Moral sentiments or moral emotions?

There is a current trend to reevaluate the role emotions and sentiments have in our behavior, thoughts and, therefore, our morality. There are no studies in the social sciences that fail to acknowledge the fact that we are not entirely rational beings, but rather influenced by emotions and sentiments in our decision-making (Camps, 2011). However, in the moral philosophy tradition, the rationalistic paradigm has prevailed in spite of some philosophers such as Spinoza, Hume and Smith, who looked at emotions, passions and sentiments as essential parts of human nature. As an inheritance of Kantian tradition, autonomy has been considered the most important aspect of our constitution as moral beings (Cortina, 2021). Set aside are all the human properties that are considered "irrational", i.e., emotions and sentiments. After all, as Nussbaum points out, emotions and sentiments remind us of our own vulnerability. In fact, this revival of the interest in emotion is nothing new. As Camps (2011) states, in response to the hyper-rationalization of moral philosophy, some philosophers advocated for the role of emotions and sentiments in human nature. Nonetheless, the political doctrines that have dominated moral and political thinking have emphasized the rational part of morality. Therefore, this new spotlight on emotions may be interpreted as a paradigm shift.

Han (2020), however, believes we should be cautious when accepting this renewed interest without considering any implications it may have. According to him, this interest is due in some extent to its capitalization as a mechanism of consumption: "Emotions are dynamic, situational, and performative. Capitalism of emotions exploits these qualities (Han, 2020, p. 68). Being reactive and pre-reflective, emotions are easily manipulated since they themselves lack a critical and reflective dimension.

[...] emotionality runs parallel to the sense of freedom, to the free display of the personality. Being free even means to give way to emotions. The capitalism of emotions uses this freedom. Emotion is celebrated as an expression of free subjectivity (Han, 2020, p. 71).

Lacroix adds to this criticism by arguing that we currently live in the «cult of emotion» (quoted in Victoria Camps, 2011, p.17). In this regard, Camps (2011) points out the cult of emotions as the maximum expression of the cult of the self. Emotions are given free rein with the excuse that "they should be free" and not submit to reason: "Commercial

advertising sells «experiences», «strong sensations», or, directly, «emotions». (Camps, 2011, p. 20). Emotions are then transformed into a catalyst that reacts and influences human behavior without much filter and is in turn used by third-party interests as a means of media manipulation.

This does not mean we should abandon the project of emotions. On the contrary, we should develop it in greater detail. Both Han (2020) and Rawls (2015) would agree that there is a current conceptual confusion between emotions and sentiments. Emotions are attitudes we have in reaction to an event. Moral emotions, therefore, are reactive attitudes we have to a situation in a moral context. Take the following example: a person walks down the street and is accosted and beaten by another person without justification. It is natural for the battered person to react with anger or fear, depending on their own temperament. Anger or fear, in this case, are reactive emotions to a stimulus. What happens, however, if we alter the context a bit? A person participates in a public demonstration and is beaten by a police officer for doing so. In this case, in addition to anger or fear, the beaten person may develop a feeling of indignation, seeing herself as the victim of an attack that violates her civil rights.

The difference between an emotion and a moral sentiment is, therefore, that a sentiment may be associated with a moral concept justified accordingly (Rawls, 1999). Returning to the example, the indignant person may justify her feeling by alluding to the moral concept of justice. It is unfair that she is violated for demonstrating publicly, no matter the reason, as she is exercising her civil rights. Additionally, another important characteristic of sentiments is that they may be shared and have a narrative dimension (Han, 2020). Now let's put ourselves in the place of a third party who witnesses the altercation. In the face of unjust violence, a shared sentiment of indignation arises for moral reasons and its justification comes with an explanation of why it is unjust. Maybe the person was demonstrating in defense of human rights or against discrimination. This person may also have a story to tell directly related to the cause. In this sense, a moral sentiment is narrative but also requires a critical dimension. In turn, moral sentiments are reflective. The person no longer reacts uncritically to a stimulus, but is able to justify her actions by appealing to moral concepts. Moral sentiments, in conclusion, take emotions one step further, to the dimension of critical reflexivity. The mere fact of knowing that something is wrong is not strong enough motivation to avoid it. The moral sentiment would function as the motivation

to act consistently.

Hence, one of the premises of this text is that not only should we focus on moral emotions, since they may be uncritical, but rather we should cultivate them so they may develop into moral sentiments. By doing so, we can take emotions to a critical, narrative and shared dimension.

