

Comparing what with what and in what regard: Some irenic reflections on the comparative study of emotions

I do not think I am alone in feeling that our last meeting was less than productive, and I think part of the reason for that is the same as the reason why this group may be interesting; which is that it collects several people from very different backgrounds, who, in part at least, employ very different methods in our work. What we have in common, we do not yet know, for, if our last meeting showed us anything it is that most of us neither know what emotions are nor precisely how they are connected with language. Those who are of the opinion that they DO know would be likely to face several objections before they've even finished their thought. Such appears to be the state of our art. Now, Amund told me when I had a chat with him last week that if I could find some way of describing the two proposed projects we heard about last time that would place them in the same universe of discourse, so to speak, that would already be quite a feat. I am not sure if I have been quite successful in that. I have however spent more time thinking about these two projects than I think either of their presenters wanted anyone to do, and as I know some of those from IKOS found Diana's presentation difficult to follow, I think I can now describe it in such a way that it will make sense to you, if Jens' project posed similar problems to the ILOS-crowd, I hope I can also be of assistance there, but I won't promise anything. My reason for offering this public service is first and foremost this; while we are working in ways which are thematically and methodologically quite diverse, if we want this network to not merely be interesting, but also to be of use, we need to find ways of making our investigations exist in the same world, after all, we are all ostensibly interested in the light the study of language, construed one way or the other, can throw on human emotions.

In order to make my intuitions on where some of the problems of mutual understanding we encountered the last time explicit, I need to buy myself some distinctions, and this will allow me to cash out part of my title, namely to reflect a little bit on the nature of comparative inquiries.

Drawing comparisons: some platitudes

Many would-be comparativists have been struck by the following problem: While we would like to compare both this and that in, for example, some kind of discourse of our own and some kind of discourse in some foreign land, we find it difficult to see that we are even speaking of the same things. Perhaps our starting assumptions are so far removed as to make it difficult to see in what way a comparison would be fruitful, or perhaps the distinctions we and the foreigners make are so different as to make it unclear if we are even living in the same world. A solution that has been popular, at least within comparative philosophy since the late eighties, is to make a distinction between thick and thin descriptions, and to say that, what we and they are speaking of in our respective thick descriptions is obviously very different, but there should, probably, be a thin description such that we could verify that we and they are speaking of the same things, and which would enable us to let our respective thick descriptions mutually illuminate each other in one way or another. Making this distinction amounts to making a claim more or less like the following: For any event, concept, thing and what else have you, the ways in which it is characterisable divide up in roughly the two following ways:

1. One which both in its vocabulary and its concerns be very tightly bound to a particular discursive context, it would be very rich in the human interests that inform that particular discursive context, but it would because of this be, in some sense parochial.
2. Another would, in its specification of whatever was to be explained, be put in a vocabulary that would lack this context-specificity, and thus richness, but would in principle aim to be maximally applicable, that is, it would as happily hold in ancient Baghdad, China, Greece or India as in modern Norway, Portugal, Russia or what have you.

People who theorise about comparative work by starting with this distinction tend to assume that it is the 'thing' thinly defined that is being compared that one seeks to gain a better, or broader or whatever, understanding of in making the comparison. This is of course one perfectly legitimate way of going about comparing things, and I intend to accuse Jens' project of being organised more or less along these lines. And for that matter, I intend to accuse Diana of having appealed to this distinction with an eye to doing something else. This is of course why I'm bringing it up, because I feel that it may throw some light on what they were both

proposing. Nonetheless, I think this distinction needs to be placed within a subtly different framework, for such things as are susceptible to thick or thin descriptions are not ontologically bare; what is more likely to be the case, it seems to me, is that one is comparing two or more things, say, texts, corpora, practises, or whatever, *with regard to something* that is susceptible to thick or thin descriptions. Now, that with regard to which one compares whatever it is one compares has a pleasant-sounding Latin name, *tertium comparationis*, ‘the third of the comparison’. I hope to demonstrate that this is not a distinction without a difference when I get to talking about the contributions of our two professors. What this distinction will allow me to do is to make explicit the potential difference between what one is ostensibly comparing and what one intends to make interesting claims about as a result of or through the process of that comparison.

