EMOTIONS IN DIALOGUE: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE HUMANITIES

1. Project Data
Project leader: Olli Lagerspetz, professor of Philosophy.
Project name: Emotions in Dialogue: Perspectives from the Humanities.
Site: The Department of Philosophy, the Department of Folklore Studies and the Department of Comparative Religion, Åbo Akademi University.

2. Background
2.1. General background
This project aims to elaborate the insight that an emotion cannot be properly understood or described in abstraction from the meaningful situation in which it is embedded. A leading thought of the project is that emotions are dialogical in character. By ‘dialogue’, we are not only referring to linguistic interchange; one may obviously have emotions without talking about them. Yet the meaning of human activity and expressivity is dependent on their being connected with relations to others. It is only possible to make sense of the roles that emotions have in life – indeed, in important cases, to recognize what emotions they are – by reflecting on interpersonal moral relations, rather than only focusing on internal states of individuals.

The implications of this approach are explored both philosophically and empirically, with a view on how philosophy and the development of qualitative field methods may mutually enrich each other. The project brings together already existing research efforts from different fields of the humanities. In their varying approaches to human dialogue, Philosophy, Folklore Studies, and Comparative Religion complement each other in valuable ways. Thus our aim is not just to introduce philosophical sophistication into empirical research methods. Philosophy has something to learn from the other humanities. Current philosophical discussion of the emotions to some extent consists of reactions to views no longer recognised as relevant in concrete fieldwork practices.

The present project will address (a) the need for reflection on the relation between emotion and interpersonal understanding in general (see 2.2 below). More specifically, (b) it will address the ways in which this reflection may be valuable in developing qualitative research methods in the humanities (see 2.3 below).

2.2. Emotions and interpersonal understanding
What general points of epistemological and methodological character will emerge from the proposed approach to the emotions?

Recent philosophical research on emotions has sought to overcome the dichotomy of reason and emotion typical of earlier theories. Cognitive theories of emotion (viewing emotions as judgments) suggest that emotions involve cognitive content that determines their identity (see works by Kenny 1963, Davidson 1976, Nussbaum 1990, Solomon 1976, 1980, de Sousa 1987, G. Taylor 1975, 1979, 1985). Emotions are constituted by our meaningful ways of responding to situations. Some strands of this approach have also contributed to a growing awareness of the need to connect this discussion to ethics (Nussbaum 1986, 1994, Roberts 2003). Among other things, these authors have pointed to the role that literature may have for the deepening of moral understanding (Nussbaum 1990, 2001, Diamond 1991). In
addition, the increased importance of the emotions in ethical theory also shows in the development of virtue ethics, emphasizing sensitivity to the particularities of individual situations (Foot 1981, Hursthouse 2001).

Questions arise for the classical distinction between epistemology and ethics. Rather than regarding epistemology and ethics as separate spheres of human thought, pertaining to facts and values respectively, the aim of the present project is to focus on their mutual dependence. Understanding someone’s emotions about a fact (traditionally seen as a matter of her ‘values’) cannot be separated from understanding how she takes things to be (i.e. what description of the facts of the situation at hand she would commit herself to).

Much of the existing philosophical and empirical research assumes, or is at least compatible with the assumption that, emotions are best viewed in the context of individual psychology. They are described as a matter of the individual’s judgments, appraisals or states – not as something constituted in meaningful relations between people. Such individualising approaches are related to a tendency to assimilate questions of interpersonal understanding into epistemic questions. On that view, understanding the emotions of others is mainly a matter of finding out what happens in their minds. When the significance of empathy is discussed, ‘empathic imagination’ is often considered a basic tool for imagining or simulating the other person’s state, intentions and ways of thinking (cf. Nussbaum 2001, Goldie 2000, Goldman 1995; also see Kögler & Stueber 2000 on the ‘Theory theory vs. Simulation theory’ debate on interpersonal understanding). Arguably, what the cited view ignores is the fact that both emotions and people’s ascriptions of emotions to one another are constitutive of their moral relations to each other. My ascription of a given emotion to you is part of our relationship, not descriptions from a neutral vantage point outside of it. Thus, reflection on the meaningful relations between persons is internal to understanding emotions.

