

EJP BOOK REVIEW

Title: On the temporality of the emotions: An essay on grief, anger, and love

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Reviewer: Jonathan Mitchell (Cardiff University)

On the temporality of the emotion, by Berislav Marušić, is a short monograph which explores how the reasons-responsiveness of emotions – that we feel emotions *in the light of* considerations which speak in favour of them – stands in tension with what we learn about their temporality by living through them; specifically, in the case of grief and anger, the diminution of the relevant emotion. The book draws from philosophy of emotion, philosophy of mind, and value-theory, and its style is consistently clear, avoiding unnecessary technicality. Presumably as intended, the book reads more like an extended essay rather than an exhaustive treatment of the topics it comes into contact with.

Let me start this review by introducing the central idea which motivates the book, namely the *puzzle of accommodation* – briefly, that emotions diminish even though our *reasons for feeling them* seem to remain as strong as when the emotions were first felt. Take grief: in response to my beloved passing away I am overcome with grief, which is *reasons-responsive* – it is a felt acknowledgment of a *significant loss*, which is a reason *in light of which* it makes sense to grieve. But time passes, and after several months I feel the grief less strongly; and years later I have moved on. Yet my *reason for grieving* has not disappeared – my beloved is still gone, and so the significant loss remains. However, I am no longer feeling grief and I fail to be responsive to reasons, and if so, could I be reproached as irrational? As Marušić puts it, ‘how could the diminution of my grief not be wrong, if my reason for grief did not change’ (4). Yet this is counterintuitive: the diminution of grief seems *reasonable*; we do not ‘go wrong’ when grief attenuates. Such is the *puzzle of accommodation*.

Marušić’s essay is a sustained attempt to grapple with this puzzle. His overarching thesis is that all attempts to resolve it fail and that we should accept that it ‘eludes a solution’ (22); that in the case of grief at a significant loss or anger at a significant injustice, accommodation is *reasonable*, yet without our being able to identify ‘reasons in light of which this would be so...accommodation remains, in a salient sense, incomprehensible’ (93). The puzzle of accommodation is therefore neither solved, nor dissolved (i.e., shown to be based on erroneous ideas) but rather *accepted as a puzzle*.

The structure of the book is as follows. Chapter 1 sets out the puzzle in detail. Chapter 2 defends the reasons-responsiveness of emotions, also critiquing appeals to *the wrong kind of reasons*. Chapter 3 considers further responses to the puzzle, arguing that they are all

inadequate, and Chapter 4 offers the author's preferred 'answer', which as noted involves recognising that the puzzle cannot be resolved, such that while accommodation can be *reasonable* this has to be reasonableness *without* reasons (a notion that is articulated in term of pragmatic encroachment). Chapter 5, contrastingly, suggests that in the case of one particular emotion, namely love, our experience of it as *endless* coheres with what we come to know empirically about its temporality. As Marušić puts it, 'we can reconcile the inner and outer temporality of love...love is *defeasibly* endless. This is because love grows, providing nothing compromises, stifles, or extinguishes it' (157).

In the rest of this review, I confine myself to bringing into focus key moves in Part 1 (Chapters 1-4) of the book, setting aside the material in Chapter 5 on love. I begin by providing detail on the approach that is taken to the study of the emotions then move on to substantive issues.

The approach is claimed to be *phenomenological*, proceeding 'through a description of personal experience that others can see themselves in' (Preface: x), providing theoretical reflections on specific experiences with the aim of identifying common features. As such, the aim is neither to provide a general theory of emotions, nor to approach emotions within a scientific perspective (e.g., the neurobiology of emotion). There is one aspect of this approach which will strike readers as appropriate, namely that 'any reflection or theorizing on the emotions, which does not in some way speak to felt experience, fails to make contact with its topic' (Preface: xi). Yet one might accept this constraint but nonetheless think it opaque why *phenomenology* should be 'first philosophy' in studying the emotions; all manner of theorizing about the emotions might in some way 'speak to felt experience'; however, *prioritizing* phenomenological observations about the course of experience, which are then utilized for abstract theoretical reflections on experience, requires more philosophical justification than Marušić offers.

