1. Background: reason versus emotion

Discussions on the nature of the emotions and on their role in moral life or in society have been the focus of a considerable amount of interest both in ancient Greek thought, in the Middle Ages, and in the early modern period. In the last two centuries, the emotions have nevertheless seemed like a topic of only marginal importance. During the last few decades, philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, and cognitive scientists have embarked, it seems, on a quest for the “rediscovery” of the emotions. What are the emotions, and what is the role that they play in our understanding of our selves, of each other, of the world? Much of the literature seems coloured by an assumption that it is possible and desirable to take apart an act of understanding, and to isolate the elements (whether purely bodily or cognitive) that relate to emotion. The emotions, if this were feasible, would constitute an addition to understanding as such, as if understanding should be thought of as a neutral process, acquiring only colour and weight from the emotional attitudes of the subject. Before discussing the issues that this situation raises about emotions and understanding, and about how these relate to each other, it will not be amiss to make a few preparatory remarks on the historical origins of this situation.

In early modern philosophy, three themes stand out as particularly topical. The religious controversies of the 16th and 17th centuries made religious faith and salvation a central topic in early modern debates. The same controversies also made those who wanted to defend a secular solution to these controversies (the theorists of the modern state: Grotius, Hobbes etc) give the notion of rationality a somewhat more narrow definition than was traditional. Those who developed the rhetoric of secular rationalism no longer understood rationality as a sort of insight into the nature of a divinely made world: reason is rather a tool, with the help of which men can calculate the consequences of their actions. Thus rationality became sharply distinguished from religious faith, a divide that was to become ever deeper until religious conviction has by and by come to be viewed as excluding rational justification altogether. At the same time, the gulf between rationality and its other traditional opposites, including the emotions, became more pronounced.

The concept of rationality, in early modern times, was gradually narrowed down until it has come to signify a faculty of computation, which is quite independent of the emotional side of human nature. The emotions have, conversely, been understood as an irrational force. The narrowing-down of the concept of rationality, then, has arguably led to a narrowing-down of the concept of the emotional side of human life as well. As irrational impulses, the emotions have seemed an unworthy object of study to most 20th century philosophers. Today, the emotions are regaining
the field as a central topic for debate in philosophy and in the human sciences, and at the same time, the question of the relation between emotions and rationality is becoming increasingly topical. This makes it all the more important to return to the venerable philosophical issue of how emotions relate to understanding.

In philosophical studies and in studies on emotions in the history of philosophy, the pioneers are almost all women (Julia Annas, Annette Baier, Susan James, Genevieve Lloyd, Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, Patricia Greenspan etc). In Finland, too, much of the philosophical research on emotions has been done by women (Lilli Alanen, Sara Heinämaa and Martina Reuter etc), often inspired by feminist perspectives. Today, the clear-cut opposition of emotions and rationality is questioned from many different perspectives. It is questioned by neurologists like Antonio Damasio, who (see Damasio, Descartes’s error: emotion, reason, and the human brain, London: Avon Books 1995) argues that the emotions form a necessary part of almost all rational thought. The need for a rethinking of the opposition of reason and emotion is also evident in the popular psychology, so to say, of our day. A host of more or less respected psychologists today seem eager to contest best-selling writer Daniel Goleman the honour of being the inventor of the concept “Emotional intelligence” or EQ (a concept he presented to a broad audience in his book, unsurprisingly titled Emotional intelligence, New York: Bantam Books 1995). Goleman blurs the opposition between reason and passion by arguing that well-formed emotional dispositions are much more relevant to success and “smartness” in, for instance, professional life, than is calculating capacity. Insightful emotional responses, one might say, are part of a mature understanding of a situation.

