

Collective Emotions: Reasons to Feel Doubtful

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The history of emotions seems scarcely operable without the idea of collective emotions, and the belief in collective emotions such as guilt, panic, anxiety, offence, hostility and even, though rarely, contentment, is an article of uninspected faith in many other areas, both of academic and folk sociology (not always distinguishable). But is such a notion useful, credible, or even properly intelligible? Not really. I will distinguish collective emotions from ‘aggregate’ emotions, in which members of a group (football crowd, theatre audience) come to have, or feel the pressure to manifest, emotions in common, an idea which is both wholly unobjectionable and may indeed do very useful work. The idea of a properly collective emotion, which is to say, an emotion felt by a collective subject, is both much more ambitious and, I hope to be able to conclude, ultimately contentless. If my arguments against the existence of collective emotions lock in, we may reasonably wonder why the idea of collective emotion should nevertheless seem so coercive. I am going to propose coercion would be precisely the point, if collective emotions were held to belong to the rapidly-swelling category of ‘emotional performatives’, meaning meta-emotions, feelings about feelings, or feelings we have about feelings we feel that we, or others, should be feeling.

Philosophical discussions of collective emotion have often wrapped the topic up in the larger category of ‘collective intentionality’, defined, as the *Stanford Dictionary of Philosophy* defines it, as ‘the power of minds to be jointly directed’. Insofar as having emotions must often imply having an attitude towards some object, this might seem reasonable. If I decide with my friend to go to the cinema, this seems like an example of a collective intention, rather than the amalgamation of two separate decisions. So, if my friend cries off, I might not want to go on my own.

And, on the face of it, collective emotion might seem even easier to conceive than collective actions of deliberation or decision-making of this kind. Writers like Gustave Le Bon and Emile Durkheim assume that collectivity induces heightened states of emotional arousal that can override the rationality of individuals. For Durkheim, indeed, there is a distinctive feeling associated with collectivity or physical congregation, the feeling of *effervescence*, which might be described as the feeling of an excess of feeling, the feeling of feeling pushing beyond its normal limits, the feeling, felt by an excited crowd, precisely of an excitable crowding. This feeling comes from and depends on the fact of congregation. While he has much of interest to say about the affective mathematics of aggregation, Elias Canetti also

argues for the existence of specific kinds of crowd emotion, of which he thinks there are five – the desire to bait, the desire to flee, the desire to refuse, the desire to reverse and the desire for festival (Canetti 1984, 48-63). Ultimately, though, for Canetti, these five emotions really reduce to, or are sutured by, one principal drive that is exhibited by any crowd, namely the desire to accumulate, and thus to be more of a crowd, by inundating every instance of apartness.

But the argument I want to defend here is that, to the contrary, it is much easier to specify the ways in which a ‘group mind’ might be said to be at work in acts of collective deliberation than to see how a group subject of emotion might come into being. There will be many reasons to feel dubious about such an idea, but I will be saying that one of the strongest of these is that it would entail the production not just of a group mind, but a group mind *lodged in a group body*.

Distributive and Attributive

It is appropriate for me at the outset for me to concede what might be regarded as a suicidally large amount of ground on the question of collective emotion. There can surely be no doubt that there are many different kinds of circumstance in which the emotions felt by individual subjects are consolidated or heightened by the fact, or at least the perception, that those emotions are shared. One would have to be a radical social atomist indeed to doubt that being physically proximate with others, or even in close communicative contact with them, can decisively change the quality of the emotions felt by individuals. It would be perverse to argue that the presence of a large crowd of people around me laughing at a comedian has no effect on my own response, for example by making it much more likely that I too will laugh, and at material that I might well not find at all funny if I were watching on my own. Mass panic and mass rage are similarly well-attested phenomena. The principle here is that emotional states are strongly contagious; indeed, it makes quite a lot of sense to believe that the point of emotions is precisely to be contagious, or at least transmissible – humans are much more driven to communicate feelings they may have than ideas. Perhaps the motion signalled in emotion is not so much a moving to action as the impulse to propagation of the emotion itself.

But the building or interchange of feeling through a collection of individuals falls a long way short of becoming a collective emotion, any more than the rapid circulation of money amounts to the creation of a commonwealth. Most cases of emotional contagion are aggregations of individual feelings, and are therefore essentially distributive phenomena. But since the idea of collective emotion will always require assumptions about the existence of a collective state that is very far from being directly demonstrable, collective emotions are also attributive. A

collective emotion must always be attributed, made out by some agent from the outside, rather than felt from the inside (from the inside of the collectivity itself, that is, rather than from an individual forming part of it).

