

Emotion, Epistemic Justification, and Oppressive Structures

1. Introduction

A popular view in the philosophy of emotion is that emotional experience is capable of immediately and defeasibly justifying evaluative belief. The idea that it is my *anger*, say, that justifies my evaluative belief that I've been wronged putatively provides us with an intuitive and naturalised explanation as to how we receive justification for a broad catalogue of our evaluative beliefs. However, a question that has received comparatively little attention is *how* emotions are capable of performing this justificatory role.

One promising answer to this question is proposed by Carter (2019), who argues on behalf of a novel virtue-based account which places the possession of emotional skills and competences at the seat of the emotions' justificatory power. According to Carter, S's emotional experience immediately and defeasibly justifies her evaluative belief *e if and only if* (i) the emotional experience is formed aptly (i.e. manifests S's generative emotional competence) and (ii) S forms *e* via the exercise of her doxastic emotional competence. Call this the emotional competence (EC) view.

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate EC with respect to a challenge presented by insight from feminist philosophy. Many in this literature take emotions experienced by members of marginalised groups to be uniquely capable of unveiling evaluative truths to those individuals; truths that would otherwise be obscured by a climate of oppression sustained by the values of the dominant societal groups. Emotions experienced by these individuals therefore seem to be *especially* good candidates for experiences which are capable of justifying the relevant evaluative beliefs. However, it seems very plausible that an oppressive socio-political climate is destructive to generative and doxastic emotional competences. If an oppressed individual cannot develop the required emotional competences, then EC reaps the unpalatable result that their emotional experiences *cannot* justify their evaluative beliefs. Here, I suggest a solution to this worry by proposing a revised version of EC, which individuates emotional competences according to the subject's *learned* capacities to emotionally identify objects as instantiating particular evaluative properties.

The structure of the discussion is as follows. In §2, I present EC and highlight the main selling point of the account. §3 then presents the challenge from oppression, and §4 sketches the learning-based solution to this challenge.

2. Emotional Competence and Justification

Many take emotional experience to be capable of lending immediate and defeasible justification to evaluative belief. Moreover, recent work in epistemology has seen a significant surge of interest in the relationship between the cognitive faculties and virtues of a believer and the epistemic quality of their belief. For supporters of virtue epistemology, the epistemic status of one's belief is dependent on the quality of the subject's cognitive capacities exercised in the formation of that belief. Roughly speaking, a belief is justified only if that belief is formed via the exercise of an epistemic competence (i.e. a disposition to form true beliefs).

Unifying the justificatory thesis of emotion and a competence-based virtue epistemology, Carter (2019) proposes the following:

Emotional Competence View (EC): S's emotional experience immediately and defeasibly justifies her evaluative belief *e if and only if* (i) the emotional experience is formed aptly (i.e.

manifests S's generative emotional competence) and (ii) S forms *e* via the exercise of her doxastic emotional competence.

To illustrate, take an experience of anger in response to an offhand remark made by a colleague. According to EC, this experience is capable of justifying my evaluative belief that the remark is offensive if and only if the following two conditions are met. First, the experience of anger must be formed *aptly*, i.e., the experience must manifest a *generative emotional competence* to experience emotions which are appropriately responsive to the presence of an evaluative property. That is, one has generative emotional competence insofar as they possess the skill of reliably experiencing anger towards the offensive, shame towards the shameful, and so forth. Secondly, my evaluative belief that the remark was offensive must be generated via a *doxastic emotional competence* to form the appropriate evaluative belief on the basis of the relevant emotional experience. It is *only* when these emotional skills are working in tandem that an agent's emotional experiences can justify her evaluative beliefs.

Briefly, the selling point of EC is that it crafts a novel and nuanced epistemology of emotion bolstered by the advantages possessed by general virtue epistemological views. That is, by putting the focus on the *emoter* and her ability, EC provides an account that recognises the necessity but insufficiency of reliable success (given that emotional skill entails reliability, but reliability doesn't entail emotional skill), and preserves an intimate connection between the epistemic quality of the emotion's etiology and the quality of the emotion-based belief.

3. The Challenge from Oppression

Putting the locus of assessment on the emoter's ability also raises a serious challenge for the view. Namely, because EC requires the possession of the relevant emotional competences for emotional justification, the account objectionably *rules out* emotional experiences of individuals whose emotional competences are adversely impacted by a climate of socio-political oppression.¹ Let me explain.

Consider an agent experiencing sexual harassment from male colleagues in her workplace, who, instead of being amused by their sexual remarks, experiences anger. When prompted, however, she is unable to identify the source of her anger due to her societally-sustained belief that harassment of this sort is harmless. This seems like a paradigm case in which the *emotion* is getting something right; her anger is accurately representing the offense of sexual harassment in opposition to the dominant social ethos, i.e. that sexual remarks of this sort don't constitute an offense. In cases like this, emotional experience appears to offer the victim of oppression a clear lens through which they can *truly see* their surrounding evaluative landscape. These emotions, therefore, look like *very* plausible candidates for experiences which can epistemically support and justify the corresponding evaluative beliefs. For these cases to fit within EC's framework, it must be the case that members of oppressed groups have the required generative and doxastic emotional competences.