A related development has been taking place in moral philosophy. While the revival of normative ethics (Rawls, Singer) has occupied the centre stage in recent decades, an opposite tendency has also been noticeable. Following the lead of philosophers like Elizabeth Anscombe and Alasdair Macintyre, in their emphasis on virtue as a central notion in ethics, a number of philosophers (Iris Murdoch, Raimond Gaita, John Cook) have come to question the idea that ethics should result in a decision procedure for ethical action. For them, as for central scholars like Annette Baier and Amelie Oxenberg Rorty, the important issues in ethics are those that revolve around the concepts of moral psychology: concepts like moral courage and weakness, lucidity, self-deception, conformism, corruption, etc. A natural consequence of this is that reflection on the emotions once more has become a central concern in moral philosophy.

The time has come to let the debate on emotions move on from, for instance, psychological issues, to the more fundamental conceptual problems involved. The aim of this project is to further philosophical inquiry into the interdependence between emotions and understanding. This we propose to do by gathering together much of the research resources on emotions that have until now led a scattered existence in Finland’s academic landscape. These resources will be brought together with top-notch international expertise in the field. The project’s PhD students will be
provided with an extensive network of connections, with guidance and supervision from internationally famous specialists on the philosophy of emotions and its history. Critical endeavours are encouraged by the considerable knowledge of feminist critique and of late Wittgensteinian philosophy and conceptual critique available within the project.

2. Goals: an external description

The project’s primary goal is to provide all possible support to three post-graduate students and to assure the completion of three doctoral dissertations of high international standing. The project also has a number of secondary objectives. Most important of these is the organisation of an international conference Emotions, Others and The Self in the autumn of 2005. A first call for papers will be sent out in late autumn 2004. The conference will be hosted by the Philosophy Department at Åbo Akademi University.

A more informal work-shop on emotions was held in the spring of 2002 which permitted the project members to discuss their research. A course on the history of emotions was held in the spring of 2003 by Simo Knuuttila, Martina Reuter and Sara Heinämaa. To make it easier for the senior project members and for the scientific board members to present feedback to the post-graduate students a web-page has also been opened on the home-page of the host department. Project members will be expected to present their dissertation plans, drafts for forthcoming articles and manuscripts from their dissertations on this web-page.

3. The host department and other resources

The Department of Philosophy at Åbo Akademi University is host to the project, which is supervised by Professor Lars Hertzberg, head of that department. The department is well known both in Finland and abroad for its sustained interest in the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Coupled with a pronounced preference for topics relating to “practical philosophy,” as well as philosophical psychology, this combines to provide an excellent starting-point for philosophical investigations into the nature and role of the emotions. Thus, it is not surprising to find that the department has provided a number of courses on emotions and related topics. In the autumn of 2000, Professor Hertzberg gave a course on Emotion and Will, and in the spring of 2001 he taught a seminar based on David Pugmire’s book Rediscovering Emotion. In the spring of 2002 he will teach a course discussing the neglect of emotion in cognitive psychology. Another course, Emotions in the history of philosophy, to be taught by several teachers, among other Professor Simo Knuuttila, is being planned. Hertzberg has published articles in Finland and abroad on topics relating to, for instance, will, rationality, and moral necessity. Many of his publications are intimately related to the project’s aims: “Pain, anger and primitive reactions”
(Wittgenstein and Aesthetics, ed. Johannessen, Bergen: Filosofisk institutt 1998), “Being Moved by Desire” (Philosophical Investigations 18 (1995), and “Voices of the will” (Commonality and particularity in ethics, ed. Alanen, Heinämäa, Wallgren; Houndmills: Macmillan 1997). In some articles, Hertzberg has attempted to show the close connection between intellectual and moral virtues. He is also engaged in the associated research project Grammars of the Will.

