

## **Rethinking Wittgenstein: An Emotional Engagement with the World**

*Susana Badiola*

### **Abstract**

This paper explores R. Solomon's notion of an emotional engagement with the world through the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein. This concept, rooted in the existentialist tradition, helps us see Wittgenstein's legacy on emotions in a different light. Against behaviouristic interpretations of this legacy, which rest predominantly on Wittgenstein's attack on the private language argument, this paper traces an understanding of emotions as personal commitments to our worldview in Wittgenstein's early and later writings.

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A quick glance at the literature of the last two decades makes the focus on emotions overwhelmingly apparent. The study of emotions is not discipline bound, and offers innumerable possibilities of approach. Emotions are intertwined in a complex social framework, which includes among other issues, our understanding of rationality, the self, or the physical and the mental. Maybe this muddle explains certain former tendency in the history of analytic philosophy to subordinate emotions to technical and narrow subjects, which could be more neatly handled. As R. Scruton has put it, "It is probably as difficult for continental philosophers to envisage an 'analytical philosophy of the passions' as it was for Spinoza's contemporaries to understand how he might treat the same subject more geometrico" (Scruton, 1987: 77). In the 1950s, W. Barrett, the American existentialist, condemned the Analytic inability to understand the primacy of existence and its fascination with static eternal essences (Barrett, 1962: 296-305). A fascination, according to his interpretation, that is nothing but Platonism in disguise. Whether or not Platonism is at bottom of this tendency, his and Scruton's comments seem to fit within an attraction towards the realm of logical "crystal purity" governing the early stages of analytic philosophy; a realm of perfection removed from (in Barrett's phrase) "sticky existence," to which, no doubt, emotions belong. Fortunately though, as Robert Solomon recognizes, analytic

philosophers have by now joined the “Continental” attempts to understand emotion, even adopting existentialist authors to do so. In his judgment, “emotions have now become mainstream” (Solomon, 2004: 3).

This paper shares the belief that an existential outlook can elucidate our understanding of emotions at large. Furthermore, some of its notions can serve to bring to light different aspects of an author’s legacy. Such is the case with Solomon’s idea of “emotions as engagements with the world” when applied to the writings of L. Wittgenstein. As will be shown, this notion proves to be fruitful before and after the 1930s, when his fascination for “logical crystal purity” turned towards “sticky existence.”

### **Wittgenstein’s Legacy**

When we think of Wittgenstein’s legacy on emotions, his criticism of private mental experiences comes to mind. Wittgenstein targeted the Cartesian model of mind and the privileged access of the first person. The philosophical puzzles linked to private experience that appear, especially in his later writings, have served to support positivistic and behaviourist discussions. It is not surprising then that Solomon considered Wittgenstein’s contribution to emotions as part of the “‘behavioural’ theories,” next to Ryle’s, whose fundamental legacy was their criticism of feeling theories of emotions through an emphasis on circumstances. According to Solomon though, “neither philosopher pursued the idea that it is a person’s view of his or her circumstances which is essential to emotion” (Solomon, 1977: 45). As will become manifest, at least as far as Wittgenstein is concerned, the former statement needs reconsideration: a person’s view plays a fundamental role in her “emotional engagement with the world” not only in the early period of the *Tractatus* and *Notebooks*, but also in the later period, where we find the famous attack against the private-language argument. While Wittgenstein’s legacy has served to feed varieties of positivism and behaviourism in the study of emotions, his writings invite us to re-think our conceptual framework, our understanding of selves, as a way of being in the world. From this perspective, Solomon’s existentialist notion of an emotional engagement with the world seems particularly appealing.

Even though this alignment of Wittgenstein with existentialism may seem perverse to some, there are several reasons that can justify my enterprise. First my use of ‘emotions’ in this paper is deliberately general. I will be using expressions such as “emotional self” or “emotional engagement” as an organic whole not too far from Solomon’s words: “What I have in mind here is a holistic conception of the personality [...] in which the whole field of one's experience is defined and framed by his or her engagements and attachments, in which truly "dispassionate" judgment is more often pathological than rational, and detachment more likely signals alienation than objectivity” (Solomon, 1992: 611). Love, jealousy, wrath and hope are all emotions, but they are to be understood as part of a complex web of interrelations that would include circumstances, attitudes, sensations, feelings, moods, beliefs, projections...