One of the most familiar kinds of collective emotion will help us to appreciate the distinction and interchange between the distributive and the attributive. No doubt, in what is called a 'financial panic', significant numbers of individuals in a particular group may indeed feel and be actuated by genuine feelings of fear. And this is not merely an aggregate phenomenon, for an important part is played in it by the awareness of others and the apprehension of what they might be feeling. Here, however, we might note an interesting observation that Canetti makes about mass panic, for example in the behaviour of a crowd trying to escape a fire. Where most crowds are bound together by what seems to be a desire, or at least a strong willingness, in individuals to conform to the crowd, which scales up into the apparent desire of a crowd to extend and consolidate itself, mass panic is a group emotion aimed at escaping the group, in what one might see the paradoxical form of a concerted will-to-dissipation (Canetti 1984, 54). Mass panic is very largely driven by a fear of the consequences of mass action – if I wait too long to withdraw my savings, there will be nothing left to withdraw, since all the bank's funds will have been paid out to others – which paradoxically intensifies the situation against which it defends. Nevertheless, such a view of financial panic remains essentially distributive, in it depends upon the accumulation of a number of isolated actions performed by individuals who may themselves be in a state of panic, or at least apprehension.

But there is another form of financial panic, in which individuals may be acting in a manner that is very far from panicky. For here the net effect of many individuals acting in a perfectly cool and prudential manner, and doing perfectly ordinary kinds of thing like selling shares, or withdrawing deposits, is what looks from the outside like a collectivity exhibiting a state of panic. Because the individuals composing the group are not manifesting panic, it is tempting to believe that the panic-like behaviour apparently manifested by the group must be an expression of a specifically collective kind of panic. But it is hard to see this in distributive terms, that is, as the aggregation of lots of little panicky acts into one big one, as in the case of a crowd fleeing a fire, since there are actually no panic-states to aggregate (we don't normally think of panic as the result of adding together lots of parcels of calmness). The collective panic here is plainly attributive.

The attribution of emotion to collective subjects raises similar difficulties as questions of probability in particular. If I toss a fair coin and it comes up heads 49 times in a row, the probability that it will come up tails on the next throw remains 50/50. But this coexists with the fact that, if I toss a fair coin 100 times, it is very likely that there will be a roughly equal proportion of heads to tails. There is no doubt that the average exists. But the idea of the average can have no impact at the

level of the individual throw, or individual element of the system. The average exists, but cannot have effects on the system of which it is itself the effect. We may say that, if collective subjects exist, they must often exist like averages, or stochastic profiles, which is to say second-order, attributive or as-if, phenomena.

Another attributive form of collective emotion is emotion felt on behalf of a certain group, or felt as an expression of or response to one's membership of a particular group. What has usefully been called 'membership guilt' (Gilbert 2002, 136), when one feels responsibility for an action performed by a group with which one identifies as a member, is an example of this. Membership guilt is what one might feel as the member of a company, a regiment, a nation, or even an entire gender, that one felt had committed some shameful action. Here, the emotion that is felt is a kind of proxy guilt. It is attributive in a slightly more complex sense than the one already made out, in which a state of emotion is deduced from outward behaviour. Here the attribution is, as it were, in the subjunctive mood. One takes on oneself an emotion in the stead of some collective that it would, or should feel, were it possible for it to feel or exhibit emotion at all.

The view that I would like to press on you is that these two forms of collective emotion, the distributive, having to do with the adding together of individual states of emotion, and the attributive, having to do with the projection on to a collective entity of an emotion state, exhaust the field. It leaves undescribed the idea of a collective emotion understood as an emotion arising from and therefore felt by any kind of collective subject. I leave this out in order to rule it out, for the simple reason that, though the existence of such collective emotions is routinely assumed, they do not in fact, because they cannot, exist. If I am fortunate, I will be able to show, not just that the view of collective emotions is mistaken, but actually that those who currently cleave to the idea of their existence do not in fact think what they think they do.

Meta-emotions

I evoked a moment ago the idea of an emotion felt on behalf of a group to which one feels an affiliation. It may be that we can learn something about the nature of collective emotions from reflecting on what kinds of emotions tend not to be attributed to collectives. My suggestion here is that the less intense or definite the emotion, the less likely it is to be attributed to any collective subject. We do not seem inclined, for example, to attribute uneasiness, or the more subtly ambivalent emotions, to a collective subject. I think this may be an indication that the idea of a collective emotion is really the hypostatisation of an aggregate emotion, in which the likelihood of amplification increases with the definiteness of the emotion, and decreases with its subtlety or complexity. Crowds do not spontaneously sing