Today, most of the students at the host department are preparing theses on topics that relate to emotions. Papers and theses explore topics like love, fear, and experiencing music, for instance, or they may focus on questions relating to compassion, self-deception, trust, forgiveness, etc. FM Joel Backström is preparing a PhD thesis on moral and philosophical issues pertaining to friendship. FM Hannes Nykänen will soon publish a PhD dissertation, in which he explores the importance of the concept of love in our everyday understanding of morality (as contrasted to most academic and philosophical accounts of morality now available). Docent Olli Lagerspetz has written extensively on the concept of trust in moral philosophy and in the social sciences. Of the various individuals associated to this project either as individuals or as members of collaborating projects, mention should be made at least of FD Katarina Elam (Uppsala University) and docent Mikko Salmela (Helsinki University). Elam continues the work she started in her PhD dissertation Emotions as a Mode of Understanding, while Salmela is currently investigating the opposing claims of cognitivist and sensationalist views on emotions, with the ambition of working out a new overall account avoiding the pitfalls of these opposed views. Mention should also be made here of FD Martina Reuter and FD Timo Kaitaro. The former continues her work on the place and role of emotions and of the body in the philosophy of Descartes. The latter is now working on philosophy in the surrealist movement, and remains an authority on the early modern history of neurological explanations, which continue to underpin account of the emotions also today. The above-mentioned researchers have consented to being invited to the project’s seminars and conferences, and to thereby assist in the direction of the project’s post-graduate students.

When Camilla Kronqvist and Ylva Gustafsson graduated at approximately the same time, the first with a philosophical thesis on love, the latter with one on fear, it seemed obvious a project should be built up around their converging interests. A little later, early in the year 2000, Michael Mc Eachrane presented a plan for a doctoral dissertation on emotions and rationality to the department. These three post-graduate students were therefore chosen to form the core of the present research and PhD project. With the scientific board and the planning member, the project will continue to function as an emotions-related network after its primary objectives are achieved. The planning of the current application has benefited from financial support by the Åbo Akademi University in the form of two grants, for FIM 40 000 and 39 000 respectively (one of them in the collaboration with the department of Psychology). In close connection with the present application, the Philosophy
department and the Psychology departments at the Åbo Akademi University together applied for funds from the privately financed Fetzer Institute in the United States for a research project entitled “Love and the Growth of Self-Understanding”.

The project also profits from the contacts and added expertise of associated projects, one of which has already been mentioned (Grammars of the will, see above). Two other projects are directed by Professor Lilli Alenä. One is the NOS-H funded project Actions and passions in Western philosophy from 1300 to 1700 (post-doc researchers are Mikko Yrjönsuuri, Henrik Lagerlund, Tuomo Aho). The other, Teorier om kognition, intentionalitet och intentionellt handlande från medeltida till modern filosofi, is financed by Riksbankens jubileumsfond (researchers Minna Koivuniemi, Lorenzo Cassini, Thomas Ekenberg, post-doc researcher Henrik Lagerlund).

4. Project members

FM Michael Mc Eachrane received his MA degree in theoretical philosophy at the University of Stockholm in spring 1997. Since then, he has published numerous articles, mainly in prominent newspapers like Dagens Nyheter and for literary reviews like Bonniers Litterära Magasin and for Glänta. Many of his articles – such as his review of Susan James’s Passion and action. The emotions in seventeenth-century philosophy (in Dagens Nyheter 18.2.1999) – focus on the philosophy of emotions. Mc Eachrane has also lectured about post-colonial perspectives on racism, and is currently editing an anthology on the same topic. He is now preparing a PhD thesis at the Philosophy Department of Åbo Akademi University. The supervisor of his research is Professor Lars Hertzberg.

FM Ylva Gustafsson received her MA degree at the Åbo Akademi University in the autumn of 1999. Her master’s thesis Om rädsla (“On fear”) received the excellent score excimia cum laude approbatur. She directed the higher seminar on the subject of emotions in 1999 and gave a lectures series “Emotions” at the Open university in Turku in the summer of 2000. Her course focused on philosophical problems in the views on emotions held by philosophers like Descartes, William James, Spinoza, and the Stoics. Gustafsson is preparing her PhD thesis at the Philosophy Department of Åbo Akademi University. The supervisor of her research is Professor Lars Hertzberg.