Travelling emotions: Portugal, Norway and India

With these reflections in mind, I would now like to say something half-intelligent about the proposed projects of Diana and Jens, and I apologise to both for any infelicities, my excuse is that I’m abbreviating much and doing this mostly from memory.

Both presentations were ostensibly supposed to answer the question ‘what is (an) emotion’, and interestingly none of them did that; Diana, rather than answer the question ‘what is (an) emotion’, answered the question ‘what is an emotion such that it may be a part of an inquiry I would be interested in doing’, she also mentioned one concrete line of inquiry she would be interested in undertaking, namely one which would look for differences in cultural norms (with regard to emotions) on the basis of linguistic evidence found in text corpora. She further gave an interesting list of semantic criteria which she thought would be of help in identifying emotional terms within the corpus, and for characterising any differences found. An emotion, so far as Diana’s investigation is concerned is something that is organised along the following axes: A. Cognitive/physical state. B. Attitude. C. Ethical perspective. And D. Action (potential or actual). That is to say, if, in the linguistic data, something (a word?) is found to be used in making claims along these several axes, or if something is found to be interpretable along these several axes, it is probably an emotion. Furthermore, something that is found to be have

loads of information along all these axes is taken to be, in some way or another, a firmly established emotion within the, well, we'll return to within what in a moment. The way in which Diana intends for comparative perspectives to enter into the picture, is by providing, for each of the emotions identified using the mentioned criteria, thin descriptions ala those used by Wierzbicka in her work, and then to similarly treat another corpus. I assume.

Jens did something similar; he seemed to say, at least, that a stringent, transhistorical definition of the term 'emotion' wasn't necessary as we all have a common-sense grasp of the concept, one that can be made explicit by means of producing a lexicon of ostensive definitions, and perhaps ordering these into hierarchies? What behoves us according to Jens, and what he would like to do, is to expand this common-sense concept by exposing it to other discursive practises in which emotions figure prominently, that have their own emotional terminologies, and their own approaches to emotions. He had some such discursive practises in mind; namely that of which the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is a representative, and one which fell under the rubric 'Abhidharmic Buddhist literature'. What he takes to be of importance for the subject of emotions in these texts are the thick descriptions they provide of the mind and the effect of the emotions, as defined by the texts, on the mind. What he thinks makes them particularly interesting, is that these texts are made with a purpose, and these are diametrically opposed; the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as a treatise on the performing arts is made so as to make its reader competent in producing emotions, while the abidharmic literature takes emotions to be problems that we would be better off without, and the point of the texts is, *inter alia* to make the reader competent in that, I assume.

This is about as much sense as I feel I need to make of their proposals in order to attempt to redescribe them in terms of the distinctions I made earlier, so that we may at least see why it is so difficult to get them into the same universe of discourse. What caused confusion for me, and here I may have been alone, was that I didn't take Diana sufficiently seriously when she very plainly advertised that her aim wasn't really to say anything about emotions *in se*, but to, use emotions as a lens through which she could, perhaps, see some interesting features of the languages and cultures of Portugal and Norway respectively. To make this somewhat more rigorous: She would like to compare Portuguese and Norwegian culture, with regard to the discursive distribution of emotion-words (As defined by the list of semantic criteria). Thick

descriptions of emotions figure in her investigations only in the following way: By their presence or absence. For it seems to me that what would make something register with loads of information along all the axes is precisely the presence of thick descriptions, but, and this is a striking point: If the texts Jens will study had been written in Norwegian or Portuguese, and on the assumption that they take diametrically opposed views on the ‘same emotions’, so to speak, they would register in exactly the same way.