diminished seventh chords, except possibly in Wales. Indeed, we might say that one of the most dubious characteristics of what are thought of as collective emotions is precisely their hard-edged definiteness, so lacking in the fringe of noisiness that characterises every real emotion. The other day, I read of an NHS Trust that professed itself ‘disappointed’ at the results of an enquiry that had found it negligent. If such an institution has a chance of being believed in saying such a thing, it may well be in part because we suspect that even were it an individual who laid claim to such a response, ‘disappointment’ would be a conventional placeholder for what they might really be feeling (weary irritation, outrage, embarrassment at being caught out, disdain for the authors of the report). It seems that ‘disappointment’ has joined the lexicon of things that we are prepared to believe the collective subjects can ‘feel’. This perhaps works in something of the same way that we accept the special lexicon that exists only in newspaper reporting of certain events: it is only in newspaper crime reports or medieval epics that people can be said to be ‘slain’, or to ‘vow’ things – as in ‘Murinho vows revenge for Cup drubbing’ (drubbings also seem to occur only in newspaperland). One of the things about vowing is that, like other verbal performatives such as declaring war, there is usually some form of words that is constitutive of the action – you cannot casually be assumed to have made a vow, unless you utter a sentence having the form ‘I vow that...’, or its equivalent. But the fact that institutions are able to make avowals of this kind about what they feel is no good evidence that there is in fact any such feeling (indeed, it provides quite a strong reason to think that there isn’t, which is precisely why it has to be publically avowed). If we are nevertheless willing in this kind of spirit to accept that an institution can feel disappointed, we are, I think, tellingly unlikely to find it plausible that it would ever feel ‘curious’, ‘affectionate’, ‘tense’, ‘fed up’, ‘nostalgic’, ‘horny’, or ‘mischievous’. When individual subjects are confident that they are feeling this kind of singular headline emotion, they are either being casual about it, or caring more about the proclaiming than the defining of a feeling. The fact that collective institutions only seem capable of having, or laying claim to, emblematic kinds of emotion is evidence of a substantial difference between the emotions we think that individual subjects are capable of feeling and the emotions that may plausibly be attributed to collective subjects. In truth, I think it is a potent hint that we don’t really believe collective subjects can have emotions at all.

To my mind, the most convincing indication that a collective emotion must always be an attributive artefact is the absence in such an emotion of what Agamben has called *impotential*. There are on many occasions emotions that it would be right for me to feel, or reasonable to expect that I would feel. ‘You should be ashamed of yourself’ – ‘you must be pleased with your success’ – you should be happy with your lot’ – ‘be afraid: be very afraid’. But it may often turn out that I do not in fact feel the emotions that even I might acknowledge I should feel, or even I might think it inconceivable I should not. Yet there it is, I just do not feel what I am supposed to, or thought I should. This is of the nature of the kinds of emotions

that subjects like us feel (the kinds of subjects, I would submit, that give meaning to the word emotion). I should feel ashamed, but I somehow, maybe perversely don't. I should feel roused to righteous anger by some racist jibe, or act of cruelty, but it just doesn't happen. I may feel the need to account for my failure to feel the requisite or appropriate feeling, but it nevertheless cannot alter the fact that I just do not feel it. It is necessary for me not to be identical with any emotion that I may nevertheless feel. It is a principle of feeling an emotion that there be more to me than the emotion I feel.

I don't mean by this that I am always standing to the side of my emotions, silently appraising them, deciding whether or not this or that emotion is appropriate in the circumstances, weighing up whether I do or do not mean to be angry, afraid, touched, enthusiastic, etc. But I do mean that my emotions are always, to some extent, intentional, in a non-technical sense, that is, they are always in some sense *meant*, if only in the sense that it must mean something to me for me to have an emotion. For emotions are not mere adjectives, complementing my actions or circumstances with a certain tone-colour, inky or rosy as it may be. I do not simply perform actions 'in the key of' rage or melancholy. I mean emotions, and emotions mean something substantial to me precisely because they are judgements on what things mean to me, and my sense of my meaning in relation to them. I am combining two meanings of the word *meaning* here, of course, meaning as intending (I didn't mean to hurt you) and meaning as having a particular sort of implication or significance (this means war). This is deliberate, because emotions are precisely the way in which I mean (intend) my relationship to my meaning (significance). Far from being the opposite of deliberation, emotions are bundled together with deliberations, as Antonio Damasio (2006) and others have been at pains to point out. We may say that emotions are not so much the complements as the enactments of deliberation, the way-in-which of purposive thinking. For Martha Nussbaum too, emotions are 'forms of evaluative thought' (Nussbaum 2003, 11). They are, to borrow a Sartrean usage, a way of transitively existing my existence, of putting myself at, or acknowledging myself to be at, a certain angle to the world. This makes them, if certainly not an act of pure choice, then, equally certainly, not just something that overtakes or occurs to me. Even if I am suddenly overwhelmed by emotion, something in me has made election of it, in a way that makes the emotion an unnecessary act, something about which I cannot say that I have absolutely no choice. An emotion about which I really had no choice would be like the effect of a drug – and we tend not to feel that the sensation of vertigo induced by alcohol is anything like an emotion. Emotion in this sense subjectifies me precisely by showing that I am not identical with the emotion of which, or to which, I am the subject. The swivel of prepositions is precisely the point; in experiencing an emotion I become the subject *of* the feeling I am subject *to*.