In this context it would have made sense, given the approach is claimed to be 'phenomenological', to engage with the methodology of actual Phenomenology. For example, consider the idea – familiar from Husserlian phenomenology – that at least for the duration of an initial phase of inquiry, in which one is aiming for descriptive adequacy to the experience and its objects, *as they are given in experience*, one should 'bracket' a range of background theories, where those would include (a) scientific interpretations of experience (making use of empirical results), (b) philosophical theories which are committed to specific metaphysical claims about how experiences and their objects are or must be, and (c) common-sense theories, which implicitly embed particularly pre-dominant, usually popularised, versions of (a) and (b). According to Husserl what this allows for, is unprejudiced descriptions of the sample experiences (and their 'noematic correlates'), 'kept [free] from all interpretations that read into them more than what is genuinely seen' (Husserl; 1977: §15).

Regardless of whether one thinks *absolute* unprejudicedness in one's explicative descriptions of experiences and their objects is attainable, the various methodologies of Classical Phenomenology provide one with a substantive sense of what phenomenological analysis of experience should be aiming at, why it might be legitimate to set-aside certain empirical and scientific claims (at least at certain points in one's inquiry), and the potential pitfalls of such a project. Absent a more concrete sense of phenomenological methodology the worry arises that what Marušić provides is speculative generalisations from more or less evocative autobiographical first-person descriptions (Marušić unabashedly starts from *his own* experiences of grief and anger). Marušić's essay offers *significantly more* than that, so it would have been good to have the justification for the approach bolstered by appealing to Classical Phenomenology.

Moving on, a central claim in motivating the puzzle of accommodation is the *reasons-responsiveness* of emotions. Indeed, it is because *my reasons for grieving* do not change over time – as Marušić puts neither the fact that my mother had died nor its significance changed, 'I did not stop loving my mother' (4) – but my grief diminuates that the puzzle arises: 'how could the diminution of grief not be wrong, if my reason for grief persists? How can I make sense of the diminution of my grief as reasonable, since it seems to be incongruous with my reasons' (5)?

Now, one way of rejecting the idea that there is a puzzle is by simply *denying that emotions are reasons-responsive* (Marušić labels this the Anti-Rationalist Response). What is said in defence of this purported aspect of emotions? Motivation for the claim that emotions are reasons-responsive – that we feel emotions *in the light of specific significant considerations*, which constitute our reasons for so feeling – can be brought out by a contrast with arational bodily feelings. Take a stomach-ache: there isn't any *rationality* to my feeling a stomach-ache, it is not felt *in the light of anything*; rather it is just a condition that befalls me. Dovetailing this, it makes no sense to ask someone *why* they are experiencing a stomach-ache, as a request for considerations that *speak in favour of having it* (of course there is a *causal* sense of this question which is appropriate, specifying explanatory reasons). Contrastingly, normative-why-questions *do* find application for emotions: it is legitimate to ask someone *why are you afraid of X*. In this sense reasons-responsiveness is connected to the *first-person intelligibility* of emotion, that is the way in which emotions often 'make sense' from the inside *in the light of* considerations which speak in favour of having them. The work done in this chapter is convincing: much of what we want to say about emotions' normative profile turns on locating them in the 'space of reasons', and in doing so we reject the Anti-Rationalist Response.

