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Socrates on the Emotions

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ABSTRACT

In Plato’s Protagoras, Socrates clearly indicates that he is a cognitivist about the emotions—in other words, he believes that emotions are in some way constituted by cognitive states. It is perhaps because of this that some scholars have claimed that Socrates believes that the only way to change how others feel about things is to engage them in rational discourse, since that is the only way, such scholars claim, to change another’s beliefs. But in this paper we show that Socrates is also responsive to, and has various non-rational strategies for dealing with, the many ways in which emotions can cloud our judgment and lead us into poor decision-making. We provide an account of how Socrates can consistently be a cognitivist about emotion and also have more than purely rational strategies for dealing with emotions.

Keywords: Socrates, Emotions, Protagoras, Cognitivism, Intellectualism

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I. INTRODUCTION: COGNITIVISM AND INTELLECTUALISM

Though usually reticent about expressing his own opinions, we find Socrates’ quite assertive about his own view of fear in the Protagoras:

[Socrates speaking] I say that whether you call it fear (phobos) or dread (deos), it is an expectation (prosdokian) of something bad. (Protagoras 358d5-6)

Just a bit later, Socrates concludes that the vices we associate with the emotion of fear — cowardice, but also shameful boldness and madness — are all explicable in terms of ignorance of what is and is not to be feared (Protagoras 360b4-c7).

Socrates’ argument here seems to be an explicit endorsement of what has come to be known as “cognitivism” about the emotions — the view that emotions just are cognitions. But as cognitions, we might wonder whether or not they are generated or sustained in the same ways that other cognitions are, and if not, what other processes might be involved. According to several recent works by various scholars, Socrates recognized that some emotions — or at any rate some particular examples of specific emotions that Socrates encounters in his interlocutors in the dialogues — are not as responsive to reason as other kinds of belief are. In her recent study of Plato’s characterization of Callicles in the Gorgias, for example, Emily Austin has argued that Callicles’ fear of death is non-rational in the sense that it “cannot be altered simply in light of rational argument.”

But why are some beliefs more susceptible — and some less susceptible, or not susceptible at all — to rational argument? And how else can one who wishes to challenge such beliefs do so effectively, and how could some process other than reasoning be able to influence what someone believes? It is these questions we seek to answer herein.

II. ETIOLOGIES OF BELIEF

Some processes by which human beings generate beliefs are veridically reliable, but it is also a feature of the human condition that some others are not. Those that are veridically reliable include inductions that are based upon adequate observations, deductions from premises that we have carefully considered and whose inferences we have inspected for validity, as well as those derived from ordinary perception in normal conditions. There continues to be debate among both psychologists and epistemologists just what kinds of belief-forming processes really can be counted as reliable, and what the limitations on these might be, but few doubt that human beings have access to at least some reliable cognitive processes. Other belief-forming processes are commonly regarded with a bit more suspicion, including memories of the distant past, and especially beliefs associated with issues of emotional significance for the epistemic agent. Wishful thinking, for example, may well be a source of some beliefs for human beings, but we do not generally regard wishful thinking as a process that grounds rational beliefs. For our purposes in this discussion, then, we will count a belief as rationally caused or sustained if it was caused or sustained by a process we would reasonably regard as veridically reliable. A belief would be non-rationally caused or sustained if it were caused or sustained by a process we would reasonably regard as veridically unreliable. For a belief to be rational in this sense, then, does