that human beings act on the values they believe in, and so parts of the physical world depend on what their values are. Value in an agent's mind becomes a force of motion on matter and energy as the agent moves matter to achieve her goals. Dallas Willard says, "Will is the ability to originate or refrain from originating something: an act or a thinking. It brings into existence . . . . Will is the capacity for radical and underivative origination of events and things."<sup>16</sup> The importance of understanding and dealing well with our emotions becomes clear when we see how central they are to human agency and how important human agency is in the nature of things. When agents emote and act, they cause real effects in the physical world external to themselves, and on other agents.

To complete the picture of emotional experience of agency in a wider world, more should be said about the forces agents contend with when they encounter what they cannot control themselves. There are both the value-oriented influences of other human agents in the world, and also the influences of forces of the physical world which are not controllable by any human agent. These physical forces can be viewed in two different ways which, as will be seen, make a large difference to one's emotional interpretation of life. It's possible the world was set in motion by a primary creative agent, who acted according to his values, and populated the world with other agents who can value and influence the world as well. If that's true, interacting with the physical world is interacting with the effects of a valuing will. It is also, of course, possible to postulate the physical world as existing impersonally, apart from any

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<sup>16</sup> Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, Colo: NavPress, 2002), 144.

conscious valuer. The implications are important. But they are better understood after looking at how agency works with regard to an agent's own emotions.

### ***The physical power of emotions, our cognitive power over them***

One might object to the idea of emotion's close tie to agency by pointing to the felt nature of emotion, in the sense of a passion, something that comes over a person and takes control. It's true that the physical feelings generated by emotions are, perplexingly, one of the forces to which embodied agents are subject. This is why people may have emotions even about their own emotions themselves, and emotions of fear or despair toward negative emotions when they don't believe they can control them. Part of the plight of agents with only limited power is that they must often judge that they will not be able to get what they want, and they also know that they must then suffer the emotions that attend that circumstance. For some, the threat of being overcome by negative emotion is worth avoiding any attention to value or control whatsoever, in an attempt to thereby throttle the power our feelings may have over us. As Roseman has noted, "[emotions] are widely regarded as among the most powerful of human experiences and are often sought or avoided with great energy and effort."<sup>17</sup>

Normally the physical feelings generated from within one's body are elements of the world human beings are less able to control. But when it comes to the feelings of emotion, surprisingly, the way they are so closely tied to agency means that it is possible to influence these physical feelings, to which one would otherwise be subject, by both action and cognition. Attention to the power and will status of emotional states can provide useful information about the factors that underlie specific emotions which are felt. At times, this can prompt a person to take action and exercise control over circumstances.

The relationship between agency and emotion is clearly evidenced when one attends to the meaning of one's own emotional states. Perhaps the most interesting state to give attention to is the emotions related to aggression and anger, the appraisal that there is something wrong and there is something that can and should be done about it. This set of appraisals is what leads to action, the exercise of power to change the external world. Anger is certainly an emotion that has been categorized as a passion, in that people tend to lose control of themselves when they feel it, and act in ways they might later judge as wrong. But it still fits the description offered by appraisal theory, in that the will evaluates a circumstance, and the agent judges that

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<sup>17</sup> Ira J. Roseman "A Model of Appraisal in the Emotion System" in *Appraisal Processes in Emotion: Theory, Methods, Research*, 81.

there is an opportunity to exert influence. Of course these appraisals can be completely wrong, from another outside perspective. However it is useful to know that when one is surprised or bewildered to feel anger from within, one can look for a judgment one has formed that something is wrong, and an opportunity one has diagnosed for action. If anger can be analyzed in this way, one may be able to correct a bad judgment, and experience the emotion transformed instead of having to battle it behaviorally.

The other categories of emotion are less likely to motivate people to action, since they either like the circumstances they are considering and do not wish to change them, or they understand that they will not be able to change them no matter what they do. It is the latter situation that causes real trouble. Agents, who are inherently oriented toward goodness, seek joy and happiness, and try to avoid fear and other negative emotions. But negative emotions of fear, grief, and despair are frequently thrust upon them because they find themselves unable to control many parts of the external world that are legitimately against their will. When an agent notices a situation that is against her will, negative emotions in the quadrant of aggression will likely first push her to take action to try to regain control and change her situation. But if she is unsuccessful in the use of our power, as she must be at times, this model points to an intriguing possibility. She may be able to pass out of negative emotion by moving counterclockwise around the quadrant, through grief to acceptance and gratitude, if she is able to change her mind about the value of the situation she is considering.

The appraisal literature refers to “reappraisal” as a strategy an agent can use to cope with negative emotions. “Lazarus postulated two types of coping processes: (1) direct actions, designed to alter the organism-environmental relationship, and (2) cognitive reappraisal processes, by which emotional reactions could be aroused or reduced.”<sup>18</sup> It is not lost on Lazarus that changing one’s will can be quite difficult. In the context of the discussion of his emotions about his own cancer diagnosis, he remarks, “To construct a benign reappraisal is easier to say than to do.”<sup>19</sup> Roseman notes the primary importance and possible transformative emotional result that changing one’s will can bring about, “if it is possible to change appraisal of the situation from motive-inconsistent to motive consistent . . . then fear would change to hope. . . The problem, of course, is that appraisals may be quite difficult, if not impossible to modify.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Angela Schorr, “Appraisal: The Evolution of an Idea” in *Appraisal Processes in Emotion: Theory, Methods, Research*, 23.