Anger, resentment, and indignation

Anger, resentment and indignation are three concepts that often come together, and are sometimes used interchangeably. According to Nussbaum (2018) and Camps (2011), in the philosophical tradition, these emotions and sentiments have not been the most popular among moral philosophers. Perhaps the most notable exception to this conception is that of Aristotle (2009), who argues in favor of a tempered and moderated emotion of anger, which, in the right circumstances, may lead to righteous indignation. Righteous indignation, then, occurs when a person witnesses "undeserved good fortune" (Aristotle, 2009, p. 34), or on the other hand, when the person witnesses undeserved harm.

However, we should first distinguish between these three concepts, for they are very different and their implications vary significantly. First of all, let's talk about the concept of anger, which is a rather unpopular passion among philosophers. The stoics and religious traditions, along with other thinkers, consider it an inexcusable passion that only leads to irrational outrage (Dubreuil, 2015). At its simplest, anger is a reactive emotion that comes up in the widest range of situations that are not necessarily moral, and which have physical reactions as well (Kriegel, 2022). We can get angry at someone who has wronged us, but not in the sense that violates our human dignity.

However, when we talk about resentment and indignation, we are taking one step further. Both indignation and resentment are moral sentiments in the sense we have discussed earlier: they both have a reflective aspect, a narrative dimension, and may be collectively shared. In this sense, we can argue that both are *essentially* moral sentiments (Kriegel, 2022). However, I suggest, there is a qualitative aspect that makes them different, and that is their justification.

Let us continue with resentment. Resentment is commonly related to feelings of bitterness and a desire for retribution (Kriegel, 2022). When we feel resentful, we believe a moral harm has been done to us and we may feel the need for payback. It is this feeling of vengeance that drives some people away from considering resentment a fruitful moral sentiment. In some cases, it is even considered an obstacle to moral development (Debreuil, 2015). Nonetheless, Taylor (2019) defends that, under the right circumstances, resentment may be crucial when intervening in situations of injustice:

I shall also disagree with the claim that the desire for retribution is a conceptual part of anger or resentment. The desire for retribution or to punish may sometimes be an element of resentment, but it need not be. When resentment is an attitude characterizing those engaged in social or political struggle, it often has the aim of constructively establishing, restoring or maintaining dignity, rights or some other good (Taylor, 2019, p. 7).

In his most famous essay *Freedom and Resentment*, Strawson (2008) defines resentment as "a reaction to injury or indifference" (Strawson, 2008, p. 15) in which we are implicated personally. Camps (2011) agrees with this definition of resentment being a sentiment of moral wrongdoing in which the person feeling resentful is directly involved. In this thinker's view, the fact of personal involvement is what makes resentment less fruitful, since it might be misguided to a struggle for personal retribution that does not necessarily correspond to a moral wrongdoing or to an incident of social injustice. In my opinion, the key is to understand how to direct these feelings and what resources we may rely on to avoid becoming overwhelmed by the desire for retribution or punishment.

Indignation, on the other hand, has a much brighter outlook, since it is widely considered to be a moral sentiment that is aroused when situations of injustice occur. West (2020) argues that "indignation advocates righteous anger in opposition to immoral, disgusting, or unfair behavior aimed at reducing the dignity of others" (West, 2020, p.532). In this sense, as Yang (2020) suggests, indignation is a "vicarious attitude", as he puts it, that reacts when we witness something immoral: "Indignation is calibrated to injustice" (Yang, 2020, p. 292). Indignation, then, is a moral sentiment that arises when we are third-party spectators of an incident. Even though there are in fact situations where we may feel indignant towards something that has been done to us, the main aspect of indignation is that the indignant person feels that way when a moral principle has been violated, regardless of whether the

harm has been done to them or someone else (Camps, 2011).

Thus, indignation is presented as an essentially moral sentiment, since it is an actual moral compass that helps us discern between fairness and unfairness in moral settings:

Feeling indignation at the violation not only of the simple ordinance but of human rights and the most universal and shared moral principles should be a good way of reacting to disgrace, a sign of moral and social health that should not be despised at all. (Camps, 2011, p.162).