FL Camilla Kronqvist received her MA degree at the Åbo Akademi University in spring 2000. Her master’s thesis This funny thing called love received the rarely used highest score laudatur. She received her Licentiate degree in 2004 with the thesis "Aspects of Love". Kronqvist directed the higher seminar in philosophy in spring 2000. Under her supervision, the seminar focused on philosophical issues pertaining to human relations and emotions. She gave a course on feminist philosophy in 2003. Kronqvist prepares a PhD thesis at the Philosophy Department of Åbo Akademi University. The supervisor of her research is Professor Lars Hertzberg.

5. Philosophical perspectives
Philosophically, the project aims at exploring the possibilities and pitfalls of philosophical investigations of the emotions. The research issues come roughly under three headings: emotions as experience, emotions as a form of understanding, and emotions as an object of understanding (particularly as an object of moral judgement). Michael Mc Eachrane’s work addresses the general questions of what a philosophical inquiry into the emotions could amount to, of the relation between emotion and thought, and of the moral dimension of the emotions, whereas Camilla Kronqvist raises similar questions in relation to the specific emotional concept of love. Ylva Gustafsson is concerned with questions about what it is to understand other people and what role emotions play in this understanding.

*Emotions as experience.* One traditional aim of philosophical investigations of emotions is to understand what emotions are. This seemingly innocent philosophical query often involves a set of problematic assumptions. Replies to this question have, roughly speaking, taken two distinct forms. Many philosophers, from Descartes and Hume to William James, have argued that emotions are a specific type of experience, more precisely a bodily experience caused by physiological processes, and thus external to the subject’s understanding of the situation. Modern reductionist views in the cognitive sciences, for instance, often assume a similar view of the emotions. The emotions, on such a view, are essentially non-rational (albeit useful) biological and corporeal processes.

At the opposite end of the spectrum of prevalent views on the nature of the emotions, we find the view that emotions are judgements. In ancient philosophy, the Stoics in particular were famous for their idea that (unreasonable) fear is a (mistaken) judgement about some impending danger. The truly virtuous and wise person has no passions, because she never concedes that a possible external occurrence is essentially evil. In contemporary philosophy, the closely related view that emotions are essentially judgements, which was at first championed by Errol Bedford and Robert Solomon, is all but predominant.

Both of the above described approaches to emotions have significant advantages. It is clearly important for our understanding of what emotions are that they are often felt, they are experienced as bodily sensations. On the other hand, most emotions of even the most basic kind, like anger or fear, relate to objects that the person is said to fear or to be angry at. To recognise a person’s mental “state” as one of anger, we need an idea of a possible object (usually another person) that she can be taken to be angry at. The idea that emotions are judgements has an obvious advantage at this point. Thus, the view that fear is a judgement about some impending danger seems to account for its being related to an object. On the other hand, this view seems to do away with the fact, stressed by James and the physiologists, that emotions are something we feel. Obviously one may judge that something dangerous is about to happen without being afraid. The cognitive view of emotions also often presupposes that the situations with which we are emotionally involved can be described in neutral terms. It is in this vein that Gabriele Taylor, in her influential article “Love” (in Philosophy as
it is, ed. Hondrich, Burnyeat. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1979) argues that love is based on loveable qualities in the person loved. Such a view of the relation between facts and judgement or facts and feeling does not seem very illuminating, as Kronqvist points out. Rather, as Kronqvist makes clear, our understanding of the persons we love often seems to be itself an expression of love. In the same way, there is no objective quality that makes a thing fearful: to regard something as a proper or intelligible object of fear is to view it through the eyes of fear. This does not entail that in order to recognise a feeling one would have to share the feeling in question, only that one can see the object of the emotion as a possible object of fear.