Jens’s project, as I understand it, would pursue something like the following order; the two types of text would be compared with, in the first instance our common-sense view of emotions as represented by a heuristic lexicon, and in the second instance, I suppose, related Chinese texts with regard to precisely their emotional terminologies, with a view to providing thick descriptions of what is going in these texts, and in the final instance, if I understood some of his off-hand remarks correctly, to enrich our thick description of emotions.

To round off my talk, I would first like to ask Diana and Jens, firstly whether I’ve come close to doing any kind of justice to their views, and if they answer in the affirmative I would like to know if this talk has been helpful to anyone but me. Perhaps first and foremost: are the distinctions I’ve drawn ones that could be useful in seeing how our respective projects relate to each other, or are there other, better ways of doing it? It seems to me obvious that a group as variegated as this one needs ways of tracking how what the others are doing relates to one’s own work (Without it descending into cult-speak), but it needn’t be the ways I’ve proposed, of course. Thank you.

with a view of expanding the thick description of what an emotion is that

we seem to have a programmatic commitment in this group to making the focus comparative, and as my title suggests, I have some thoughts on what that entails. I do not think that anything I have to say will be particularly novel or surprising, nonetheless, given that we several times last time seemed to be speaking of different things, it may be of value to remind ourselves. What I intend to do in this talk is the following: I will first make some general remarks about the nature of comparative inquiry. Based on these remarks, I will attempt to characterise, as best I can, the two more or less concrete lines of inquiry which were presented last time, that of Diana and that of Jens (Maior). I do not have the arrogance to say that I will draw any kind of hard and fast conclusions; the point of this exercise is rather to make explicit what I take to be the features of these two proposals that have to be taken into consideration if they are to be made to enter into some kind of dialogue and jointly illuminate our concept or concepts of emotions. My thoughts here are irenic, for the purpose is to bring us closer to having a common understanding which would enable us to be useful for each other.

Drawing comparisons: some platitudes

The first few things I have to say I suspect that most will feel to be almost at the level of platitudes; nonetheless, it may offer us the makings of a common vocabulary in which to

frame our various inquiries so as to make them able to communicate. What I would like to discuss are two sets of terminologies, one which has seen a fair bit of use in recent comparative philosophy, and one which may. The former is the, I assume, well known distinction, first drawn by Gilbert Ryle between ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ descriptions. As normally construed, the distinction is meant to articulate something like the following: for any event, thing, concept and what have you the ways of describing it would divide roughly into two kinds: one which both in its vocabulary and its concerns be very tightly bound to a particular discursive context, it would be very rich in the human interests that inform that particular discursive context, but it would nonetheless be, in some sense parochial. This would be a thick description. Another way would, in its specification of whatever was to be explained, be put in a vocabulary would lack this context-specificity, and thus richness, but would in principle aim to be maximally applicable, that is, it would as happily hold in ancient Baghdad, China, Greece or India as in modern Norway, Portugal, Russia or what have you. Ryle’s explanatory example is two young boys blinking their eyes right eyes in quick succession, the thin description of which would be just that, which is to say that that amount of information should be available to all. Ryle’s thick description of the same makes a distinction which no thin description would: the first boy merely has an involuntary twitch; the other is signalling his friend in a conspiratory manner, and a proper thick description would be able to make explicit everything that has to be the case for someone to wink conspiratorily which would distinguish twitching from winking. Such a description would not be made by an outsider to the practise of signalling by means of winks, and would in that sense be parochial, but it would explain the movements of the two boys in a far richer way than an outsider could.