We propose to take the existing work one step further by connecting it with authors known as dialogical philosophers (such as Buber 1983, Lévinas 1989, Logstrup 1997, and Marcel 1948) as well as with the emphasis on the role of the linguistic community typical of the later Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 1953). Wittgenstein’s work suggests that emotions and related states cannot be viewed separately from the web of human relations in which they are manifested (see Lagerspetz & Hertzberg, forthcoming; Lagerspetz 1998). Dialogical philosophers argue that this human interaction is essentially ethical in character. This is also typical of some work done in the post-Wittgensteinian tradition (Cockburn 1990, Lagerspetz 1998, Hertzberg 1994, Gaita 1991).

The project will emphasise the need to reconsider the concept of ‘understanding’. Our ability to think, reflect and remember does not consist in purely neutral, cognitive abilities. They are also expressive of the moral significance of people’s lives and experiences, and of the mutual significance of people to each other.

For instance, what it means to remember traumatic experiences from a war cannot be separated from how these experiences are talked about. They may be something one does not want to remember or talk about at all, yet one may be haunted by them. On the other hand, an inexperienced person might discuss all sorts of atrocities with an ease quite unimaginable to someone who has lived through them. How participants in an exchange talk, ask questions, and listen, and how they might hesitate to ask certain questions, is thus internal to their moral understanding (or lack thereof) of the events themselves.
Reflexivity is central here. One’s changing accounts of one’s emotions (suppression, regret, pride, etc.), will reflect one’s changed understanding of the original situation, as well as of what constitutes proper or acceptable responses to it. The accounts one gives of one’s own emotions and of those of others will, in themselves, constitute further responses to situations and persons. This also has consequences for the role of purported causal descriptions and explanations of emotions. As causal accounts are advanced in science and popular culture, they feed back to our self-understanding. Thus they are not only attempts at explanation, but involve invitations to take a certain perspective on emotions, responsibility, and the self.

The philosophical concerns mentioned here connect with earlier work by research team members. In her dissertation (forthcoming, September 2008) and a number of essays, Kronqvist investigates the concept of sexual love. Gustafsson has, in particular, discussed the concepts of empathy and compassion, raising the problems just indicated. Nynäs has investigated the emotional dimensions of religiosity in general and of intercultural communication, as well as the models of human nature underlying scientific explanations of religious feeling. Also Nybom is addressing the question of how explanations of emotions reflect our cultural self-understanding and how they change it. Lagerspetz has discussed the concept of trust, the ethical and epistemological role of human interdependence, as well as methodological issues in the humanities and the social sciences. Strandén regularly teaches courses on fieldwork methods, also addressing questions of reflexivity and positioning. There she has confronted many of the issues addressed in the present project (also see Strandén 2005, 2007, 2008).

2.3. Emotions and Qualitative Fieldwork
What are the implications of this take on the emotions with regard to the ways in which the emotions should be accommodated, responded to, and understood in the context of qualitative fieldwork in the humanities?

Current interest in emotions in fieldwork is the result of a debate since the 1980’s concerning reflexivity and representation, and the researcher’s relation to the object of her study (Ehn & Klein 1994). A point made in this debate was that the data of folklore studies are not just pre-existent pieces of information ‘out there’, to be collected by the field worker. Rather data are created in the contact between the interviewer and the interviewee. Emotions in field situations may be seen as objects (or starting points) of research, not as problems to be overcome or ignored (Kleinmann & Copp 1993; see also work by the cultural geographer and social psychologist Liz Bondi, 2005). Emotional expression is not extraneous to the factual content of what a person is saying. Rather it contributes to the meaning to the story that unfolds in the course of the dialogue.