Collective subjects, by contrast, can never *not* feel the things they seem to feel, because they can never really feel them, and they can never really feel them because

there is nothing left over from the feeling that is attributed to them. In their case, the oughtness of those feelings exhausts them, leaving nothing over, and certainly leaving no margin for the kind of emotional contingency or misfire I have just evoked. I am a bundle of emotional possibilities, and my being at any one moment in some emotional condition or other is dependent on the background of these possibilities. But collective subjects are not like this. They are not, as individual subjects are, a standing reserve of possibilities, emotional and intellectual. And this is because they are called into being by the feelings they are called upon to feel. Individual subjects have feelings. Collective subjects of emotion just are the imputed feelings of which they are the occasions, with nothing left over, since they are called into being expressly to be the occasions of those feelings. I can fail to feel a feeling that nevertheless seems requisite, even compulsory, and still exist. A collective subject of a collective emotion simply and softly vanishes away if it does not fulfil its function of feeling an emotion, because its function, of being the subject of an imputed emotion, is all there is to it. Collective emotions are puppets in morality-plays. It would be as absurd to say of a collective emotion that its subject might not really feel or completely feel it as to say of the figure of Vice that he's probably not all bad. We may say that individual subjects perform their emotions, as one performs an action, whereas collective subjects just are the performance of their emotions, in that they do no more than go through the motions of the emotions, because that is all they are.

This incapacity for ambivalent emotion is highlighted in particular in the idea of collective trauma, surely the most ambitious, and also absurd, of the forms of affective attribution. Now, if trauma means anything more definite or interesting than just an unpleasant experience, it would seem to have to involve some kind of excessiveness of feeling to representation – a feeling that, in the Freudian formulation, for example, is so intense or shocking that it passes right through conscious experience, like a lightning bolt through a leather boot, only to take up malignant residence in the victim's unconscious, whence, though it passeth understanding, it erupts in the form of painful, but unintelligible symptoms of various kinds. So, although it is true that the word 'trauma' is getting to be synonymous with 'unpleasant experience' or 'minor inconvenience', the core definition of a psychological trauma remains a peculiar kind of feeling that you were rendered incapable of feeling.

But what kind of sense can it make for a collectivity, however shockingly its members may have been injured or assailed, to have a feeling that it cannot feel, or cannot represent to itself? Once again, the idea of being able to feel seems to involve a sort of reflexivity, that involves not just knowing that one feels, but feeling that one feels, that seems on principle to be unavailable to a collectivity, unless of course that collectivity is being brought to life on the model of an individual subject. I will return to this reflexivity later.

Shame and Subjectification

One of the commonest emotions that are accorded to collective subjects is shame. This is because shame is one of the most powerful of the meta-emotions, feelings that we feel we or other people should have. Collective subjects are summoned into existence in order to embody shame, because shame is itself the most powerfully subjectifying emotion. If I say, of the German people, or of French collaborators, or violent football supporters, tormentors of badgers, or some other group that I feel may be collectively responsible for a disgraceful action, that they should feel ashamed, I exert a complex kind of force upon them. I force them into subjecthood expressly in order that they can be the subjects of their subjection to shame. Shame and guilt are often elided, but there are important differences between them. Guilt is a matter of externally-imposed conditions and judgements. If I have committed a crime, and the crime is proven against me, I can be found guilty. I may not feel ashamed for what I have done, but if I admit committing the crime of which I am accused, I cannot deny that I am guilty, because guilt is something that is externally established. But shame is guilt that I feel, that I cannot but feel, often or even usually in excess of external conditions. Guilt is what you feel when you get caught bang to rights: shame is what you feel when you have got away scot free. A court can pronounce me guilty – indeed perhaps only a court can pronounce me guilty – but it would be absurd for a court to pronounce me ashamed, because shame is guilt I pronounce on myself, a guilt I do not have to feel but nevertheless do.

Shame therefore involves a deep and paradoxical self-division, that, as many have noted, goes to the heart of subjecthood. I am overcome by my shame, the intensity of which derives from the fact that it does not allow me any space for the internal differentiation between the subject and the one subjected of which, in the condition of shame, I am nevertheless composed. That is why there is something potentially triumphant in shame, because its degradation is something I am forced to give myself, and forced, what is more, to give myself freely, since nothing requires it from the outside. Perhaps, to go even further, that is why there is something disgusting about those who wallow in shame, because they are in fact harvesting profit from a condition that ought to be maximally humiliating.

And it is for this reason that shame is perhaps the most subjectifying of emotions. Perhaps the myth of Eden is right, perhaps subjecthood and shame are coeval, and perhaps subjecthood is essentially the capacity to feel shame. But this is not the end of the story. For shame is also the means whereby the subject must acknowledge that they are not fully in command of themselves, that they are subject to norms and demands that come ultimately from outside them. Shame is not given in subjects, it is given to them, in order that they cannot but give it to

themselves. We have to learn to give shame to ourselves. Shame is the name of our toxic sovereignty.

Shame is fit for this task because shame is, of all the emotions, the one in which the paradoxical condition of division in identity, having to be what I am not, not being able to be what I am, is most intensely embodied. That ‘embodied’ is not a metaphor, because shame is essentially of the body, or rather of our embodiment. To be ashamed is to be liable to be betrayed by your body. Nothing that does not have a body to betray it can really feel ashamed. I say ‘I’m not embarrassed’, but my spreading blush says otherwise. I say ‘there was really nothing to be ashamed of in that’, but I nevertheless sit up suddenly in the night filmed with sweat and with hammering heart. The body is always implicated in shame. The body is not that of which you are ashamed, it is that which seems, in shame, to feel spontaneously *ashamed of itself*, in excess of what seems necessary or reasonable to me.