However, let me note a worry. Despite the book's official position of not proposing a general theory of emotion the above issues are ones that warrant more reference to debates in contemporary philosophy of emotion. Marušić claims that 'the assumption that emotions are

reasons-responsive is plausible, because our emotions are not conditions that befall us, but they partly constitute our take on the world: in fear we apprehend something as dangerous, in anger we apprehend something as unjust, and in grief, we apprehend something as a loss' (29). But a growing number of theorists question whether it makes sense to think that emotions can simultaneously be apprehensions of value *and* responsive to reasons: a central strand of criticism of perceptual theories of emotion emphasises the kind of reasons-responsiveness Marušić points to, but argues that this puts pressure on the idea that emotions can be understood as apprehensions of value – rather to accurately reflect their reasons-responsiveness and first-person intelligibility emotions might need to be reconceived as responsive to reasons made available by prior states of value apprehension (see Muller 2019; cf. Mitchell 2021). So, despite the book's official stance of being non-committal on any specific theory of emotion (at least within the broadly cognitivist framework that is adopted), this is one point at which the theoretical stakes of accepting claims about emotions warranted more consideration.

Next Marušić considers the 'Pragmatist Response'. According to this view we account for the *reasonableness of accommodation* by appeal to pragmatic considerations relating to the diminution of grief and anger: simply, the *badness* of grief and anger constitute reasons *against having those emotions* (or at least having them persistently). Accommodation is therefore intelligibly reasonable from the perspective of the experiencing subject insofar as they are aware of reasons which speak in favour of accommodating: puzzle solved.

But as Marušić persuasively argues, this pragmatic response appeals to *the wrong kind of reasons*. Let me explain: there is something correct about the idea, and it is an empirical-psychological reality, that we have to and do move on from anger and grief – we in some sense need to accommodate ourselves otherwise we would 'go to pieces'. But the need to move on 'does not bear on the object of our emotional response but has to do with the emotional response itself' (40). Simply: The Pragmatist Response has identified third-person instrumental reasons for which, from a detached perspective on the course of my own emotions, it is reasonable for me to *not feel grief* – after all, still feeling *that way* would not be *good for me*. But such instrumental reasons fail to speak to whether or not it would be appropriate to continue grieving *qua* the *object of the emotional response*, that is in light of the fact that the significant loss remains – they are not rationally and first-personally intelligible as a (changed) response to *that question*. As Marušić puts it: 'a wrong kind of reason against grief is a condition that shows it worthwhile not to grieve without showing that what occurred is not a (currently significant) loss' (42), such that if we were to try to justify our diminution in terms of such a reason of the wrong kind we would be implicitly committed to the following confused thought: 'Grief is bad for me, so nothing with current significance is lost.' (44). In this sense, the Pragmatist Response, invites confusion; once the character of the reasons involved

is made explicit, we can see that such instrumental reasons for the diminution of anger and grief are really 'no reasons at all' (45).

This critical discussion is one of the highlights of the book – it brings into focus the importance of emotional intelligibility, and sets up a condition on *any solution* to the puzzle: 'The solution should speak to the *subject* who experiences grief and anger and undergoes accommodation; it should furnish her with an understanding [rather than a *mere explanation*] of a change in her emotion' (45) – of course, Marušić's final position is that no such first-personal understanding of accommodation, where that would require revealing a *reason in the light of which* accommodation could be understood by the 'accommodating subject' as correct, is in the offing. The rest of the chapter (2.5) details further ways one might end up appealing to *reasons of the wrong kind* to solve the puzzle and further clarifies Marušić's view on the intentional objects of grief and anger.

Chapter 3 critiques various alternative responses to the puzzle, one notable amongst them is the 'Hardline Response', according to which 'accommodation to loss or injustice cannot be reasonable, unless the significance of the loss or injustice changes (61). So, in a situation in which the *significance of the loss or injustice* remains the same, failing to feel the relevant emotion is a *failure to respond to our reasons* – accommodation then is a *rational failing*. The main line of argument against the Hardline Response is that it fails to do justice to our moral psychology. For example, the Hardline response suggests that it is *entirely unreasonable* for grief at a significant loss to diminish, for as long as the loss remains significant, yet this is psychologically unrealistic – we do accommodate, and there is something reasonable about doing so. As Marušić puts it 'temporal distance does not merely afford a diminution in grief or anger; in many cases it makes it reasonable, or at least not wrong – not unreasonable' (64). Indeed, to be *stuck* in grief is classified by the DSM-5 as *prolonged grief disorder*. Yet 'if the Hardline Response were correct, persistent grief would not be a mental disorder but the rational response to loss' (65). So, it is apt to seem that the Hardline response is too *unaccommodating* – any plausible account of grief or anger needs to do justice to the realities of our moral psychology, explaining how in light of our psychology, physiology, history, and social circumstances, accommodation can be reasonable.