The capacity for indignation might even be considered an essential moral skill for any person (Kriegel, 2022). When we fail to feel indignant in the face of moral tragedy, we are missing something that makes us truly human, and that is the capacity to empathize with other beings that are suffering or whose basic human rights are being compromised. We need to put ourselves in others' shoes, go beyond empathy, look at the face of injustice and all the people that have been left out so we may truly feel what Valverde (2015) calls radical empathy. This inner feeling of outrage is not only far from being irrational, but in the context of injustice, it is the only rational way to feel.

Consequently, indignation gains relevance in social settings where human and civil rights tend to be violated. In a recent study carried out in Mexico (Atilano-Barbosa, Paredes, Enciso, Pasaye and Mercadillo, 20022), researchers found that in a country where violence takes place on an everyday basis, people who are exposed to violence in the mass media tend to feel indignant towards the institutions that allow such things to happen and start demanding radical social change. In another study (Assouline and Trager, 2021), scholars investigated the political impact that indignation had on social leaders who used it as a moral detonator for political change, regardless of the purpose.

Thus, the sentiment of indignation may become a very powerful tool and potentially have a large-scale impact on the lives of many people. It is crucial then, as Aristotle said, to feel indignation and anger or even resentment in a moderated and tempered way. Only by calibrating our own feelings to the reality we observe and to basic universal moral principles of human dignity are we able to tune up our moral compass and feel indignant to an appropriate measure and in the right circumstances. To help elucidate this objective, I

shall suggest the Rawlsian conception of the sense of justice, which, from my point of view, brings together the most important aspects of indignation as a moral sentiment, as well as a comprehensive conception of justice and moral learning.

The Rawlsian Sense of Justice

John Rawls dedicates a complete chapter of his most famous work *A Theory of Justice* (1999) to the topic of the sense of justice. For him, defining the sense of justice means proving that his theory of justice as fairness, as a comprehensive conception of justice, can be sustained over time. This is achieved by providing a mechanism for the stability of justice as fairness, which is guaranteed by the sense of justice.

Of the sense of justice, Rawls explains:

Let us assume that each person beyond a certain age and possessed of the requisite intellectual capacity develops a sense of justice under normal social circumstances. We acquire a skill in judging things to be just and unjust, and in supporting these judgments by reasons. Moreover, we ordinarily have some desire to act in accord with these pronouncements and expect a similar desire on the part of others. Clearly this moral capacity is extraordinarily complex (Rawls, 1999, p.41).

This complexity is clearly expressed in chapter VIII of *A Theory of Justice* (1999). Firstly, he explains that he starts from the conception of a Well-Ordered Society, which would be the case if his principles of justice were to succeed. Then, he exposes his own ideas on moral development, which he worked on in his earlier essay *The Sense of Justice* (1963), where he took ideas from Rousseau (2003), Kohlberg (1992) and Piaget (1932) to construct his own conception of moral stage-development. Oddly enough, in his 1963 version of the theory, he used the moral sentiment of guilt as a key element of moral development. In his latter version, however, he focused more on "psychological laws" that mainly explain the ties and attachments we develop with other people and with fair and just social institutions.

I shall now briefly explain the three stages of moral development according to Rawls' view (1999):

- Morality of authority: This stage of development takes place, mostly, during infancy. As her cognitive and intellectual skills are limited, a child relies almost entirely on her parents to survive. If the parents succeed in providing the child with love and care, she will naturally develop the corresponding feelings of love, gratitude and trust. Thus, when failing to fulfill the parent's wishes, the child will feel guilty and want to make amends. Therefore, in the moral dimension, right and wrong are defined by the figure of authority. The moral virtues related to this stage are humility, obedience and fidelity.
- Morality of association: Once a person has successfully completed the morality of authority, she advances to the morality of association, which is characterized by the realization of the different groups of people that make up society. The person finds herself in other settings where it is possible to form bonds of friendship and association with other people: school, the neighborhood, sports clubs, cultural groups, or any kind of association. The passage to the second stage of moral development occurs when the person is able to recognize that she is part of a society, and that, just as she places her love and trust in others, others do so in her. Therefore, not only is cooperative work more advantageous, but it also produces feelings of fellowship and community with others. The virtues related are the cooperative virtues: justice and fairness, fidelity and trust, integrity and impartiality.
- Morality of principles: Finally, the person who has completed the morality of authority and the morality of association is capable of relating to others, interpersonally and collectively. Realizing that society works thanks to the various associations of people to the bonds of love and trust that she has developed, a feeling of love for humankind is born within her. It is in this moment that the sense of justice reaches its full potential and drives us in two directions: 1) We recognize society as a valuable association of people and groups, so a feeling of guilt arises in us if we do not comply with the standards of justice; 2) A desire to uphold justice is born within us and we become indignant when we witness an injustice. The morality of principles brings together the virtues of the previous stages and adds them to the love for humankind. The morality of principles, then, translates into a mature sense of justice that will help guide our behavior, always in constant evaluation based on reflective balance.