The above described approaches share an essentialist assumption, that the emotions simply are some one thing (bodily sensation or judgement), and because of this assumption both approaches seem somewhat rigid. It is important to examine and appreciate the important advantages of each of these positions. It is also important, however, to see what they exclude from a discussion of emotions. Can the assumption that the emotions are nothing but physiological processes provide a sufficient basis for discussing all the things that are usually important when emotions are discussed? Does such a view allow for an intelligent discussion of the ways in which we can be held to be responsible for our emotions? What kinds of aspects does the opposite assumption that emotions are judgements exclude? How can we make use of the distinct advantages these two accounts have to offer, while avoiding their drawbacks? How can the important insights they both offer be developed and used while avoiding the problems and confusions they create? Or is there some more fundamental problem in these two approaches, some other problematic assumptions that they share? In fact, what is it that we do, when we discuss emotions as bodily experiences or as judgements?

Emotion as a form of understanding. Both the above views on emotions seem to be grounded in a presupposition that has been very influential throughout the history of Western philosophy, and which can be expressed by saying that reality is transparently present to all observers with the requisite sense capacities. In principle, all rational beings see the same neutral states of affairs. Since our emotional responses to situations vary, it follows that emotions must be considered to be extraneous to our capacity for thought. Accordingly, there is no room for the possibility that the emotions themselves might constitute an irreducible perspective on the way things are. Is this a correct view of emotions and understanding? Are emotions really either ill-formed judgements about a neutral external reality or physiological processes that disturb the formation of neutral and accurate judgements? Or, should (all) our judgements rather be seen to express emotional commitment in one form or another? Are emotions an inseparable part of how we understand ourselves, each other, and the world we live in?

The significance of expressing or attributing fear varies depending on the situation and on the sort of claim being made (saying “I’m afraid” may, for instance, be a warning, or a confession, or a report of a state of mind, or a judgement). Hence, there
is no sense in trying to establish what fear is independently of trying to get clear about what would be involved in expressing or attributing that emotion in various cases. Responding to this by saying that fear is not one thing but a number of different things would not get to the root of this problem. The lack of clarity which comes from our failure to achieve an overview of the different uses of emotion words is often misidentified (through a form of transfer that is not uncommon in philosophy) as an obscurity in the object of study itself. This, in turn, is interpreted to mean that to be emotionally involved in a situation is to have a deficient cognitive grasp of it. This has contributed to the impression both that emotions are not intellectually respectable and that they are not suitable objects of philosophical inquiry. This is not, however, what the everyday observations about emotions entail. When it is said, in ordinary parlance, that an emotion may “cloud a person’s judgement”, this remark is usually made with reference to a particular situation or person, not as a general statement about the epistemological role of the emotions.

*Emotions as an object understanding and of moral judgement.* If emotions like love, anger, and fear were fundamentally just bodily occurrences comparable to hunger and thirst, it would seem unreasonable to judge persons in terms of whether they have sufficient cause to be afraid or angry, or to blame them or praise them for their emotions. That we do so, however, is not only an obvious fact: it seems that one of the main reasons why emotions are important is precisely that we, in varying degree, consider people’s emotions (including our own) as a reflection of their character. To what extent does the physiologist approach to emotions hinder intelligent discussion of emotional responses as objects of moral judgement? In Stoic philosophy, the (usually disapproving) judgements about emotional reactions were based on the assumption that strong emotions arise from a mistaken appreciation of the facts at hand in any given situation. More generally, it does not seem to clarify things if we assume that emotions are simply expressions of the fact that we take note of certain facts that are unequivocally given in observation. What problems does this perspective create for an intelligent discussion of moral judgements about emotions? How does this picture change if we assume that a person’s moral outlook is in part defined by the kind of emotional commitment his judgements express?

To judge by the signs, philosophers are once more ready to accord the emotions the central place in our understanding of human life that they have traditionally held. The question is how well philosophers will succeed in taking on this challenge. Will they continue to debate whether the emotions are nothing but this or nothing but that, or can they (we) step down from the pedestal of universal definitions, to examine the different ways in which the emotions come into our understanding of ourselves, each others, and the world we live in?