Second, throughout his intellectual career, Wittgenstein is at pains to distinguish between the empirical and the conceptual, that is to say, between what a science like psychology can say about emotions, and what philosophy can say about them. Causal explanations, hypotheses and theories belong to the realm of science not philosophy. In line with Sartre, Wittgenstein claims that a philosophical reflection on emotion could not be dealt with in terms of causes and empirical discoveries. The vital point, which interests him, remains untouched by scientific explanations. Whereas the physicality of emotions is never questioned, emotions cannot just be considered as passions, in the sense of things happening to us, but require the active role of the will in our engagement with the world (this point will become apparent in his early years). Also, since emotions (especially in his later years) are to be understood as conceptual webs or patterns that link the object of emotions, behaviour, belief, and physiology in a non-contingent manner, they are open to cognitive interpretations. Our “emotional engagements with the world” incorporate evaluative attitudes, beliefs, and thus intentionality.<sup>1</sup> An important aspect repeatedly claimed by Solomon through his famous — even if slighted exaggerated — slogan “emotions are judgments.”

Wittgenstein’s separation between what science does and what philosophy does leads us to the last although, perhaps, more controversial reason to justify the applicability of an existential

concept to Wittgenstein's work. As some scholars have pointed out, Wittgenstein's philosophy can be understood as a phenomenology.<sup>2</sup> According to Wittgenstein, phenomenology deals with possibilities (Wittgenstein, 1975: 51). Phenomenology is a priori in the sense that the sciences use descriptions based on grammars that afford such descriptions. Or to put it in terms of the *Tractatus*, the logical form is given in immediate experience, and phenomenological language provides an immediate representation of the immediately given. Throughout his career, Wittgenstein explores the problem of immediate experience and how it can be said. Even if "what can be said" varies in the early and later writings, the main concern remains.

### **The Early Years**

Wittgenstein's concern with emotions and the emotional self can be traced back to the *Tractatus* and the *Notebooks*. During this period we witness his struggles with self and its place in the world, with the limits of language and rationality. Wittgenstein's aesthetical outlook, greatly influenced by figures such as Kraus, Schönberg or Loss, seeks for balance between reason (what can be said) and emotions (what can be shown). According to Paul Engelmann, the *Tractatus* is primarily directed against the wave of irrationalism and excess of feeling of the first decades of the 20th century:

But it is not a question of head or heart, reason or emotion: the watchword must be reason with emotion, head and heart. We cannot say: what we lack is feeling. But we shall be much nearer the truth in saying: what our reason lacks is feeling, we need reason endowed with feeling, indeed with the unspoken feeling that is manifest in our reason; it is what we call heart: feeling which does not pour freely outwards in emotional self-indulgence, but which is restrained, turned inward, thus suffusing the whole personality and bringing warmth even to its coldest part, the seat of reason (Engelmann, 1967: 89).

This aesthetical demand for balance through the integration of emotion and reason applies not only to music, literature or poetry but to the understanding of self. The harmonious perspective of the years of the *Tractatus* and the *Notebooks* rests on a clear separation between the world of

experience and meaningful language, and what is not of this world, i.e., the mystical. Causality and scientific explanations set up the world of phenomena, whereas conceptual necessity — in which philosophy dwells — allow us at best to reach a “synoptic view.” Thus the self of psychology and the natural sciences is part of the world. To that extent, emotions can be studied as neuro-physiological events. However, there is a sense in which the self is not part of that world. The self who looks at the world is not part of it, like the eye in the visual field. “The world as I found it” does not include the metaphysical self (Wittgenstein, 1992: §5.631):

The Philosophical I is not the human being, not the human body or the human soul with the psychological properties, but the metaphysical subject, the boundary (not a part) of the world. The human body, however, my body in particular, is a part of the world among others, among beasts, plants, stones, etc., etc... [Cf. 5.641] (Wittgenstein, 1979: 82)