There are two things I would like to emphasize. First of all, even though Rawls tries to give a reasonable account of justice as fairness starting from rational arguments (the Kantian

conception of persons as free, equal and rational beings), he very much cares to give the most reasonable conception of us as moral agents. In order to do so, he takes into consideration not only rational aspects but also emotional ones (Frazer, 2007). Feelings of love, trust, fellowship, among others, help a person form bonds with other people, which is essential when constructing a sense of justice, because it gives us the sense of belonging to a group and loyalty towards the ones we love. It is when we realize these same features are shared (or can be shared) with other people, that the love for humankind starts flourishing. The second thing I would like to emphasize is the role the moral sentiments of guilt, resentment and indignation have in the sense of justice. Resentment, guilt and indignation are related to faults to justice but have different purposes. Guilt is felt when we fail to act according to the principles of justice. On the other hand, we feel resentful when an unjust harm has been done to us and we feel indignant when harm has fallen upon a third party: "[...] feelings of guilt and indignation are aroused by the injuries and deprivations of other unjustifiably brought about either by ourselves or third parties, and our sense of justice is offended in the same way" (Rawls, 1999, p. 417)". These moral sentiments, therefore, respond directly to the concepts of right and justice: "In general, guilt, resentment, and indignation invoke the concept of right" (Rawls, 1999, p. 423).

Thus far, I have distinguished between moral sentiments and emotions, and made a case for the advantage of moral sentiments such as indignation and resentment. In the present section, I argue in favor of the Rawlsian sense of justice as a concept capable of combining all these ideas. In the following segment, I shall attempt to go beyond and justify indignation as a crucial moral sentiment in the construction of a common sense of justice.

The construction of a common (and solidary) sense of justice

As we have seen throughout this text, there cannot be moral development without taking into consideration human aspects such as emotions and sentiments. However, we cannot consider emotions uncritically. To do so, we must consider the way humans integrate them into their decision-making and what moral concepts we evoke once we feel them.

Rawls' proposal, I suggest, gives us the necessary tools to think of justice not only as a rational distributive calculation, but also as the tie that binds us to other people and gives us our own place in society. Furthermore, one crucial aspect of the sense of justice,

although sometimes overlooked, is the role it plays in building a community and a *common* sense of justice. This idea is best understood with the notion of civil disobedience. In chapter VI of *A Theory of Justice* (1999). Rawls makes a case for the part that civil disobedience should play in justice as fairness. For him, civil disobedience is a political tool people may use when they find something that goes against the principles of justice and fair cooperation:

Rawlsian civil disobedience shows anti-authoritarian pretensions based on the maintenance of a just order, and whose manager is located in civil society. There, values such as justice, diversity, mutual respect, a sense of dignity and respect for freedom are shared. Civil society is made up of elements such as the associative, cooperative, and plural character, and by public reason by reaching agreements and defending justice (García-G, 2006).

It is important, however, to distinguish between conscientious refusal and civil disobedience. The difference, once again, lies in the object towards which it is directed. Although both are morally oriented, conscientious refusal only stays in the scope of private and individual actions, whereas civil disobedience has the aim of reaching the public and appealing to "the sense of justice of the majority" (Rawls, 1999, p. 335). Even though both are valid forms of morally disagreeing with something, civil disobedience is inherently *collective*. Civil disobedience, as a non-violent approach, appeals to a community's common sense of justice in order to take action, or demonstrate, against injustice: "Indeed, civil disobedience is one of the stabilizing devices of a constitutional system [...] by resisting injustice within the limits of fidelity to law, it serves to inhibit departures from justice and to correct them when they occur" (Rawls, 1999, p. 336).