In the theoretical literature, Sara Ahmed’s (2004) emphasis on performativity represents another attempt to break with the internalist and individualising approach. Instead of asking what kinds of states emotions are she wants to see what emotions do. Emotions arise in our relations to objects and other living subjects, and they shape those relations. Thus the question whether emotions are located ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ the subject is not helpful. But the emphasis on performativity also risks producing the undue impression that emotions are instruments, to be used consciously by the subject.
On the whole, formulations used in the methodological debate are frequently ambiguous, leaving room for views that are officially rejected. For instance, Seidman (1998) describes the relationship between interviewer and interviewee explicitly in terms of an “I-Thou” relationship. This implies reciprocity, taking the other seriously, valuing what they say, and honouring the details of their lives. However, he also describes close rapport and intimacy between the parties as a disturbing element. ‘Interference’ and ‘inappropriate’ personal engagement for, say, an interviewee who starts to cry, should be avoided. According to Seidman, in such situations ‘the best thing to do is nothing’ in order to avoid a ‘therapeutic relationship’. He also refers to the ‘danger’ that too much rapport makes it unclear whose experience and meaning are being described. This warning echoes the old view of the fieldworker as a collector of pre-existing data.

An example from our material illustrates the shift of perspective that is often needed – as well as reasons why this may not be an easy task. Reflecting on one of her interviews with war veterans, Strandén brings out the initial sense of inadequacy that may be felt by a field worker when strong emotions are expressed by interviewees, as well as her own uneasiness with emotional involvement. Her original intention was to interview Finnish WWII veterans about the wartime use of The Tales of Ensign Ståhl (the patriotic epic by the Finnish poet Runeberg). An interviewee unexpectedly started to describe the horrors that he had gone through. The soldiers would sometimes whistle or sing as they were crouching in the battlefield, just waiting to be hit by enemy artillery but trying to keep their minds off what was happening. In this situation, Strandén’s question was: “What songs did you sing?” She writes, “Today I see that question as more or less absurd in the context. [...] I had been preparing for stories about a piece of poetry and on how it was used during the war. It was my interview with Viktor that made me really understand that for some people, telling stories about The Songs of Ensign Ståhl was somehow intimately related to telling stories about the war.” – Thus the solution in this case was not to abstract away from the emotional significance of the data, but rather to use it as a starting point for revising one’s views on the material. At the same time the ‘material’ was something other than Strandén had initially thought she was to ‘collect’.

Nynäs addresses related methodological questions. In an empirical study (2007) on interpretation of religious and spiritual experiences, special attention was given to the role of emotional expression as part of a meaning creating process. The study showed that the appreciation of religious meaning includes a significant emotional dimension, which is of a dialogical character. In a study on religious practice based on both participant observation and interviews, Nynäs (2008a) also emphasises the importance of being attentive also to bodily practices. The conceptualization of the emotional dimension of religiosity in relation to intersubjectivity, and the development of methodology is of importance (see Nynäs 2008b).

3. Objectives
3.1 General Aim of the Project
The general aim of this project is to bring together philosophical and empirical approaches to the emotions around a common focus on their dialogical character. The philosophical and methodological aspects of the project (described above in 2.2. and 2.3) are closely intertwined. Philosophical insights contribute with conceptual tools for discussing the role of
emotions in fieldwork. Reflection generated by empirical work will in turn feed back into philosophy.

Empirical research quite naturally leads the fieldworker to questions about her own role in the interview situation. The practice of interviewing as such becomes a theme for reflection. However, the difficulties that face the field worker are not only interesting for practical reasons. The fact that she experiences them as difficulties to be faced is, in itself, indicative of her striving to understand the other. It is expressive of the ethical relation that obtains in the context of the dialogue – a relation that is, in turn, highlighted in the philosophical discussion.

3.2 Descriptions of Project Members’ Individual Perspectives

Strandén’s study is an analysis of interview material. She examines how war experiences are presented in her in-depth interviews with twenty Finnish war veterans and members of the women’s Lotta Svärd organisation. The interview material now exists; Strandén will use the funding period for analysis of the material and for the study of contemporary written sources as well as literature on the theory and method of folklore studies. Strandén investigates what veterans say about the war, as well as how and why they talk about it. She is interested in the process of creating understanding between individuals with different life experiences: How do interviewees describe what is hard, difficult, and unpleasant, the battles and deaths, to someone who has never seen the horrors of war? This raises important questions about ethics in fieldwork and in subsequent analysis. How does one combine respect for the persons being studied with the scientific task of examining their expressions, actions, thoughts and emotions critically? Above all, how does understanding emerge in a situation where interviewer and interviewee share next to nothing except for their Finnish citizenship?