The way this terminology is typically employed within comparative philosophy often follows the lead of Martha Nussbaum, who in her paper ‘Non-Relative Virtues’ suggested that ‘thin’ descriptions could be used to make discourses that are divided by space, time, vocabularies and concerns speak of the same things, the next step would be to thicken both descriptions so as to make the concerns expressed in the discourses thus found to be ‘about the same thing’ mutually illuminating. This is one way of framing the comparative endeavour, and putting the two projects

Comparative inquiries can take a great variety of shapes, and so there exists a fair variety of vocabularies and theoretical frameworks in which to describe and according to which one may conduct a comparative inquiry. I intended to talk about thick and thin descriptions and *tertium comparationis*, but it

The way this distinction is typically applied in comparative philosophy is to say ‘do the barbarians have a concept of X’ say ‘virtue’, and to say, well, they do not have our concept of virtue, but on a sufficiently thin description they have a notion of, say human flourishing tied to action, perhaps even a moral psychology, and then to proceed to thicken that notion with materials from both *comparata*, until one is able to make sense of us and the barbarians, or perhaps the Greeks and the barbarians, differing with regard to something

What I would like to make a large fuss about is what my title suggests, namely that there are no bare comparisons; comparison is always with regard to something. Which is to say that if one were to make a comparison of, say, this table and the idea of the Good, one would necessarily compare them with regard to something, and find that, with regard to extension, they differ; a table being extended and the idea of the Good not, with regard to both causal and rational explanations they would be similar in being able to serve as part of them, but probably different in how they do that. That with regard to which, in light of which and so on and so forth we compare has a scholastic-sounding name, namely *tertium comparationis*, or ‘the third (part) in the comparison’. I recently read a rather fine article on this by a certain Ralph Weber on the topic of comparing ancient Greek and Chinese views of the good life, in which he attempts to make several rather fine distinctions with regard the notion of *tertium comparationis*, and while I do not feel the need to marry myself to his thoughts, one of the distinctions he makes seems like it can be made to serve my present purposes. It is the notion he suggests under the rubric ‘pre-comparative *tertium*’, which he describes as the way in

which one characterises one's comparative endeavour even before setting about comparing. So suppose one were to set out to compare the different terminologies that Indian and Chinese philosophical texts employ when speaking of the emotions, in describing the undertaking thus, one probably has something fairly particular in mind regarding the terms 'terminology', 'Indian', 'Chinese', 'philosophical' and 'text', all of which is in principle specifiable in advance of the comparative undertaking itself. Being conscious of what one relativizes one's inquiries to in this sense, and making this explicit is something I think would enable us, as a group to be of use to each other, rather than merely interesting.

Identifying tertia and comparata

While this group is defined, as per the web-page, as one that pursues different targets using different methodologies, it may be of value to see whether or not our different projects cannot be made to speak the same language. In what follows I will make a brief characterisation of two of the presentations we heard last time, I apologise to those who presented them for any and all infelicities, after all I'm doing this mostly from memory.

Both presentations were ostensibly supposed to answer the question 'what is (an) emotion', and interestingly none of them did that; Diana, rather than answer the question 'what is (an) emotion', answered the question 'what is an emotion such that it may be a part of an inquiry I would be interested in doing', she also mentioned one concrete line of inquiry she would be interested in undertaking, namely one which would look for differences in cultural norms (with regard to emotions) on the basis of linguistic evidence found in text corpora. She further gave an interesting list of semantic criteria which she thought would be of help in identifying emotional terms within the corpus, and for characterising any differences found. Jens did something similar; he said that defining emotions wasn't necessary as most of us have a common-sense grasp of the concept, one that can be made explicit by means of producing a lexicon containing any and all terms one takes to be related to that concept, and perhaps ordering these into hierarchies? What behoves us according to Jens, and what he would like to do, is to expand this common-sense concept by exposing it to other discursive practises in which emotions figure prominently, that have their own emotional terminologies, and their

own approaches to emotions. While I could say quite a lot more about these respective projects, I think this suffices for my real purpose; to do a bit of comparative work in light of my platitudes to see how these two projects could be made to enter into a dialogue.