And this might be the reason why it is so common for collective subjects to have shame imposed on or imputed to them, namely that shame is the emotion that most powerfully brings subjects into being. This in turn makes it ideal for bringing into being collective subjects who can then be made to be the subjects of their own subjection. This may lie behind the contemporary preoccupation with apology. It is not enough for somebody to be fined thousands of pounds, or given a 20-year jail sentence for a wrong they have inflicted, they must also *apologise*. For, until they apologise, they have given no evidence of shame, they are mere culprits, and can conceal their undamaged dignity in the condition of being mere objects. To be made to apologise is to be summoned into the condition of self-subjecting subjecthood. To be made into a subject of shame is to be made to put yourself in the condition of undivided self-division. Crucifixion was the most shameful death because it caused you to torture and kill yourself by your very efforts to draw breath.

We wrest apologies from political leaders because we demand that there be authors of bad actions. Marina Warner has had some interesting things to say about the contemporary cult of apology. When political leaders like Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and the Pope issue apologies, these speech acts constitute ‘magical, sacramental acts, designed to ease and soothe and purge hatred and grudge’. Their purpose, she says, ‘is to generate the identification that comes with the shared experience of healing, however momentary’. (Warner 2003) Warner points interestingly to the seductively aggrandising attraction of this action to the apologisee as well as to those to whom the apology is offered. But she focuses more on the act of making apology than on the feeling to which it is supposed to bear witness. The very fact that a president or prelate must take on himself the burden of making apology for actions performed by a collectivity is a sign of the frustrating difficulty we have in imagining a way in which a collectivity could really have the kind of shared feeling

we nevertheless feel it must have, producing the need for some kind of surrogate, a *subject-supposed-to-feel*, to adapt a Lacanian jingle.

We think that if there are collective subjects, then they must be able to have emotions as well as to rational intentions, but this may be to put it the wrong way round: that is, there must be emotions in order to lend force to the idea of collective subjects. If there were such a thing as a collective Germanness, then it should feel collective guilt. Therefore there must be such a thing as ‘Germany’, conceived as a collective subject, in order that that required emotion have a bearer. This may be regarded as a kind of coercive or punitive subjectification, in which the collective subject is subjected to the emotion that it is believed should exist.

Reflexivity

This helps to account for the centrality of shame in discussions of collective emotion. If there is to be shame – and shame is one of the most powerful of the meta-emotions, or moral sentiments – then there must be a subject to feel it. You cannot have shame without somebody being made to give it to themselves, without somebody’s body being made liable to betray them. But collective subjects cannot feel shame, precisely because they are automata or zombies, because they do not exist in a condition of embodiment. Collective subjects are there to do our will, unthinkingly. In fact, a collective subject is not so much a zombie as an anti-zombie; for, if a zombie is an untenanted body, a body with nobody at home, then a collective subject is a bodiless tenant, a subject without a body to call home. But neither kind of zombie can feel shame, exactly because if you could feel ashamed or embarrassed at being a zombie you would by definition no longer be one. No disembodied creature can feel shame, because shame is the condition of being susceptible to betrayal by your body. Embodiment is necessary to shame because only embodiment allows for the paradox whereby I both am and have my body, which is to say I both am and am not my body. Having the feeling of shame exhibits exactly the same paradox of identical non-identity – I have and I am my shame. But collective subjects cannot have shame because, being unprovided with or unimpeded by bodies, there is no such paradox involved in their being. The governing body of Peterhouse might in principle very well perform actions that could be regarded as shameful, but the governing body itself cannot feel shame because it cannot blush, or experience nocturnal palpitations – only its constituent members possessed of their ungoverned bodies can do that.

The example of shame helps us to see that for an individual subject to have a feeling is for it to have complex or reflexive feeling, for it to be able to feel that it has a feeling. Oddly, perhaps, to feel that you have a feeling is not necessarily to feel the feeling more intensely or indubitably. To be able to feel that you have a

feeling involves you in your impotential, it is to be able to be incompletely saturated by or coextensive with that feeling. Indeed, there are some feelings, like happiness, where the acknowledgement of the feeling is essential to it. The person who looks back at a time in their life when they were happy without realising it is saying that they weren't as happy as they could be if they could realise it. Only incompleteness – not being so swallowed up in a feeling as not to be able to feel it – makes a feeling complete. This is essentially the case with the kinds of feelings we call emotions, which might be defined precisely as definable feelings, as opposed to vague, mixed states, or mere unconscious drives, feelings that we are capable of feeling we have, partly through being able to distinguish them. Once again, collective subjects are not capable of such feelings, because collective subjects are incapable of feeling themselves feeling. We are able to do that for them, and in fact have to do it for them, because we have bodies.