This reflection also highlights certain inadequacies in philosophical accounts of emotions, a theme addressed by Gustafsson. The question of understanding the emotions of others has usually been treated as an epistemological problem (a matter of our limited access to someone else’s thoughts and feelings). The epistemological approach has solipsist implications, possibly entailing the idea that we never completely understand others. In opposition to this, Gustafsson remarks that, while genuine difficulties exist, these must be taken to be manifestations of ethical difficulties about making contact with the other, not as epistemological riddles. For instance, feelings of isolation and loneliness may stem from traumatic experiences and the shame or guilt that may follow from them (Brison 2005, Cavell 1969). Gustafsson also investigates accounts of compassion given in terms of simulation or analogical thinking. Such views of compassion have also found resonance in experimental work which, according to Gustafsson, is based on the epistemological view on understanding. She attempts instead to treat ‘understanding’ and ‘failure to understand’ as ethical notions. How knowledge enters this understanding cannot be separated from the ways in which we approach the other person. ‘Compassion’ is internally connected with self-awareness, our ability to reflect on our own moral blind spots.

Kronqvist’s research also starts off at the intersection between the philosophy of mind and moral philosophy. She attempts to demonstrate that it is not possible to make sense of the
ways in which questions about what we feel and who we are arise for us, unless one considers the existential and moral dimension of the human contacts and dialogues that form human life. Using sexual love as an example, part of her research aims at showing how emotions can be said to be constitutive of self-understanding, our understanding of others and of life as a whole. Furthermore, she attempts to show how our difficulties in understanding each other, and in particular, each others’ emotions, can be seen as emerging from our moral failure to respond compassionately, i.e., lovingly, to each other and to ourselves. Kronqvist and Gustafsson are currently finishing their editorial work on the international philosophical anthology Emotions and Understanding (Gustafsson and Kronqvist, eds., 2008, forthcoming).

The uneasy relation between moral life, as expressed in our use of the relevant concepts, and the attempts to describe that life theoretically, lies at the centre of the critical endeavours by these project members. This is also true of Nybom’s work. Nybom sets out to investigate the scientific theories associated with the internalist view on the emotions. This part of the project will examine the relation between scientific explanation and moral understanding of human life. Scientific explanations are here mainly seen as explanations in terms of causal relations, physiological processes and functions within the human body. In such explanatory approaches, behaviour and emotions are described as bodily states and movements. ‘Moral understanding’, in contrast, involves a view on human beings as self-conscious, intentional beings, who are taken to be responsible for their behaviour. Here, behaviour is understood as (meaningful) action. Nybom’s research will focus on questions that arise when causal explanations of human behaviour are seen as excluding intentionality and thus, responsibility. Nybom will examine the challenges that M.R. Bennett and P.M.S. Hacker raised in their work Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience (2003) and the subsequent vivid discussion (Bennett, Dennett & Searle, 2007). How is our understanding of an emotion affected by its having been produced by some cause? And how (if at all) does the fact that such explanations are endorsed, change human interaction, behaviour and self-understanding? For instance, how is our self-understanding changed when depression or shyness are described as clinical conditions, not as individual responses to life situations?

In his pioneering work, A Cultural History of Causality (2004), Stephen Kern presents an interesting aspect of the role of explanatory theories in our conceptualisations of human life. In this study of the narrative in European and American literature since 1830, Kern examines the impact that scientific theories on the causes of behaviour made on human self-understanding. To some extent our knowledge of a certain theory not only explains behaviour but also alters that behaviour. On the other hand, if new knowledge can have such impact, that might already imply the inadequacy of straightforwardly causalist explanations.

