BOOK REVIEW

An Ethic of Emotion

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ABSTRACT

If you are seeking explanations burdened by language leading to circular definitions for emotions, ethic and the ethical then you will be sorely disappointed - this is not the book for you. However, if you want a guide on a journey of self-reflection on the ethical, you will come to accept the inadequacy of words and ambiguous meaning, if you had not already done so. Accompany Jordi Vallverdú on an exploratory tour of the experiential.

An Ethic of Emotion
Jordi Vallverdu
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INTRODUCTION

The core of Jordi Vallverdú's essay 'An Ethic of Emotions' is concerned with the inadequacy of language. In some places his preoccupation reads like a philosopher's, not necessarily hubristic, ascendancy to the incomprehensible for the lay person – but perhaps this is more so because the Reviewer here is not an expert on *ethics* as a philosophical inquiry into 'right' or 'wrong' behaviour, because what is right or wrong is cultural. For example, the current UK debate about same sex marriage, which is now law under the Marriage Bill[1] as "legislation in England and Wales allowing gay couples to marry comes into force"[2] from Saturday 29 March 2014[3], would not be tolerated, and such marriages would not be allowed in Muslim nations such as Saudi Arabia – the only society in the world with a religious edict that exclude women from driving a motor vehicle[4], or in African countries such as Kenya and Uganda[5] with values strongly against *gay coupling*, at the time of writing.[6] Or a faction within my 'birth country' (Pakistan) which sees it suitable to shoot a female teenager in the head (Malala Yousufzai), because she dared to speak out and demand an education[7], or families that perpetrate (dis)honour killings of their children, especially female members, because the clan's societal standing in their parochial setting is vastly more desirable than the right-to-choose by their offspring[8].

My own personal view is that emotions are ethical to the person feeling them, whether they be of tiredness from perceived overwork, or elation at seeing a majestic piece of engineering, such as the Eifel Tower on a warm spring day in Paris. To the Reviewer then, what seems like an ethic of emotions can be a subjective justification of the ethical. But let's move back to Vallverdú's exploration of the topic.

The conflict between the bioethical (for example, the ethics of human enhancement, how far should we enhance ourselves[9], or should we go as far as possible to be super-human versions of ourselves), the ethical itself and its impact on human actions is sheltered under the "umbrella of language". The ethic of emotions and the ethical experience can become obfuscated. Vallverdú tells the reader that they will not find a "definitive solution to this ethical conflict" rather they will gain an exploration to "experience the physical meaning of the ethical" while attempting to avoid a dependency on language". What Vallverdú attests in his long essay-type book is that "thinking is unethical" and that "if the ethical is realized in what can be experienced, ethics is realized in lived interaction.

Vallverdú's musings on the ethic of emotions are reflection "grounded in the present of life". Vallverdú beseeches the reader to "look at language from outside of language" – does this mean thinking without visuals sounds and without words?[10] He concedes "reflection upon the ethical leads to ethical language" and "which never wholly encompasses the ethical" – words are mere tools that to Vallverdú are "the shadows of action". However he is not totally in opposition to language because it "is not limited to the spoken or written word", he recognises it includes "bodily signals" (hand, face movement) whose "biological evolutionary roots transcend [language] and are the basis for language itself". Vallverdú asks whether an individual's "emotions, sensations and intuitions" are to be "dismissed because they are private and somehow opaque to language"? This reminds of Joanne Milne, born deaf who, following cochlear implants, and after hearing sounds for the first time, was overwhelmed with emotion, amazement and tearful recognition that once the implants had been switched on she possessed audition capability[11],[12]. Individual emotions are certainly not to be dismissed: had the patient not expressed emotion the doctor might not have been aware how the operation had succeeded.

Vallverdú asserts that "the ethical permits attributing a personal meaning to a feeling" – he strongly advocated 'listening'. Humans have to thank emotions "even more for making us *human*" [Reviewer's emphasis]. Nonetheless, Vallverdú warns: "we must recognise the emotive element present in any rational explanation of the world … the very desire to exclude emotions is motivated by an emotion, by *fear* of emotions" [Vallverdú's emphasis]. He claims "rationality and emotions have been at odds with each other throughout history". Whether words or thinking, or thinking-and-words make us humans rations emotions do make us human[13]. Vallverdú intrigues with "Closing the loop of the infinite … is a necessary emotive response in order to handle the complexity of choice in daily life" and asks the question "Do we exclude emotions in machines?" – Is this because we fear what future intelligent machines

might emote? Do we reference this fear through the HAL machine in Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke's 2001: A Space Odyssey" which murdered space station personnel?[14] If so, were not the humans back on earth at fault for embedding conflicting instructions in HAL's programme? At this point British AI pioneer Aaron Sloman should be brought into the discussion.

He asks: *Do intelligent machines natural or artificial, really need emotions?*:

The (briefly fashionable?) belief that emotions are required for intelligence was mostly based on wishful thinking and a failure adequately to analyse the variety of types of affective states and processes that can arise in different sorts of architectures produced by biological evolution or required for artificial systems.[15]

Returning to rationality and emotion, is the former not embedded also in the latter and vice versa? For instance, protecting one's identity information in cyberspace, and annoyance felt at having to reveal it to a third party to secure a needed official document is rational but emotional. Annoyance and the reluctance is the emotional, the compliance is the rational.