For the purposes of Diana's investigation, as I understood it, emotions *in se* are unexplained explainers; which is to say, her purpose is not to do anything at all to our concepts of emotions, nor to see what sort of concepts that may be characterisable as being 'of emotions' enter into various discursive practises, rather she wants to say something about how, more or less antecedently understood emotions enter into far larger pictures; what is the distribution along several axes of emotion-terms in Languages L1 and L2 and Cultures C1 and C2, and in the final analysis it is these, the languages and cultures Diana would like to be able to say something interesting about. So she asserts, merely by the way she frames her inquiry, that there are such things as languages and cultures that have norms that can, potentially, be understood more clearly through

Comparing with what Jens sets out to do seems to me like it could be illuminating, for it seems to me that he would like to pursue quite exactly the opposite direction of inquiry; he would like to expand and elucidate the concept of emotion by exposing 'it' to other ways of construing 'the same'. In order to do this, he would have to rely on knowledge of if not a whole language or the whole culture, then at the very least of the peculiarities of the discursive practises in which the texts he studies are contributions.

By their own lights, as I have described them, success for these two projects would

Interpreting these into the terminology of

Travelling emotions: Portuguese, Norwegian and Indian

Now, to say something about what I take away from all of these fairly abstract points. I will do this with reference to the two Diana's and Jens' projects as described at our last meeting, as I understood them. I apologise in advance if I have too greatly misconstrued what either of you said, I'm working, in great part, from memory, after all.

Both presentations were ostensibly supposed to answer the question 'what is (an) emotion', and on this point, I feel that Diana did something of a sleight of hand, although she advertised it fairly clearly. Rather than answer the question 'what is (an) emotion', she answered the question 'what is an emotion such that it may be a part of an inquiry I would be interested in doing', she also mentioned one concrete line of inquiry she would be interested in undertaking, namely one which would look for different cultural norms (with regard to emotions) on the basis of linguistic evidence found in text corpora. In the interest of this line of inquiry, Diana listed several necessary conditions, or at least, several criteria by which one may know these putative emotions. A first criterion was that an emotion for Diana is something that is susceptible to being put into language, and talked about; not merely expressed in language. (The distinction comes to this: While we can talk about, say, anger, we do not necessarily use that term when we are angry).

The rest of her criteria appear to me as qualifications of this initial criterion, for she first gave a semantic criterion: What Diana is interested in, is organised along several axes: A. Cognitive/physical state. B. Attitude. C. Ethical perspective. And D. Action (potential or actual). That is to say, if, in the linguistic data, something (a word?) is found to be used as making claims along these several axes, or if something is found to be interpretable along these several axes (I cannot claim to have completely understood Diana's claim here), or something such, it is, or is probably, an emotion. The amount of information one can retrieve along these axes would, if I understand Diana correctly, provide data for the standing of the emotion within the corpus, and by extension within the culture represented by the corpus.

Diana's proposal for comparative work was that it could be done by providing thin descriptions ala Wierzbicka for all emotions identified using these criteria, and then to do the same with a different corpus, from a different language. What would be seen in such a line of comparative inquiry are, perhaps, the presence or absence of certain items, as identified by thin descriptions. Which would require explanation, but it could potentially be an interesting find. What one can be fairly confident to find is different valuations, understood as different patterns of prominence along the four axes of the semantic criterion of emotion-words. Despite being expected, it would still be significant, as it would enable us to say something concrete about the patterns of these differences.

To make some more general claims about Diana's proposed project, which was part of my ostensible aim here. As Diana is interested in seeing, among other things, different evaluations of the 'same emotions', she assumes the possibility of type-identity, where type is defined by Wierzbicka-characterisations, and obviously token-diversity. She is not interested in doing anything to our concept of emotions or their interaction with language, one way or the other, she wants to say something about how more or less antecedently understood emotions enter into a variety of discursive contexts, these contexts themselves are not really of importance to her; she wants to say something about the wider context, and so, in the final instance, she relativizes these emotions to fairly large abstract objects, such as language and culture. These are emotions in language L and culture C. The importance of this point will be clear once I've discussed Jens' thoughts.

