

LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND MIND
INTEGRATING PERSPECTIVES AND METHODOLOGIES IN THE STUDY OF
LANGUAGE

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LANGUAGE, NORMATIVITY AND EMOTION

[abstract - poster presentation]

Fabrice Pataut
Institut d'Histoire et de Philosophie des Sciences et des Techniques
(IHPST), Paris

Emotions are part of our culture ; particular emotions like resentment and guilt are part of specific cultural heritages. On the other hand, moral judgements and imperatives have the appearance of objectivity. There lies—or so it seems—a conflict, even a contradiction. Statements like “Slavery is unjust” may be asserted, agreements may be reached concerning what they claim or express, and they may occur as antecedents in conditionals such as “If slavery is unjust, then it must be abolished.” When it is claimed that slavery is unjust or that it is wrong to harm others, it is thereby claimed that it is so *objectively*. We mean by this (among other things) that it is so independently of the moral emotions anyone may feel with respect to slavery or the infliction of moral and physical pain by means that are specific to that institution.

It will be argued here that there are grounds to believe that emotions must be evaluated cognitively and that they do have cognitive significance, value and content. In this cognitive or quasi-cognitive perspective, the appropriate character of an emotion is akin to the truth of a proposition: just as the truth of a proposition may be evaluated in terms of the justifications we are able to

provide in its favour, the correctness of emotions may be evaluated relatively to cognitive bases and classes of available warrants. Some emotions may be ruled out as incorrect or inappropriate, just as some propositions may be rejected as unjustified or in need of a warrant. The parallel relies on the controversial notion of *non*-propositional forms of moral justification. The notion may be construed in a variety of ways, the most promising construals being, I believe, those provided by the perceptual model.

I shall focus on the following point. Moral judgements and imperatives are expressed with the usual resources of natural languages. These typically include predicates like “unjust” and “wrong,” and deontic sentential operators like “must” and “should.” Moral emotions, on the other hand, may be expressed by bodily movements and facial expressions. Although it may be argued that emotions do not bear the cognitive marks of objectivity when expressed in this way, there is no reason to think that a reformed language of ethics, i.e., a pure language of emotions, free of all the linguistic or symbolic marks of truth, assertability and objectivity, would thereby be free of normative input, or even be inadequate to express normative claims. I shall argue that once non-propositional forms of justifications are taken into account, the reforming strategy of emotivists and neo-emotivists is indeed inefficient.