

## **INTERVIEW WITH RONNIE DE SOUSA**

Ronald de Sousa grew up in Switzerland and in the United Kingdom. He obtained a BA from Oxford and a PhD from Princeton. Based at the University of Toronto since 1966, he has lectured in more than twenty countries on the emotions, human rationality, philosophy of biology, philosophy of sexuality, ethics and aesthetics. He is currently an Emeritus Professor at the Department of Philosophy of the University of Toronto and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

**Praxis: How do you see the relation between philosophy and science, in terms of their respective tasks?**

**Ronnie De Sousa:** There is, of course, no simple answer. Here are four tries.

(i) Like religion, philosophy aims at a large scale vision of the place of humans and consciousness in the universe. But like science and unlike theology, it aims to establish conclusions on the basis of rigorous argument grounded ultimately in either necessary truths or empirical evidence.

(ii) Science makes progress on any given question when enough people can agree on what would count as answering it. Until then, questions are “philosophical”, which means there lacks an agreed method for tackling them. This, by the way, may account for the pejorative tone in which “It’s a philosophical question” is often uttered. When methodological consensus arises, a science branches off. Mathematics, Physics, Biology, and Psychology have all been bred by philosophy before establishing themselves as sciences; not so, as yet, Aesthetics and Ethics.

(iii) A third answer, favoured by many philosophers, is that philosophy deals with conceptual issues and necessary truths rather than empirical ones. That view has often been used to insulate philosophy from science, particularly in those areas that

concern normative issues. But since Quine's "blurring of the supposed boundary between speculative metaphysics and natural science" in his famous 1951 "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", the distinction is no longer sharp, and I myself side with those philosophers who seek once again to merge philosophy with science. I am encouraged in this by the thought that only religion beats philosophy, in the deplorably high ratio of certainties claimed to agreement secured.

(iv) This explains, incidentally, a cultural cleavage among philosophers, between those that *read aloud* their papers at conferences and those who give *talks*. For the latter, philosophy aims at the condition of science; like scientists, therefore, they want to get across *ideas*, and ideas can be explained in many different ways, so that others can in turn take them home and explain them in their own words. The former, by contrast—especially those that pride themselves (like Peter Sellers' shrink who gets to the strip club before his patient by "following him very fast") on being "*post-modern*"—regard philosophy as a branch of literature. Hence, having no actual ideas to convey, they need to get the wording just exactly right.

### **Emotions are a hot topic in both philosophy and science today. Why?**

Historically, philosophers have been very interested in emotions. Aristotle, the Stoics, Descartes, Spinoza, Hume, to name some, all had important things to say about the emotions. But emotions are theoretically messy; they were avoided, for a few decades, by analytic philosophers intent on making things neat. In psychology, the dominant ideology of behaviourism in the first part of the twentieth century and the focus on cognitive mechanisms in the second consigned emotions to the role of disrupters and spoilers. Only recently have methods become available in neuroscience to look into specific mechanisms in the brain that are responsible for emotions. (William James, the first anglophone philosopher to get interested in emotions in the 19th Century, had argued that there were no special brain centres

devoted to emotions.) As so often in science, then, what is done is driven by what can be done—by the opportunities afforded by technology.

Fashions in philosophy are perhaps less accountable. But what now attracts some of us to the study of emotion is the very feature that keep others away: sheer messiness. To study emotions, you need to think about every domain of philosophy from ontology through semantics, philosophy of mind, ethics, and rationality theory to aesthetics. The rapprochement of some philosophers with science is also a factor. Exciting results have poured in from scientific work. Though many still resist it, assimilating it to naive sociobiology, evolutionary psychology has thrown fresh light onto the genealogy of social and moral emotions. And how could philosophers resist the challenge thrown out by the findings of neuroscience? To cite just one example: there has been intensive study of the notorious “trolley problem”, in which one is asked whether one should do something that would result in the death of one innocent person in order to save five. Responses vary depending on the emotional cost of actually pushing someone to their deaths, as opposed to merely causing a mechanism to send the trolley down one line instead of the other. What does this tell us about the place of emotion and principle in ethics? And what philosophical moral are we to draw from the fact that subjects with frontal lobe lesions respond in a more consistently utilitarian way to both scenarios? Whatever the answer, a philosopher concerned with ethics will be drawn in.

**On your website, you list 10 things you believe in. One of the items on the list reads “We are animals, and everything worth knowing about us derives from biology”. Yet, in your latest book, *Why Think?*, you argue that rationality and language “allow the individual to offer a more or less anarchic resistance to the impersonal destiny embodied in the vestigial teleology of natural selection”. How is this second claim compatible with the first, and with your sympathy with evolutionary psychology?**

The answer to this could be put in the following slogan: *the truth of existentialist metaphysics is a fact of biology*. To explain this, I need a preamble about the meaning of *possible*.

Maynard Smith and Szathmáry (v. *The Origins of Life*, 1999) list eight “critical transitions” of evolution. Their list includes the formation of the first autocatalytic system that marks the beginning of life itself; the codification of information in DNA; the cell; sexual reproduction; and so forth. The last item is *language*. Each of these transitions marks a threshold at which the number of available possibilities is raised by many orders of magnitude. Each threshold, in other words, *creates a vast range of new possibilities*. In a strictly logical sense, of course, one might claim that possibilities don’t evolve: whatever is logically possible is necessarily possible. Possibilities, like all self-respecting philosophical truths, are eternal. But there is a more interesting and important sense in which not every logical possibility is a possibility *for* something or someone at a particular time: possibilities for a given person—or species—can begin (and perhaps cease) to exist. In that sense, new possibilities were indeed created by each of the critical transitions of evolution. Call these *potentialities* rather than possibilities, if you like, in tribute Aristotle’s distinction between different senses in which a baby or an adult “can talk”. It is possible in the fullest sense for a normal adult to talk; for an infant, it is possible in that she is expected to become an adult. We could add that it’s not *logically* impossible for insects to talk, as in the fable of the ant and the grasshopper; but logical possibilities aren’t the kind that can come into being.