In the ethical pondering on the value of our lives and actions which give meaning Vallverdú details two philosophical cases:

1. A runaway train on a choice of forked rail tracks can kill either 8 people on the one fork or one person on the other fork, which track should the driver do his best to avoid?

2. A runaway rail can avoid a track with 8 people on it if the driver throws one person over and in front of the rail, the thrown bodyweight causing the runaway to come to a standstill – but can the driver knowingly and willingly throw someone overboard killing them?

In the first case, the driver's option to choose the fork with one person on it appears the least dreadful, the driver will not have their conscience pinged as much because the machine will be deemed to have caused death, While in the second case, the driver will be deemed to have a murdered a human being. However, in both cases, will not the driver do their utmost to their death in stopping the runaway rail before it reaches the point of track bifurcation, or the one person fork? Is not our human instinct to give our life to save others rather than cause death of another? In the Nairobi shopping mall terrorist attack in 2013 one man was gunned down and died giving "some of the victims time to escape".[16] Is this an instance of Vallverdú's "social sharing of emotions"? A non-verbal act of bravery.

The heroic act confirms Vallverdú's contention, that the ethics of emotion does not reside in language "it is where it is made explicit" – the "emotions are the basic expression of our being" where the "linguistic realm is more of a second skin" to Vallverdú. Thus, is not ethics a social project, Vallverdú appeals? His ethical "lies in the immediacy of the subject" – but what of the patient in the vegetative state – conscious but able to communicate through fine gestures such as eye-blinking?[17] The locked-in patients can convey their own feelings. French

journalist, Jean-Dominque Bauby's locked-in predicament, "I am alive, I can think, and no one has the right to deny me these two realities" was captured in his unique work 'The Diving Bell and the Butterfly'[18] an enlightening book he created by flickering his left eyelid. What ethic of emotions poured from this devastated man, emerging from a coma after a cardiovascular accident (see note xvi). So, there can be no ethical absolutes, everyone experiences ethics differently. Do we now draw the stale nature vs nurture debate? Vallverdú has to! He is "an ethical being situated in a body and a space that undoubtedly conditions" his actions. Human nature is social, Vallverdú reminds, "with the social nature of human beings the situation is the same … material nature behaving in a social manner". And, because "emotions are regulated and oriented towards the social" then do "emotions stem from experience".

Finally, the reason for Vallverdú's exposition is to orient towards the ethical" he allows his readers "to discover the limitations of his or her own language or their own world, in order to allow a more direct experience of his or her own being". I hope I have whetted the appetite and encouraged readers to delve into Vallverdú's story to find their own ethic for their emotions.

ENDNOTES

[1] See UK government site: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/same-sex-marriage-becomes-law accessed 28.3.14

[2] See BBC: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-26773016 accessed 28.3.14

[3] Scotland will join England and Wales in Autumn 2014

[4] See InterNations: http://www.internations.org/saudi-arabia-expats/guide/driving-in-saudi-arabia-16101 accessed 28.3.14

[5] See list of countries where homosexuality is illegal: http://76crimes.com/76-countries-where-homosexuality-is-illegal/ accessed 28.3.14

[6] See Washington Post for list of countries in which homosexuality is punishable by death: http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/02/24/here-are-the-10-countries-where-homosexuality-may-be-punished-by-death/ accessed 28.3.14

[7] See BBC: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-24379018 accessed 28.3.14

[8] See NDTV: http://www.ndtv.com/article/world/landmark-case-puts-spotlight-on-dishonour-killings-in-the-uk-255426 accessed 28.3.14

[9] See John Harris 'Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People', Princeton University Press, 2007

[10] See Russell T. Hurlburt 'Investigating Pristine Inner Experience: Moments of Truth', Cambridge University Press, 2011

[11] See BBC:http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01wd9bp accessed 28.3.14

[12] See Independent: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/amazing-moment-deaf-woman-joanne-milne-is-overwhelmed-as-she-hears-for-the-first-time-after-having-cochlear-implants-switched-on-9218755.html accessed 28.3.14

[13] In one practical Turing test a judge / interrogator marked a hidden human (foil for the machines) as a machine because he (a teenager at the time) did not use emoticons in his response to the judge's questions (See Shah & Warwick, 2010abc)

[14]   IMDB: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0062622/?ref_=nv_sr_1 accessed 28.3.14

[15]   See http://www.slideshare.net/asloman/do-machines-natural-or-artificial-really-need-emotions-presentation accessed 28.3.14

[16]   See Telegraph: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/kenya/10339708/Nairobi-mall-attack-British-hero-died-trying-to-save-children.html accessed 28.3.14

[17]   See Steven Laureys 'Locked-in Syndrome': http://www.coma.ulg.ac.be/papers/locked-in_syndrome.html accessed 28.3.14

[18]   See Independent's Jean-Dominique Bauby's obituary: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-jeandominique-bauby-1272406.html accessed 28.3.14

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