Part of the task of Chapter 4 is to explain how this works in terms of an account of *reasonableness without reasons*, by appealing to pragmatic encroachment. Here is the view: "Once we have accommodated ourselves, loss and injustice still constitute reasons for grief or anger, however, their force or significance is now different, in virtue of the practical considerations that serve to determine that significance. We still have the same reasons to grieve or be angry; however, in virtue of, say, completing the emotional processes of detachment, or satisfying the functional role of the emotion, they are no longer forceful' (111) This serves to explain, according to Marušić, the *reasonableness* of accommodation, such

that a change in emotions can be reasonable such as to ‘pragmatically encroach’ upon our reasons (altering their force for us), without there being a change in the *reasons for our emotions*.

I close this review with a comment on what strikes this reader as one of the most interesting claims that Marušić makes in the course of critiquing various attempts to solve the puzzle of accommodation which has a broader philosophical significance. This is that they ‘help reveal an essentially unreconcilable moment in our emotional lives – our inability to apprehend at once and in one self-consciousness, the objects of emotions and the empirical nature of those emotions’ (89). According to Marušić we suffer from *double vision*, as an inability to integrate either perspective into a unified view. Emotions are said to have a *subjective reality*, the apprehension of value (say of a continuing significant loss) that constitutes the emotion, and an *objective reality*, as the particular way in which the emotion is realised in us. Playing into how we understand the responses to the puzzle considered, the Hardline Response favours emotions’ *subjective reality* in doing so obscures their *objective reality*, and the Pragmatic Response favours emotions’ *objective reality* in doing so obscures their *subjective reality*.

The issue is that the subjective and objective reality of these emotions cannot be *integrated* into a single viewpoint. A unified self-consciousness in which the subjective reality and objective reality of grief and anger were both in full view, fully attended to, and somehow reconciled is claimed to be impossible, and it is because of this that accommodation remains in a significant sense *incomprehensible*. For example, in the case of grief: ‘in grieving we can either apprehend our loss, or we can apprehend ourselves as undergoing a process of detachment from the lost object. But we cannot do both at once: as we attend to one thing, the other recedes into the background’ (95).

Yet, there is a broader thought in play here: namely that the puzzle of accommodation highlights a structural feature of human experience and reality, that as Marušić puts it, (explicitly taking his lead from Jean-Paul Sartre) we are *embodied reason*; we are both *subjects*, living through experiences directed towards their intentional objects, and *objects*, situated creatures, with a specific psychology, physiology, history and culture; and furthermore we are subjects who can *take themselves as objects* by bringing into view our ‘situatedness’ but in doing so alienate ourselves from our *experiences as lived through*; and contrastingly we can attempt to ignore our ‘facticity’, and in doing so indulge in a narrow subjectivism, ignoring how our empirical reality has a bearing on our reasons-responsiveness. The challenge as Marušić sees it is not to attempt a self-deceptive reconciliation, but to somehow learn to live with this irreconcilability of perspectives. As interesting as this suggestion is, it would have been good to hear significantly more about what it would be like to live in this *unreconciled way*, perhaps connecting in more detail with the Sartrean themes being aired.

In conclusion, this monograph is an excellent attempt to grapple with a specific puzzle concerning emotions, which then gives way to issues of broader philosophical importance. There is much to be learned here about grief, anger, and love, and a range of connected issues. And while the approach at times has an idiosyncratic flavour, the essay is nonetheless essential reading for philosophers concerned with the role that emotions play in our lives, in particular with a view to their temporality.

References

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