The question seems to be now what can philosophy say about emotions? When we are not focusing on the empirical self studied by the sciences but on the metaphysical self, we are not dealing with a fact of the world, we are dealing with an active process of creation of self. It is the transcendental self, who changes the world's limits and thus colors the world differently. As Wittgenstein says, “And it is also clear that the world of the happy is a *different* world from the world of the unhappy” (Wittgenstein, 1992: §6.43; see also Wittgenstein, 1979: 77). The view changes because the self looks at the world differently. This change of attitude involves the will,<sup>3</sup> and, as I am about to show, it requires some kind of integration of reason and heart. This is the colorful world that cannot be said due to the restrictions imposed in the *Tractatus*. The world that can be said by means of bipolar propositions is grey, neutral, and colorless (Wittgenstein, 1980a: 53, 56, 62). It is the world of science (and psychology). But, as Wittgenstein says, life is full of color. Emotions, meanings, interpretations and valuations are not part of the world of facts, what is to say that ethical or aesthetical propositions do not fit into the strict demands of the language-reality isomorphism, and thus are not part of what can be said. Just like the same piece of music can be performed very differently at different times, qualitatively affecting the resulting experience, our attitude towards the world of facts affects its quality resulting in a happy or an unhappy world. Emotions color our world in the sense that they are attitudes, outlooks toward

how things are. For Wittgenstein the subject is the point of coordination with reality, the locus where reality gains meaning (Wittgenstein, 1992: §5.64).

As we can see, our engagement with the world appears close to Sartre's understanding of emotions as "a certain way of apprehending the world" (Sartre, 1975: 52), as a means of transformation of the world of facts (Sartre, 1975: 58), and as a way of living and being involved in this newly created world (Sartre, 1975: 76); a magical world (the mystical?) that allows the eternal outlook of the happy person. But unlike Sartre, for Wittgenstein this outlook is not necessarily opposed to reason. The notion of emotions as attitudes and ways of perceiving things seems to be partly motivated by Wittgenstein's fascination for W. James, at this time, his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Wittgenstein is concerned with the meaning of life, with the possibility of creating meaning in moments of *Sorge*, with making the world a happy world, even when the self cannot alter the world of facts, given that world and will are independent of each other. James' talk about the sick soul that can reach a different outlook on the world through a meaningful experience seems to speak to the author of the *Tractatus*, who defends the mystical as "feeling the world as a limited whole" (Wittgenstein, 1992: §6.45). However, this type of feeling is not equivalent to a sensation. It is not passive. It amounts to a change in attitude that distinguishes the happy from the unhappy. It is an evaluative judgment on the world that changes our engagement with it.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to Solomon's assessment, for the early Wittgenstein, the person's view is essential to emotion.

### **Later Years**

From the 1930s — with the *Brown Book* and *Philosophical Remarks*, usually considered of his transitional period — and into his later years (*Philosophical Investigations*, the two volumes of *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, and the "Lectures on Philosophical Psychology"), Wittgenstein analyzes the status of mental states through the grammatical asymmetry of the first and third person of psychological verbs. He distinguishes between the expressive and the descriptive role of such expressions, rejects the notion of observation when applied to first person experience, and discards a causal theory of emotions. During these years he consistently

attacks the idea that emotions are based on a type of private feeling only accessible from the first person perspective, or that they can be described as the result of physiological causes. His main interlocutor and intellectual stimulant on this topic is now made explicit: William James through his *Principles of Psychology*.<sup>5</sup>

The direction of Wittgenstein's criticisms to James' theory (and, in general, to feeling theories of emotions) serves to show the relevance of Solomon's remark concerning our emotional engagement with the world. Wittgenstein incorporates emotions "in the weave of our lives," as ways of living. With James, Wittgenstein acknowledges the clear link between body and emotions. Interestingly enough, we point to our heart as if love were there or to our head when we have an idea (Wittgenstein, 1988: 163); however, emotion is not just a feeling in the body or a sum of them; nor is it directly caused by physiological alterations (Wittgenstein, 1980b: 448, 453). The distinction between the empirical and the conceptual again plays a fundamental role. The connection between emotion and body has to be understood as part of the grammar of our concepts. Therefore the link is internal and non-contingent: there are not two events, i.e., the feeling and its expression, but one.<sup>6</sup> They do not rest on the indubitable character of a private sensation but on the necessity of a rule of grammar. And rules, of course, do not cause forms of life, even if they guide them.

Emotions are to be understood as interrelated with other concepts. An emotion is not a mental event that can be defined by itself as an isolated concept. This is why the study of emotions can only be done attending the multiple uses of concepts, thus overcoming the false comfort of imposing one model for different cases: "A main cause of philosophical disease— a one-sided diet: one nourishes one's thinking with only one kind of example" (Wittgenstein, 1968: 593). When we insist on imposing one such model we fail to appreciate the complexity of our language games, the richness of language. That imposition Wittgenstein also calls "grammatical obsession." The crystal purity of ideal logical abstractions from the early years has now been replaced by the richness and variety characteristic of "sticky existence." Philosophical problems (and personal attitudes towards the world)<sup>7</sup> are dissolved when we learn to look at things aright:

“The way to solve the problem you see in life is to live in a way that will make what is problematic disappear” (Wittgenstein, 1980a: 27).