<sup>19</sup> Lazarus, “Relational Meaning and Discrete Emotions,” 48.

<sup>20</sup> Roseman, “A Model of Appraisal,” 83.

There is a real question of whether this is possible. How can one accept what one doesn't want, or reject what one does want? Many have argued that it in fact isn't possible to change what one desires. And yet phenomenologically people do have a strong sense of being able, as agents, to change their minds, specifically their wills, about situations. On a power and will conception of emotion, the ability to change one's will is quite important to the prospect of human happiness. An agent without power to fully implement her will over the world, will ultimately be destined to dwell emotionally in the quadrant of grief and despair as often as she cannot get what she wants.

Victor Verdejo approaches the question of whether an agent can choose his desires by looking at how desires and beliefs are similar and different with regard to reason and decision-making. He observes that while beliefs are responsive to reasons, desires are not. But he points out that beliefs cannot be held instrumentally, for their consequences, while desires can.<sup>21</sup> This is important. The difference between instrumental desires and ultimate ones in the quest for the good has been a factor in many classifications of goodness, for instance, that of Aristotle. Most desires are in fact instrumental, even if their ultimate goal can be hard to determine. But if a person's deepest desire is for some version of "the good," and what he wants otherwise is as a means to achieve it, those instrumental desires will be very responsive to a deeper or wider understanding of the value of their consequences. Most desires will therefore be potentially moldable by comparing the results of their achievement with what is truly good.

This speaks to why desires are often found to be in conflict: they are mostly instrumental desires which are not guaranteed to bring about what is most deeply desired. This is both because it is impossible to completely predict how events will cause one another in the world, and because it is difficult to be exactly sure what to aim for. This leaves emotional agents in a difficult position, but it does mean that instrumental desires for the good are open to modification and will-changing reappraisal. Perhaps the best way to gain a wider perspective on what to desire is to consider that there are other agents who also value and influence in the world.

### III. Agency requires Empathy

The previous sections have shown that emotion is crucially dependent upon will and control, and that it can therefore be understood as the qualitative experience of agency. This insight is extremely valuable for understanding emotion.

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<sup>21</sup> Victor Verdejo, "Reasons to Desire and Desiring at Will," *Metaphilosophy* 48:3 (April 2017): 355-367.

But for embodied agents the goal is really more than to gain understanding of negative emotions. Instead the hope is to achieve freedom from them and to attain peace, even when agency is frustrated. The model points to reappraisal of value as a key strategy for accomplishing this, but the task of realigning the will toward objects to which it had not naturally been oriented is daunting. In this section empathy will be offered as a strategy for widening one's conception of the good and adopting values which are different from more narrowly self-oriented ideas of goodness.

The fact that the world is full of many agents with differing wills is crucial to the emotional experience of each. First of all, agents may act as the obstacles which resist each other and cause negative emotions. On the other hand, when agents share specific values and work together to achieve them, those positive values are reinforced for each agent, and their collective power in the world is augmented. Where conflict of will brings about negative emotions, unity of will enhances positive ones. It multiplies good feelings toward the goals which have been identified and toward the person with whom the same vision of goodness is shared. This is partly because another's will is not something a person can control, and finding it to agree with their own is a circumstance that belongs in the quadrant of joy and gratitude. When this happens, the person herself is seen as good and desirable, as something which is loved.

Basic to being able to unite in will is the ability to understand the valuing experience of another. Edith Stein defines empathy simply as "acts in which foreign experience is comprehended."<sup>22</sup> She argues that empathy is a fundamental part of the human experience. In addition to knowing about the external world through empathetic understanding of the experience of others, Stein says it is possible to learn about value this way as well. "Every comprehension of different persons can become the basis of an understanding of value."<sup>23</sup> Stein believes that an agent's latent capacities for valuing may be awakened when they are roused by empathy with others who also have those capacities.

As an agent comes to understand the values of others through empathy, she is alerted to value she had not assessed herself, and she may be able to use that new assessment to adjust her own appraisals. Furthermore, she comes to value other agents for their parallel ability to appreciate goodness along with her, which augments her ability to enjoy it. This joining of wills in mutual appreciation is what happens in love, which is perhaps the highest good emotional agents know of. Eleanore Stump ascribes to Thomas Aquinas the view that love is the desire both for the good of the

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<sup>22</sup> Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, transl. Waltraut Stein (Washington: ICS Publications, 1989), 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.



beloved and for union with the beloved.<sup>24</sup> This description of love fits well with the idea that empathy influences our desires toward union of will with other agents. Sharing new values derived from empathy with others also gives us new insight that can be vital for the reappraisal needed to escape from negative emotion.