All of this is to oppose the suggestion made by Margaret Gilbert, that '*a specific phenomenology*' (a way of physically experiencing) and 'specific feeling-sensations' are not needed for the formation of a collective feeling like that of collective guilt (Gilbert 2002, 119). I oppose this disjunction between emotion and feeling for precisely the reason that Gilbert proposes it (indeed, surely must propose it), namely that a collective emotion plainly cannot be something that the collective itself can feel, or feel itself feeling. Where Gilbert proposes that the existence of collective emotions implies that there is no need for emotion to be accompanied by feeling-sensation, it seems to me that it is precisely the absence of feeling-sensation that confirms the non-existence of collective emotions.

Many arguments for the existence of collective emotions similarly recognise that they depend upon the separation of emotion from what we more fuzzily call 'feeling' for their force. But to distinguish in this way between emotion and feeling is really little more than a kind of word magic, which depends too much on the idea that, because we have these two words, they must pick out separate things. The frequent overlap between the words 'emotion' and 'feeling' should be an indication, not of categorial muzziness on our part, but rather that emotions and feelings usually name different aspects of a blent phenomenon. They diverge, of course, on the question of physiological sensation; to speak of an emotion of itch or giddiness would be bizarre. Nevertheless, there are many cases where a feeling may be the name that we give to the more bodily aspect of an emotion, the way we feel it, as our own. Thus, in discussing a cello concerto we might wish to distinguish the raw physical fact of the sonic vibrations of which it is made up, from the more abstract musical relations – of harmony, thematic development and contrast, etc. – of which it is also constituted. But the distinguishability of these different kinds of constitution, physical and formal, does not make them dissociable things. (Of course, one can apply the idea of a concerto metaphorically, in ways that do not have to have a sonic dimension, but that is irrelevant here.) You would have to change the definition of what counted as a cello concerto quite

drastically to set aside entirely the requirement for it to be able to have some physical manifestation as sound. My claim would be similarly that an emotion which could not possibly have any feeling-aspect, and so could not possibly be felt as an emotion, would be a very different kind of thing from what we mean by the word emotion. It would, in fact, have to be the purest of imputations, a conventional artefact, and not any kind of experience.

The reflexivity of emotions, the capacity we have to have a feeling of an emotion, is dependent on embodiment. It is much easier to understand how the things we call emotions occur in individuals because individual subjects are embodied (that is what we mean by an individual, since what ultimately defines my individuality is my separate body), whereas collective subjects by definition are not. We might on occasion be inclined to speak metaphorically about collective bodies, but this is precisely the proof that they are not actual bodies. Arguments like those of Margaret Gilbert and Bryce Huebner for the existence of collective emotions rightly recognise that their arguments must persuade us to dispense with the phenomenology of the body, in order that we may then assent to the view, as Bryce Huebner puts it, that ‘Emotions ...require only the right level of functional organization’ (Huebner 2011, 113). I want to argue that our language, and the structure of our thinking, does not in fact currently allow us to do this without incoherence. To put it as simply as possible, it is a necessary part of my feeling sadness – that is, it is a defining part of its profile of possibility – that I might burst into tears. That somatic component is absent from a collective emotion, because no kind of body can be present to it. We might lend our bodies to that collective emotion, bearing flowers en masse to the grave of a Princess, in fact, we have to, but that does not make the emotion collective. Indeed, aggregated emotions of that kind, emotions transmitted from body to body, and distributed between them, are the strongest proof one could wish for of the impossibility of a collective emotion. Emotions that are rapidly transmitted between embodied creatures, as they surely are, since one of the conditions of inhabiting the kinds of bodies we have is precisely that they should be susceptible to this kind of contagion, are the disproof of the existence of collective emotion, precisely because collective emotion cannot be catching in this way, because collective subjects have no bodies with which they might ‘catch’ emotions from – what? other collective bodies?

Plural and Singular Collectivity

However, if there are no collective emotions, this is not because only individuals can have emotions. The reason that collective emotions, conceived as the simple scaling-up of individual emotions, are implausible is not because real emotions can only be experienced by individuals. In fact, emotions cannot be directly experienced in the sense in which we seem to want to believe, even by individuals.