In comparative religion, the role of emotion has been central in many prominent accounts of religious experience (e.g. James 1902/1957, Otto 1958/1917) and today there is a growing interest in religious emotion (Ostow 2007). Cognitive science, for instance, contributes with new vistas (see, e.g., Pyysiäinen & Anttonen 2002, Andresen 2001, Franks 2003). However, recent accounts have not paid much attention to the hermeneutic context in which emotions necessarily occur. Thus there are unanswered questions about the precise significance of
these findings, and in some cases a tendency towards undue explanatory simplicity. In contrast to this, *Nynäs* explores how awareness of a dialogical dimension may contribute to the understanding of emotion in religiosity (see Hill & Hood 1999) and he will further assess and develop their methodological implications. Questions that will be addressed are: In psychology of religion, what are the central requirements for a methodology that is to correspond with the complexity of religiosity, rejecting simplistic account of emotions? How can the emotional dimension of religion be recognized in fieldwork in terms of intersubjectivity and interpersonality?

### 3.3 Joint Book on Fieldwork Methodology

One aim of the present project is to write an interdisciplinary anthology (preliminary title: *Critical Perspectives on Emotions in Interviews*) where the role of emotions in interviews is discussed critically. A fieldworker will need to address questions such as: What does it mean to understand or not to understand another person in research? What is the nature of *Einfühlung* or empathetic understanding? Is it a general cognitive technique? Or is it an expression of our moral attentiveness towards the other person? – The presence of emotions in fieldwork situations is frequently acknowledged in textbooks on fieldwork methods, but they are not typically given any extended treatment. Existing methodological handbooks are considered helpful for students taking their first steps in fieldwork, but researchers feel a need for a more reflexive take on the concepts employed. There is also a certain lack of reflection on the character of fieldwork and on the need to confront difficult emotions (by the interviewee and by the researcher).

The *instrumental* value of emotions in fieldwork can be easily recognised. Mutual trust and responsiveness make it easier to obtain information. However, there is also the question in what ways the presence of certain emotions as such (on the part of the informant and/or the field worker) tells us something of the situation and the kind of data that are obtained. In other words, in what sense, if any, do they constitute knowledge? – In fieldwork, the empirical material is created in a dialogue between the fieldworker and the interviewee. Thus the fieldworker’s task is seen as establishing dialogue. The interviewee is introducing the fieldworker into new ways of life and new perspectives on the world.

### 4. Implementation: The mutual benefits of interdisciplinary research

In practical terms, the present aims are characterised briefly by the following entries:

1. To produce three doctoral theses: Ylva Gustafsson (Philosophy), in 2009, Sofie Strandén (Folklore) in 2010, and Martin Nybom (Philosophy) in 2011.
2. To publish articles in scientific journals (minimum one per person and year)
3. To write jointly a critically reflective interdisciplinary book on emotions in interview situations. Two or more joint seminars will be arranged each year in order to discuss the individual chapters and the overall progress. The manuscript is expected to be finished at the end of the funding period, 2011.
4. To arrange three workshops on emotions (once a year) by project members, other members of the research network, and an invited keynote speaker.

As the planned funding period is three years (2009 – 2011) some participants now writing their dissertations will count as postdoctoral research fellows later in the period.
5. Research Environment
5.1 Members of Research Team

(a) Project leader and senior supervising members

Olli Lagerspetz, Head of Philosophy at Åbo Akademi University. Lagerspetz studied at Åbo and Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, receiving his doctorate in 1996. In 1992 – 1998, Lagerspetz was Lecturer of Philosophy at the University of Wales, Swansea. He is the author of the books Trust: the Tacit Demand (Kluwer, 1998) and Smuts: En bok om världen, vårt hem (Symposion, 2006). He has published in Inquiry, Philosophical Investigations, Philosophical Papers, Philosophical Psychology, Philosophy, and elsewhere on philosophical anthropology, the philosophy of mind, ethics, and the philosophy of the social sciences. Lagerspetz is supervising Nybom’s doctoral work.

Lena Marander-Eklund, Senior Lecturer of Folklore at Åbo Akademi University. Marander-Eklund received her doctorate in 2000 on childbirth narratives. She has edited several books, on methodology (Metodkompassen – kulturvetarens metodbok, Åbo Akademi 2004; Frågelistan som källa och metod, Studentlitteratur 2005) and on emotions (Känslornas koreografi, Gidlunds 2007). She is cooperationg with Nordic scholars in a project on the emotions called In Joy and Sorrow. She is co-supervisor to Strandén’s doctoral work.

