

Emotions - Thinking or Feeling

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What is the role of emotions in our lives? Are they essential to our understanding of the world we live in?

When was the last time you felt angry or hurt? Or had an overwhelming feeling of pity or compassion towards someone? Emotions are part of our lives from the time we are born, till we die, irrespective of how we deal with them. Do they help in enriching your life, making you a better individual, or are you a slave to them, allowing them to control your thought processes?

What would happen if a supremely intelligent but emotionally dry person like Mr. Spock of Star Trek, the popular TV series, entered into an argument with an emotional being like the renowned poet Rabindranath Tagore, about the usefulness and validity of emotions? What follows is an interesting debate between two such seemingly conflicting parties, the thinker (T) and the feeler (F).

T: Being emotional is not going to help you to know the world better. Do you understand a blade of grass better because you are emotional? A charged emotional self is only going to get in the way of knowing an object.

F: There is some truth in this - but it's not the whole truth. Certain emotions, to some degree, definitely put you in a frame of mind or affect your rational faculties and thereby influence your knowing or not knowing something. If you are enthused to a degree you will concentrate better than, let's say, when you have a negative, hostile attitude towards the person teaching you.

T: But that's an indirect, marginal influence!

F: It's indirect, but not marginal. Today, educationists are worried about the attitude of students and their indifference to learning. And attitudes have a lot to do with emotions as well as your rational self. They influence your other faculties - primarily your reasoning abilities.

T: So, you mean a good natured, positive scientist is likely to be more successful than a grumpy old one?

F: Well, it would be dangerous to generalize but it's hard to argue against the notion that an enthused, balanced and positively oriented mind is likely to function better while cracking a problem, than a cynical, grumpy, angry person.

T: Okay, but that still makes reasoning a better way of knowing than emotions, doesn't it?

F: There's more to emotions than this. Tell me, is knowledge of the physical world the only knowledge worth gaining - what about people, their behavior and artistic expression? To understand anything to do with emotions you need to have the faculty of emotion yourself. You can't understand a poem by dissecting it like a frog. You'll understand the meaning of words and the background and other factual details, but to truly understand a poem you have to feel, respond emotionally.

T: In psychology, the science of behavior, we do take into account emotions, but only after they are studied rationally.

F: That may be so. A rational view of emotions doesn't imply that emotions don't count in helping you to know the world. The world of art is the world of emotions.

T: The world of art is a world of lies! There's no reality in artistic expression. It's just what you imagine, which is just a euphemism for wool gathering. And if emotions lead you to either an expression or an understanding of art, they just lead you nowhere - to a world that doesn't exist.

F: Tell me, the fact that you are angry and charged up now - is that unreal? And if I write a poem or short story depicting your state of mind, showing your stream of thoughts, what causes it and how you react, is it a lie?

T: If you write about me then it's not fiction, it's not art, it's either biography or history or psychology.

F: And do you suppose all these fields you've mentioned are free or devoid of imagination? Do you presume that only that counts for knowledge, which describes measured and confirmed facts alone? Then we would be left with only data as the sole descriptor of 'truth' and everything else would be rubbish!

T: Well, if you don't like the idea of data as the sole descriptor of truth, that's your problem. After all, everything else is subjective and depends on how you see things.

F: So, you are suggesting that if it's subjective it's not real; it's not knowledge?

T: Yes, I am. Any comments?

F: Well, all scientific inventions, discoveries and theories begin with the subjective perspective. It's because one person sees something or thinks something that it eventually becomes a theory or device or discovery.

T: Yes, but eventually it is open and clear and definite for everybody. There's little scope for argument or interpretation or subjective individualism. It's not like art when five people can hold five different views about the same painting or poem and all can be right - or wrong!

F: Perhaps you haven't understood the subjectivism in science or the objectivism in art.

T: Perhaps. Tell me - I'm listening.

F: Water boils at 100° everywhere in the world, right?

T: Right - for once!

F: But what about on the hills, does it still boil at 100° there?

T: Well, the condition of pressure and sea level has to be taken into account.

F: So, some scientific 'facts' such as boiling point of water or even the color of objects, is only 'true' under certain given conditions?

T: Yes, that's true.

F: Well, that's not unlike the emotional world. People will largely react in certain ways if you take into account their basic mindset or the conditions they are exposed to.

T: That sounds confusing. Could you explain with an example?

F: Let's say a person X has formed a mindset where s/he believes that everyone should be treated equally and if s/he finds that this is not done, anger is the natural reaction, unless of course the person has been trained to overcome anger. If another person Y is in a similar situation, and has always accepted that 'all are equal but some are more equal than others' then there will no anger, jealousy or rebellion.

T: That's pretty complex!

F: The world of emotions is undoubtedly complex, individualistic and subjective, but that doesn't make it less authentic or less important. It is a different world from that of objects and things that the physical sciences deal with; however, it is there and is very much real.

It is more subjective because human beings develop because of multiple influences and forces, whereas trees or plants only need sunlight, water and protection from microbes and animals, etc. It is easier to predict about a tree than a person because of emotions and other things, but that must not be confused with unreality.

It may well be that we haven't spent enough time or resources in trying to probe into the 'science of emotions', and because we do not understand enough we tend to dismiss it cynically. Much like the ostrich that sinks its head in sand when it sees danger!

T: Are you calling me an ostrich!

F: Not necessarily. All I'm saying is that you need to see things from a different perspective to understand the relationship between emotions and reality. Just because you can't pin down and

dissect emotions in the laboratory is not enough ground to reject them as useless or worse, as a barrier to knowing reality. Something can be nebulous and yet reality.

I would agree with you in so far as saying that emotions don't have a direct or significant role to play in understanding the physical world. Yes, empathizing with the structure of the atom isn't the best way of knowing it, but please remember that the hexagonal structure of the benzene ring accepted by science, was seen in a dream by the scientist.

T: So, you are saying that it can be vague, changeable and yet real?

F: Yes, the world of emotions throws light upon the human world and has its own chemistry and physics that science has yet to discover fully. But don't tell me you've never even heard of the chemistry between lovers. That's a bridge between the definite physical world and the seemingly vague and indefinite emotional world.

T: Umm... but you will - or rather, your world of emotions will leave the physical sciences - physics, chemistry and biology out, won't it?

F: To a degree, yes, but the scientist is human, not untouched by the very real world of emotions. I think it's important to understand that emotions highlight a very different dimension of life or existence. If we continue to measure or judge them with the parameters of only physical sciences we will miss out on understanding them. Perhaps the physical sciences should try to accommodate experiential knowledge. Even though I know science holds objectivity to be its God, that simply leaves out the world of emotions and all that it is associated with. If science is to become more comprehensive it should review its methods.