Empathy allows a person's assessment of the good to be expanded as he comes to understand the values of others. Love brings a person to value others and to work to align in will with others for what is truly good. This leads to much greater success in dealing with conflict of will which generates a large part of people's negative emotional experiences.

But significant problems remain. Human agents don't reliably choose to empathize, love, and work toward shared value (and sin causes all to struggle to do so themselves). Because of this, conflicts of will-directed power are often inevitable, even among those who are trying to love others, in order to maintain the commitment to what is ultimately valuable. In all but the most privileged lives, an agent's power will not be enough to get anything like all that is hoped for in the struggle to negotiate value with other agents with conflicting views. But the situation is even worse when it comes to the struggle against natural forces in the physical world.

Negotiating the value of human desires or even continued survival with a physical universe will get nowhere. Empathy and love cannot be used to appreciate the universe's perspective if it has none. The proper, rational, emotional response to much of life, in this case, might just be fear and despair. Negative emotion has been shown to be the inevitable and appropriate response to unwanted uncontrolled circumstances. Changing one's negative emotions toward the forces of nature would require overpowering the universe physically, or else changing the way one sees the value of death, ultimately, and unwanted circumstances generally. But there is no clear reason to change one's will about whether death, or poverty, or illness should be accepted, when a moral human agent is in disagreement with the valueless void.

But here the Christian has resources unavailable to those who do not know God. If the universe is not impersonal, and is controlled ultimately by an agent who is radiantly good, and supremely powerful, the situation is different. If there is a creator of the world who is a valuing agent, empathetically learning his values and trying to share them in love will be of supreme importance.<sup>25</sup> When an agent finds her will in conflict with what are for her immovable circumstances, she has good reason to reappraise the acceptability of what is happening.

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<sup>24</sup> Eleanore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 91.

<sup>25</sup> This is not to say that I think God values death as something good. Instead, I think his power is able to use even death as a means or instrument to bring life while teaching us love and allowing us real agency.



She can turn her mind in empathy to God's experience, and know that he is not malevolent, indifferent, afraid, or despairing. He is loving, confident, peaceful, even joyful, because he is aware of his good purposes being brought to bear successfully.

More stunningly, in the Christian picture the ultimate agent feels empathy and love toward human beings. He understands how they feel, wants what is good for them, and offers them his power to achieve it. If this picture is subscribed to, it becomes possible to align one's will with God's, by learning from what he shows he values, implements, and allows (maybe for reasons which can't be understood, but which can be trusted because of the goodness of his person), feel confident in his power, and use one's agency to contribute to his purposes while sharing his confidence, peace, and joy.

In von Hildebrand's study of the human heart he notes that emotions he would characterize as falling under responsive "tender affectivity" are themselves given as gifts, in other words, they are not something people can choose or produce. Whether Hildebrand is right about this has been flagged above as an important question at the heart of emotional life. It is the proposal of this paper that where the intellect identifies goodness in God's will without feeling it, what Hildebrand identifies as the heart may be brought along, so to speak, through the process of cultivating empathy with others and with God. Von Hildebrand's work focuses intently on observations of the heart of Jesus in his earthly life in order to learn about the well-functioning human affective life, and he encourages us to ask God to make our hearts like Christ's. Though empathy is not explicitly mentioned, an empathetic cultivation of unity with God's will is in harmony with von Hildebrand's contemplation of the heart of Jesus. It is likely true that appropriate emotions are gifted by means of empathy in the same way that sight is gifted through the function of clear vision. But it is possible that turning one's visual apparatus in a certain direction is a similar strategy to the turning of one's mind in empathy to the value perceptions of other agents in order to feel more clearly.

In dealing with this topic, von Hildebrand also emphasizes his distinction between one's felt assessment of the goodness of a situation (the heart/value) and what one will do about it. While action must submit to God's commands, the heart may feel grief and loss in this submission. "The cross would have no place in our life if our heart conformed to God's will in the sense that everything that God permits could only gladden our hearts."<sup>26</sup> This is an important factor to make note of. Moving from aggressive emotions generated by negative assessment and resistance to the release of control inherent in grief is a step on the path to eventual gratitude and joy.

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<sup>26</sup> Von Hildebrand, *The Heart*, 116.

The importance of the release of control for true joy could possibly be one of the benefits of swallowing the bitterness of loss and sadness.

Loving God and agreeing in empathy with his will is of primary importance for the emotional lives of created human agents. The emotions which are a response to circumstances that are willed but not controlled are gratitude and joy. Accepting circumstances that one does not bring about, but that come from God, ultimately results in these emotions. When human wills align with God, says Dallas Willard, they will, “want the good and be able to do it, the only true human freedom.”<sup>27</sup>

Understanding that the world is controlled by a good God who created human beings to join him and other agents in enjoying goodness, on his terms but with their joyful agreement makes a crucial difference for emotions. Emotional human agents are at the mercy of their fear, anger, and even pride until they acknowledge that these emotions all come from the belief that human beings alone determine and bring about what is good. Neither is ultimately in their purview. Instead, human agents must align their values and their influencing power with the ultimate force for good, and grow in love through empathy with him and others.

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<sup>27</sup> Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 65.