Here it is important to emphasize the role that the community has in civil disobedience, especially, in modern pluralistic societies. According to Han (2020b), nowadays we live in a communitarian crisis. Neoliberal individualism has created an atomized society more focused on consuming emotions, rather than building sentiments that can be felt collectively. Thus, the development of a sense of justice is not only a matter of individual moral development, but also as a collective one that translates into a common and shared sense of justice. This notion can only properly work when we take a communitarian point of view in which we can rely on other people to support us when unfairness comes about. Building a strong sense of justice is crucial to making valid our claims of justice.

One key to sustaining and constructing a common sense of justice is the concept of solidarity. Despite the fact that solidarity has been used in various forms in recent years; from a moral sentiment to a moral obligation or a civic value, solidarity may be defined as:

[...] a type of intersubjective relation that potentially emerges when people share political goals and ideas and are willing to collectively and reciprocally shoulder the burdens that pursuit such goals might entail [...] In this sense, solidarity can be viewed as an intersubjective relation that allows human beings to rebuild that sphere of plurality and commonality" (Tava, 2021, p. 2-10)

Solidarity, therefore, takes the collective sentiments of resentment and indignation and integrates them into a political goal or idea that is collectively shared. This capacity to care and empathize with other people comes from concrete relationships and bonds we have with them, and not just from abstract principles of justice. Solidarity, therefore, is necessary for us to connect with the suffering of other people or others' concrete goals, while, at the same time, appealing to moral principles that have been compromised.

Despite the fact that Rawls meant his theory for well-ordered societies that were close to being fair, I believe this idea may be useful in our own contexts, in which we find ourselves far from living in such societies. For example, due to the recent wave of femicides that have taken place in the state of Nuevo León, Mexico (Reina, 2019) and the number of missing persons in the country surpassing 100,000 (Ferri, 2022), a common sense of justice and indignation have made various groups and feminist collectives assemble and publicly demonstrate against these appalling circumstances. People feel indignant, despite not being personally involved, by recognizing that fundamental human rights are being violated, and by sharing a communitarian feeling of outrage against the institutions that allow such things to happen. Furthermore, solidarity plays an important role, since it unites people and groups in a common cause. For example, since 2020 (Reina, 2020), catapulted by crimes against women, there has been a rise in feminist movements in Mexico, where women and other concerned citizens look to raise awareness and make visible the structural and direct violence women have been subjected to.

Resentment plays an important part as well. As felt by the families and relatives that have lost people or whose loved ones have gone missing, resentment is perceived as a personal

harm. This feeling may also be shared with other people that have experienced something similar and create ties of solidarity. Due to this, groups of people have reunited and made efforts to publicly expose their situation and claim justice (Ferri, 2022). By doing so, other people who empathize with their cause might join them out of solidarity. Their public demonstrations help make other citizens empathetic to the problem and feel indignant, which contributes to constructing a common and solidary sense of justice.

This is just one example of the kind of situations where anger, rightly conducted, leads to indignation, resentment and solidarity. Taking up Rawls' theory, a population capable of constructing a civil society with a finely tuned sense of justice is stable over time and may be self-regulatory. However, as we have seen in Mexico, social problems may rise to a level where they may seriously destabilize the social fabric. I believe that, by understanding and correctly channeling moral emotions into moral sentiments, which are reflective and collective, we may find an alternative and work toward a more just and peaceful society.

Conclusions

Thus far, I have moved from moral emotions to moral sentiments and how we may apply them to the construction of a common and solidary sense of justice through the moral feelings of indignation, resentment and solidarity. Moral sentiments, therefore, have reflective and narrative dimensions, which differ from emotions and may also be felt collectively. I also suggest that Rawlsian theory is useful when analyzing moral sentiments as essential in constructing a firm sense of justice. He proposes a moral development theory based not only on the progress of intellectual skills, but also moral ones, always related to the creation of mutual and collective feelings that generate ties and bonds with the society in which we live.

Even though Rawls' theory aims to create a just and peaceful society in a more theoretical sense, I believe his ideas may be used. For instance, his justification of civil disobedience through the appeal of the sense of justice of the majority. As we saw briefly through two examples, the sense of justice manifests via the moral sentiments of indignation, resentment and solidarity with the victims of violent and unjust acts. Despite being far from a just society, educating and cultivating these moral sentiments may not only make society more stable in Rawlsian terms, but also provide a tool for people to channel moral emotions such

as anger, triggered by unfairness, and convert them into moral sentiments that are reflective, may be explained by appealing to moral concepts, and most importantly, may be shared and felt with the community in a collective effort towards the demand for justice and fairness.

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