We do not simply *have* emotions, we assent to them, we aspire to them, we enquire into them, we negotiate for them and bargain with them. Emotions are precipitates, not upwellings. Emotions are more like statements than states; they are not predicaments but rather predications. They are transactions we perform rather than conditions we inhabit. Babies and long-stay castaways may be subject to states of excitation, but to have an emotion requires a complex web of social relations and a highly-developed communication system. If all emotions are to some extent social, then all emotions are borrowed emotions, or emotions-by-proxy. People who affirm themselves to be ‘offended’ or ‘in love’, are not just pointing in language to feelings they would otherwise anyway have. The emotions in question are genuinely felt, but they can only *be* genuinely felt once one knows in some detail what the circumstances are in which it is appropriate to feel them and what they are supposed to feel like. You can no more have private emotions than you can have private meanings – the meaning of both is that they can be communicated, indeed, more than this, that they are-to-be communicated. Indeed, emotion is probably best regarded as a kind of meaning, especially in the fact that meanings are always contractual, transactive. Emotions are currency; and if we do well to put them in circulation rather than hug them to ourselves, this is for an economic reason. Unspent emotions do not build and fester, as we encourage ourselves to believe, but, like the miser’s hoard, they dwindle in value, since they have no meaning except in transaction. If I am to keep an unbroached feeling throbbing inside me, I must keep returning to it and haggling with it, exchanging it with myself. This is the reason that individuals cannot be said to have emotions, though they are their bearers. If I am angry, I am in fact, an instance or occasion of anger. There are no collective emotions, in the sense in which we appear to wish to believe in them, not because only individuals can have emotions, but because *not even* individuals can simply ‘have’ emotions in the commonly-desiderated sense.

So, if individuals perform and produce, rather than simply experiencing emotions, and if all emotions are in some sense a matter of according and assenting rather than arising, does this not imply that all emotions must be regarded as in some sense collective, since they do not and cannot arise simply from my self? This would seem to scupper my case, since it is hardly coherent for me to argue against the existence of collective emotions if I am also arguing that all emotions are collective. My response to this is to say that it matters a great deal what kind of collective emotion one is talking about. I would want to argue for a distinction between diffuse and concrete collectivity. A language provides a reservoir of forms of expression that do not belong to any individual in particular, because they circulate and are held in common between individuals; but this does not in the least mean that one should assume that language constitutes a collective entity, though many have been led into just this kind of silly prosopopoeia (language as the tool of patriarchy, and so on). Emotions are borrowed and ascribed, moving across and between individuals, and never coming absolutely to rest within them, a little like the quasi-objects posited by Michel Serres, but there is no reason to

assume that these conditions of collectivity round off or cancel out into anything as coherent as a collective subject. The coming into being of concrete collectivities is in fact an after-effect of this mobile diffusion. Emotions are collective because they exist between rather than within individuals, not because they exist within collectivities conceived on the model of individuals.

But there is still another point to consider. What would be wrong in saying that the emotions ascribed to institutions or collectivities are similarly produced and performed? And, if all emotions are reflexive rather than immediate, things that are produced rather than things that happen, it may indeed be necessary to concede that the argument against the idea of collective emotions cannot be based upon a simple opposition between entities to which emotions are ascribed and entities (individual human subjects) in whom they simply and spontaneously arise. In both cases, the emotion in question is dependent upon a kind of ascription, even, in some cases, a self-ascription. Doesn't my argument mean that there not only can be collective emotions, but that since as I have rashly proposed, all emotions are collective, there can only be collective emotions?

I do not think we are committed to thinking this. For the word collective means different things in these different usages. In the case of my anger, which has a reputation for being among the most spontaneous and asocial, even antisocial of emotions, there is undoubtedly a collective dimension that makes it possible for me to decide or agree that what I am feeling is to be regarded as anger. I will have encountered lots of ways in which anger is expressed, I will have a stock of representations of states of anger, and circumstances in which anger seems requisite or to be deprecated. There is a field of probabilities which cannot come from me which establishes the profile of my anger.

In the case of a collective emotion, like the shame that is felt, or that it is felt should be felt, or that it is said should be felt, by crowds, corporations, or churches, these probabilities no longer form a field, but are so to speak rounded up or cancelled out into complete forms. Collectivity as field of probability here becomes collectivity as achieved outcome.

It may be felt that I have characterised the idea of the 'collective subject' in so austere a way as to make it unlikely that anybody would actually hold to such a view. Perhaps when people speak of collective emotions, they have in mind no more than varieties of what I have called the distributive or attributive ideas of collective feeling? Perhaps, when people speak of collective emotions, they are not necessarily imagining super-subjects, but only cloudy, free-floating accumulations of emotion, without a necessary subject to be their carrier? Perhaps free-floating anxiety or collective effervescence need not imply a subject any more than 'it being sunny' in fact implies any it, 'the weather' say, to be sunny. The weather here is purely conditional, a matter simply of whether it is or is not sunny.

Well, perhaps so. Indeed, I profoundly hope it is so, since it would be an indication not just that people have insubstantial beliefs, but also that they actually don't really believe in the things they think they do. The most optimistic way of putting this is to say that, if it is the case, our conceptual language is in much better shape than I thought. Unfortunately, I do think that the claims made for the existence of widespread and readily-communicable emotions often do in fact scale up into injudicious and unjustifiable claims that there is a collective subject that is feeling these emotions. In fact we must in some sense posit a subject when we posit an emotion, because what we mean by an emotion is a certain meaning-to-be, the taking of a position or perspective on the world, rather than just being a phenomenon in it. But it seems very doubtful indeed to me that a crowd, or more diffusive kind of collectivity, can be regarded as meaning its emotion in anything like this sense.