Emotions only have meaning as part of a conceptual web, as “patterns”, which are embedded in our conceptual framework. Emotions, such as “grief,” describe “a pattern which recurs, with different variations, in the weave of our life” (Wittgenstein, 1968: 174). Emotions are integrated in our forms of life. And our forms of life embrace beliefs, which express attitudes towards the world. Our way of looking at things, at first accepted and then questioned (Wittgenstein, 1969: 23), is just like religious belief, “a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it’s belief, it’s really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It’s passionately seizing hold of this interpretation” (Wittgenstein, 1980a: 64). We are committed to systems of beliefs which constitute the scaffolding of our thought; and we understand ourselves by them (Wittgenstein, 1969: 29). “Our view on our circumstances”, to bring back Solomon’s rebuke, depends on that personal commitment of an emotional self, who participates in multitude of language games. The self (as transcendental will) that was the limit of the world in the years of the Tractatus has now become a transcendental “we” embedded in language games, in forms of life.

### **Conclusion**

While Wittgenstein’s legacy on the topic of emotions focuses on his criticism of the private language argument and has served as inspiration for behaviourist and positivistic approaches, this paper presents a different outlook by means of a concept rooted in the existentialist tradition. Solomon’s notion of emotional engagement with the world serves to look at Wittgenstein’s remarks in a different light; it offers yet another angle towards the possibility of an “emotional grounding of rationality” (Solomon: 1992: 16). For those who might find the applicability of Solomon’s notion questionable in this context, I can only venture the words of the master as rebuttal: “I find it important in philosophizing to keep my posture, not to stand for too long on one leg, so as not to get stiff” (Wittgenstein, 1980a: 27). I hope showing parallelisms and points



of connection between different philosophical traditions may serve as an antidote against intellectual stiffness.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> There are remarkable parallelisms between E. Kerruish's interpretation of Nietzsche on emotions (2009) and my interpretation of Wittgenstein. Her understanding of the will as an emotional process also emphasizes an active role of interpretation and construction of self in our engagement with the world. As I will try to show, Wittgenstein's early writings struggle with a conception of self that brings together the cognitive and the "affective". In addition, her insistence on emotions not merely as reactions "but as inextricably intertwined with social needs and norms" capture fundamental aspects of Wittgenstein's position in his later writings.

<sup>2</sup> Scholars, such as C.A. van Peursen, F. P. Copelston, J.N Findlay and Thomas N. Munson, started to write about Wittgenstein's relation to phenomenology in the 50s. However it was especially after the publication of the *Nachlass* materials when scholars attempted to interpret Wittgenstein in a phenomenological light. Herbert Spiegelberg, Nicholas Gier, Merrill and Jaakko Hintikka, B-C Park, and R.

Alva Noe are representative of this second trend. Even though interpretations vary as to what periods of Wittgenstein's thought are to be considered as phenomenology, they all show in what respects some or all of his work can be considered a phenomenology. Among those who oppose any link with phenomenology are Harry Reeder and D. Pears.

<sup>3</sup> The metaphysical self of the *Tractatus* is not empirical. Against a Humean interpretation of self, Wittgenstein presents a transcendental will that brings meaning into language by the method of projection. As P.M.S. Hacker explains, it is the act of willing that brings words to life by giving them meaning. For a non-Humean analysis of the self see, for example, Arregui (1985) and Anscombe (1971).

<sup>4</sup> According to Wolgast (2004), this way of assessing the world would be part of Wittgenstein's "religious point of view" inspired by Tolstoy and James.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed study of this intellectual dialogue see Goodman (2002).

<sup>6</sup> Arregui (1991) offers an interesting interpretation of this necessary connection as one event described in two different ways, the formal and the material one, thus incorporating the Aristotelian distinction between matter and form.

<sup>7</sup> "Working in philosophy [...] is really more a working on oneself. On one's own interpretation. On one's way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them)" (Wittgenstein, 1980: 16).

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**Susana Badiola teaches philosophy at Angelo State University, TX, USA.**

Email: [sbadiola@angelo.edu](mailto:sbadiola@angelo.edu)