The problem is that it's not obvious that they do. Regarding generative competence, it's very plausible that a climate of socio-political oppression can inhibit a subject's ability to experience emotions which are appropriately responsive to the presence of a given evaluative property. Take a victim of harassment who fails to experience anger in response to her abusers; whose emotional

¹ It's certainly not the case that *all* members of oppressed social groups experience erosion of their emotional competences, but rather that being such a member makes one vulnerable to this adverse psychological influence.

experiences incorrectly represent the offence as amusing rather than offensive. Or, similarly, take someone who, having internalised false beliefs about the blameworthiness of women who experience sexual harassment, inappropriately experiences shame towards her own behaviour after being harassed by a male colleague. In these cases, the presence of an oppressive climate manipulates the subject's generative emotional disposition and inhibits her formation of the required competence. Doxastic competence, on the other hand, is what is absent in a case where the victim of harassment has the *right* emotional experience, i.e. manifests an apt emotional performance in experiencing anger towards her harassers, but fails to form the right evaluative belief on the basis of that experience. Here, the social ethos that sexual harassment is *not* offensive intervenes as a defeater for her emotion-based evaluative belief that it *is*, and thereby prevents her from forming the appropriate evaluative belief.

How might this breakdown of competence happen? The corrosive effects of an oppressive climate on emotional skill strikes me as a clear but underexplored dimension of epistemic injustice. Take testimonial injustice, for instance. A speaker who is consistently and unjustly discredited on account of her being a woman will be significantly more susceptible to distrusting the content of her emotions when they conflict with the societal values sustained by dominant groups. Thus, because oppression leads to the erosion of emotional competence, and because EC takes emotional competence to be essential for emotional justification, EC cannot account for the particular epistemic significance of emotions experienced by members of oppressed groups.

4. Responding to the Challenge

To answer this challenge, we need an account of emotional justification which explains how emotions experienced by oppressed persons *can* be capable of justifying their beliefs despite the *general* pejorative influence of an oppressive climate on subordinated individuals' emotional competences. That is, ideally, we need a version of EC which restricts its scope from an all-or-nothing claim of global emotional competence to smaller, more localised epistemic assessments concerning a subject's emotional skills. Accordingly, my proposal is as follows:

Emotional Learning View (EL): S's emotional experience which attributes evaluative property E to object O is capable of immediately and defeasibly justifying her belief that O is E if and only if (i) S has the emotion as a result of her having emotionally learned that O is E, and (ii) S forms the belief that O is E on the basis of that emotion.

In a nutshell, *only* emotional experiences which arise as a result of the subject's learned capacity to emotionally identify an object as instantiating the given evaluative property are capable of justifying the relevant evaluative belief. Emotions generated instead by false beliefs, poor reasoning, etc. are *not* capable of performing this role.

Emotional learning is to be understood as analogous to *perceptual learning*, i.e. the process through which long-term changes are made to perception as a result of practice and experience. Paradigmatic examples of perceptual learning typically include the development of particular expertise, e.g. a wine aficionado's ability to perceptually discern the quality of wine according to taste. Here, through prolonged exposure to the qualities of different wines, the aficionado comes to be sensitive to the subtle low-level properties which determine the quality of the wine.

Analogously, it seems plausible that what underlies the intuition that emotions can be a unique epistemic resource for subordinated individuals is that, through prolonged exposure to oppressive structures, these individuals come to emotionally learn which states of affairs instantiate evaluative properties (such as 'fearsome', 'offensive', etc.) in a way that dominant social groups do not. Hence,

given EL's focus on the epistemic importance of emotional learning, it can explain how these emotions can bear justificatory power *even if* the subject lacks generative emotional competence. That is, it might be the case that a marginalised individual has low emotional reliability overall (i.e. often forms emotions on the basis of false beliefs sustained by oppressive structures), but EL can still explain why *some* of her emotions are capable of conferring justification to her evaluative beliefs in spite of this.

Not only can EL provide a satisfying solution to the challenge from oppression grounded in epistemically significant learning mechanisms, I also take it to preserve the original attractions of EC, given its compatibility with the original view. Recall that the central motivation for endorsing Carter's competence-based view was that it could provide a nuanced epistemology of emotion by both explaining the necessity but insufficiency of emotional reliability *and* forging an intuitive connection between the etiology of emotional experience and the epistemic quality of the emotion-based evaluative belief. Plausibly, EL fulfils these desiderata. Having developed the capacity to identify an object O as instantiating a given evaluative property E via the mechanism of emotional learning entails being reliable with respect to such identification, and requiring that an emotion arises from having such a learned capacity preserves an intimate connection between the epistemic quality of the experience's etiology and the epistemic quality of the emotion-based evaluative belief.

In summary, then, if a competency-based view is to be successful with respect to explaining the immediate justificatory power of emotion and answering the challenge from oppression, it must be supplemented with the emotional learning view which individuates emotional competences according to those learned capacities.

References

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