I think it is worthwhile to encourage suspicion of these mythological entities, just because we are much better off not relying on the idea of zombie-subjects, not least because they may encourage us to make zombies of ourselves. Understanding the nature and force of emotions, especially the complexity of emotions felt in aggregate, is too intricate to be reduced to this kind of mythological puppet-show. We should give up the idea of collective subjects, or, perhaps more importantly, give up our ways of talking that make it seem as though there were such things, because they are deluding simplifications, that get in the way of a properly rich understanding of the nature of our affective collectivity. Scaling up individual subjects into collective subjects actually leaves one with only two notes in the scale – the individual and the collective, even though the collective is conceived both as the opposite of the individual and its mirror image. But in fact, when it comes to emotion, and probably when it comes to most other things besides, the pure individual and the absolute collective are not the objective limits that define a field of complex combinations between them, but are in fact the only two values in the spectrum of possibilities that cannot exist. The fantasy of collective emotions, felt by collective subjects of emotion, prevents us paying proper attention to what happens between these abstract alternatives, which is where anything that is anything must occur.

But what about the argument that, precisely because the emotions that we impute to collective subjects are meta-emotions, emotions that we feel it would be good for corporate bodies and nation-states to feel, the very idea of collective emotions can actually have good effects? I am willing to concede that this may well be the case. I can understand and sympathise with Marina Warner's conclusion that she is in favour of public apologies:

I want to give my support to acts – verbal utterances – which represent revulsion against wrongdoing, to accept that to forgive and forget is the better part, and to acknowledge the enchanting power of

language to bring about changes in the air – aery nothings, however insubstantial, are aery somethings too. (Warner 2003)

But I do not think that we should necessarily look to a philosophy of social forms to provide succour for such causes, exactly because we do not have to be philosophical all the time, indeed, we had better not try. Hobbes thought that the fiction of a state, and indeed of a sovereign, were necessary for the maintenance of peace and prosperity. We might well ask what the point is of a philosophy that demonstrates that the sovereign is a kind of pretence – Charles II was certainly uneasy about it and would have preferred to be regarded as a divinely appointed ruler rather than as an ontic marionette. Hobbes perhaps thought that a rational understanding of the workings of this fiction would be better than the other, more ridiculous and offensive fiction that the King was divinely appointed. But there are times when fiction actually trumps rational understanding, times when it might be a good idea for philosophy to pipe down about the false or fictive nature of the beliefs we entertain. OK. Philosophy cannot always be on the side of goodness and prosperity, and sometimes a fiction of a collective emotion might do us some kind of good. But the upshot of this is that we are on our moral own, and should not count on philosophy to validate our fables and fantasies, or validate them as anything else.

Conclusion

So, what is wrong with the idea of collective emotion, understood as the imputing of emotional states to a collectivity, rather than the simple aggregation of emotional states in multiple subjects? Well, first of all, that it is an improbable notion that requires us to take for granted the existence of entities – collective subjects of emotion – for which there can be no strong grounds and which, on investigation, turn out to be the flimsiest and most phantasmal kind of wish-fulfilment, or alternatively a rather nasty forcing into being of emotions we think should be felt, by somebody. But, given the implausibility of such fabular entities, the claims or assumptions of their existence constitute an unwelcome, and even dangerous willing into simplicity of the way in which emotions are in fact concentrated and distributed collectively; where emotions are spread across collectivities in complex, unstable, impermanent and statistically ugly aggregates, the idea of collective subjects rounds up all this lumpiness into sleek singularity. There are good reasons for what may seem like the equivalent fiction of a collective subject of deliberation, because in this case we have deliberative procedures designed precisely to meet the conditions whereby we might be willing to accord to collective subjects the power to make decisions and determinations, as well as to give expression to them. We have no such procedures for establishing collective feeling, other than through surrender to the urgings of what Michel

Serres has called the ‘libido d’appartenance’, the longing for belonging. I am not quite prepared to join Serres in his judgement that ‘all the evil in the world’ proceeds from this drive, but I do think that the idea of collective emotions reifies the processes of collectivity into a myth the effects of which are more likely to be malign than benign.

Ultimately, the idea of collective emotion prematurely chokes off a real understanding of collective existence, which seems particularly interesting and important at a time in which we are so multiplying and diversifying the forms of our collectivity. We remain strangely unable to think of any kind of entity than an absolute singularity, or an aggregation of such singletons magically compounded into singular multiplicity. Yet everything that is of any interest or import happens between these two abstract, all-or-nothing, and therefore downright metaphysical alternatives of the absolutely one and the many-that-counts-as-one. The alternative to singularity is not the multiple that counts as one, nor the compensatory pluralising of that multiple into what amounts to shards of singularity. It is the principle of composites and compoundings, or what Michel Serres calls a ‘philosophy of mixed bodies’ (1985), a way of registering complex social tonalities that never, not even locally, add up to one, because they are always more or less than it. Our thinking about the ways in which emotions are distributed and attributed, shared and transmitted, stands in need of a statistical desublimation that would diminish our need for pathetic fallacy, and take the steam out of our literally totalitarian forms of counting-for-one.

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