Lars Hertzberg, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Åbo Akademi University. Professor Hertzberg is an internationally recognized expert on Wittgenstein, writing mainly on philosophical psychology, the philosophy of language, and ethics. A number of his internationally published papers were included in 1994 in the volume The Limits of Experience. Hertzberg has led several research projects, including projects financed by the Academy of Finland. Currently he is supervising Kronqvist’s and Gustafsson’s doctoral work.

Ulrika Wolf-Knuts, Professor of Folklore Studies, currently Vice Rector of Åbo Akademi University. Wolf-Knuts is supervising Strandén’s doctoral work.

(b) Post-doctoral research fellows

Peter Nytnäs, Adjunct Professor (docent) of Comparative Religion, University Lecturer in the psychology of religion at the Department of Social Sciences of Religion at Uppsala University.

Camilla Kronqvist, currently Licentiate of Philosophy. Kronqvist has studied philosophy at Åbo and the University of Wales, Lampeter. Her doctoral thesis was recently endorsed by the referees. Kronqvist is currently on maternity leave, but her Viva voce examination is scheduled for the Autumn of 2008.

(c) Doctoral Students

Sofie Strandén Scheduled date of completion of PhD 2009.
Martin Nybom Scheduled date of completion of PhD 2011.
Ylva Gustafsson Scheduled date of completion of PhD 2009.

(d) Associated members of the research team

Ruth Illman, Adjunct Professor (docent), Comparative Religion, Åbo Akademi University. Illman is currently working as a post-doctoral fellow for the Academy of Finland (2008-2010) on Inter-religious Dialogue: Jewish-Christian-Muslim Perspectives. She has cooperated with the
members of the research team already previously, including joint editorship (with Marander-Eklund) of the anthology Känslornas koreografi (2007) and co-authorship (with Nynäs) of Kultur, människa, möte (2005).

Ville Kivimäki, Doctoral student, History. Kivimäki is working on the Finnish war trauma, using material related to that studied by Strandén. While receiving funding elsewhere, he has expressed interest in participating in the joint seminars.

Esther Oluffa Pedersen, Postdoctoral fellow, the University of Århus. Funded by the Danish project, Trust and Morality, Pedersen will spend the Spring term of 2009 working with Lagerspetz on the concept of trust and participating in the joint seminars.

(e) International Resource Persons

David Cockburn, Head of Philosophy at the University of Wales, Lampeter. Professor Cockburn is the author of Hume (Open University Press, 1983), Other Human Beings (Macmillan, 1990), Other Times: Philosophical perspectives on past, present and future (Cambridge University Press, 1997), and An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind (Palgrave, 2001). He has also edited Human Beings (Cambridge University Press, 1991) and written numerous articles on philosophical psychology, ethics, and the philosophy of mind. He has a long history of research visits and other contacts with Åbo, including working as referee for several dissertations.

Peter C. Hill, Professor of Psychology (Ph.D) at Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University, CA, USA.

Anne-Marie Pahuus, Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Århus. Since 2006, Pahuus is the Director of the network Emotions, Knowledge, and Culture. (Lagerspetz is scheduled to visit Århus as a keynote speaker for the network conference in May 2008.)

Ulf Palmenfelt, Professor of Ethnology and Folkloristics, Gotland University. Palmenfelt has a long-standing collaboration with Marander-Eklund and the Department of Folklore and Comparative Religion.

Susanne Nylund Skog, Adjunct Professor of Ethnology, The University of Stockholm. Dr. Skog has a long-standing collaboration with Marander-Eklund and the Department of Folklore and Comparative Religion.

Dan Zahavi, Professor of Philosophy, the University of Copenhagen. Zahavi is the Director of the Danish National Research Foundation Center for Subjectivity Research. The research at the Centre has numerous overlaps with the concerns of the present project.

Literature

1. Relevant Work Published by Project Members

Ylva Gustafsson

Hedemora: Gidlunds.

Lars Hertzberg

Camilla Kronqvist

Olli Lagerspetz (Also see enclosed list of publications)

Lena Marander-Eklund

Peter Nynäs

Sofie Strandén

Other Literature