Jens takes a different approach to that of Diana; if I understand him correctly, it wouldn't be wrong to characterise him as something of an Aristotelian; which is to say that he wants to not merely to do something to our concept of 'the emotions' but also to do something about it, perhaps enlarge it in some way. The way he proposes to go about doing this is also fairly Aristotelian, for he said that the sort of common-sense grasp one has of the emotions is more than sufficient to start an inquiry. He would then make that common-sense grasp explicit by means of a lexicon, that is by making a list of terms that seem to him salient in connection with the key-word emotion, and then compare that with the views of *hoi sophoi*, in this case two Indian textual traditions. The one, represented by the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, takes a positive stand

on the emotions, claiming them to be things that ought to be elicited; the other tradition, that of ab

I do not think I am alone in feeling that our last meeting was stimulating and exciting, but at the same time not very productive. I would like, in this little talk, to describe what seems to me our common ground, and what I think should be our common ground, and to describe what I think follows from that. What I will not be doing is to attempt fine distinctions between various mental or half-mental terms, because within this context I do not think there is a non-question-begging way of doing that. I may of course be completely wide of the mark, in which case, this is an opportunity for personal growth for me, but given the very stimulating Wild West-atmosphere of our last meeting, I think some peaceful reflections may be useful.

The following seems to me necessarily true, given our respective backgrounds and that we've decided to get together to form a group like this one: With some qualification we would all concede that there is a sense in which emotions exist (We needn't be wedded to that term). Furthermore, we all have some sense that the phenomenon, displays considerable variation linguistically, culturally and sub-culturally. I will further add that it seems to me obvious that we all think discovering something that does justice to the following two contradictory intuitions: That, whatever variation, we are talking about something that displays enough unity to be called one phenomenon and that being able to describe this unity accurately would be of value. And that, whatever unity there may be, there is a richness in the variation of the things we term 'emotion' which it would be similarly valuable to accurately describe. That we, as a group, if not individually, have these intuitions I infer from the question that was raised at the first meeting as to whether we should be studying similarities or differences; to this question I would answer, in the spirit of my title, 'yes'; one cannot make sense of studying difference except on the basis of extensive similarity, and one cannot make sense of studying similarity except on the basis striking difference.

At the last meeting, we discussed, in the vaguest of terms three possible methodological approaches, three approaches that it seems to me could co-exist quite happily, I will now describe them in terms so vague that none of their proponents will be entirely happy with my characterisations. I will now name and anger each: Jens' 'Aristotelian' approach, Diana's 'linguistic' approach, Amund's 'non-reductive biological'. And now I will describe them in more length:

I have called Jens' suggestion 'Aristotelian' because it strikes me as being very much in the spirit of the Stagirite to start from the 'appearances' (*phantasiai*), that is, one's common-sense grasp of a notion of 'emotion', and to expose this to, on the one hand, logical scrutiny, on the other to the 'views of the wise and the many', in the present case this latter point would be exposing our intuitions to individual texts and corpora, and to through a dialectical jumping between these two to arrive at a characterisation that would be approaching the True.

1. Literally anything is comparable with literally anything.

That is to say, when we claim that two things are not comparable, we are speaking figuratively, there is no category-mistake being made in comparing, say, this table to the idea of the Good. The criteria of success or failure, value or lack of value of a comparative line of inquiry are pragmatic criteria of fruitfulness or lack of fruitfulness relativized to the context of inquiry.

2. To (1.) there is one exception: The comparanda may not be identical.

In other words: when one says that one is comparing 'the same' something, one is equivocating, for in order to be comparable, the things compared must be distinguishable, and thus non-identical. (Although, of course, this does not bar one from saying that the comparanda are different tokens of one and the same type, more on that as we go along).

4. The criteria of success or failure, value or lack of value of a comparative line of inquiry are pragmatic criteria of fruitfulness or lack of fruitfulness relativized to the context of inquiry.

While it may be true that the value or viability of any line of inquiry is guaranteed *a priori*, the point is after all to end up knowing something one did not, nonetheless, one tends to have an inkling whether drawing a comparison

I have written the text of this talk several times