Now to explain why our capacity to resist or even “transcend” the “vestigial teleology” of nature is itself *derived* from our biological nature. Note first that the teleology of nature is “vestigial” because it doesn’t involve any genuine goals. Instead, nature behaves *as if* its sole goal was replication. Its tool in achieving that goal is the diversification of forms, both at the genotypic and at the phenotypic

level. Language is just the latest of those increasingly ingenious tools. As it happens, however, that tool can be turned against nature's goal itself. For once we start to describe, to argue about, and to reason, we discover that our own goals need have nothing to do with those of nature. That is what it means to have escaped, in reward for tasting the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, from the prison that was Eden.

It's still true, of course, that *most* of what we do and think is done from motives we neither know nor understand. Yet deliberation yields a huge range of possible new values independent of the teleology inherent to life. (It's curious, incidentally, that the Vatican, while so keen on our spiritual freedom from biological determinism, rejects the very emblem of that freedom—the capacity, as Monty Python put it, to “put a little rubber thing on the end of my John Thomas.”)

We are animals, but we talk. Hence our relative freedom from the bare, stark goals of life. That freedom is part of our biology. Thus we become, in the crucible of gossip, self-conscious thought, reason-giving, and debate, the first beings for whom “existence precedes essence”.

### **Are there moral emotions? If so, how do they relate to value?**

Some philosophers restrict the term “moral emotion” to those that foster social cohesion. The main candidates are then compassion, guilt, and anger. The first appears to motivate altruistic acts; the second pair represent apt responses in those who offend and those offended against. In accordance with the commonly held doctrine that emotions imply action tendencies, it's assumed that people will be moved by these emotions to do things that reinforce social bonds. Among other emotions, some, such as love and grief, can be made out to be derivatively important for morality, in that love selects targets of altruistic acts and grief is a

sort of warrant of love. Still others, such as jealousy, are sometimes considered in the same light, though I am more inclined to think of it as a pathology of love, driven by biological imperatives inimical to the development of the best potential for human intimacy and social life. (On the pathology inherent in the ideology of love, as exemplified by wife-killers, see *In the Name of Love*, the forthcoming book by Aaron Ben-Ze'ev).

There are also thoroughly nasty emotions, such as envy, spite, and despair, which have been held to be redeemed neither by the motives they might induce, nor by any intrinsic pleasure they bring, nor by any contribution they make to correct ethical evaluations. As implied by my answer to the previous question, there is nothing paradoxical about the idea that some emotions might be irredeemably nasty: we need only suppose that their personal and social drawbacks are outweighed by objective biological ends with which they are associated.

A radically different perspective, broadly speaking aesthetic, starts from the fact that if there were no emotions, nothing would matter. Considered in that light, the connection between emotions and values is intrinsic and fundamental. But the values in question are not necessarily moral: whether a value is “moral” depends on what *ought* (not necessarily morally!) to count as moral. Aristotle’s version is *inflationary*: if all human potentialities contribute to making life worth living, none is irrelevant to “ethics” in the broadest sense; moral education then consists in learning to feel the right emotions to the right extent on the right occasions. All emotions are then moral or immoral, but none is amoral.

By contrast, a *minimalist* view of ethics restricts moral concerns to the prevention of harm and injustice. On that view, to accept that every emotion is in some sense tied to a value is merely to say that for every emotion there is a standard of appropriateness. I call that standard an emotion’s “formal object”,

and it is specific to each distinct emotion. Since not every value is moral, neither is every emotion. An emotion may be appropriate to its formal object, without thereby being one that a moralist ought to recommend. (Similarly, a good economist or a good thief isn't necessarily a morally good person.)

A moral minimalist, then, can regard all or most emotions as apprehensions of value, without denying that some emotions are amoral and others even immoral.

### **In what sense can one say that emotions are rational?**

Rationality, as I understand it, is in the business of maximizing the likelihood of success. Its various forms depend on the relevant mode of success and failure appropriate in different types of cases. Whenever we assess something as more or less rational, we therefore have in mind — or perhaps should bring to mind—some norm or standard of success. In the case of epistemic rationality, any way of acquiring belief, whether by intuition, perception or inference, can be assessed as more or less likely to result in true belief. For practical rationality, what the success of any particular action might be depends, of course, on the goals the action sets itself; since those tend to be complex and any action's outcomes are partly unpredictable, practical rationality is more difficult to define. So is the rationality of desire, since the incompatibility of desires doesn't follow from the incompatibility of their objects. Emotions involve all three of beliefs, action tendencies, and desires, in addition to their respective formal objects as appraisals. The appropriate standards of rationality for emotions are therefore the most complex of all. For what is it for an emotion to be "successful"? Four domains of assessment are relevant. First, an emotion might be said to be rational, in a derivative sense, as the beliefs that constitute its cognitive content are more or less epistemically rational. Second, you could think of assessing an emotion's rationality as derivative from the rationality of its attendant desires: and here it is crucial to remember that mere incompatibility

of *states desired* does not make the *desires* inconsistent. Third, one might assess an emotion in terms of practical aims which it overtly or covertly pursues. A fit of anger may function to affect another's behaviour, and its practical outcome could be judged accordingly. That too is a derivative sense of rationality, though it can be of major importance in human interactions. (Thus the deterrent effect of an emotional outburst will have its full effect only if the opponent is convinced that you are mad enough to act out of spite.) Most interesting and difficult is the fourth domain, which alone measures emotional rationality intrinsically rather than as it derives from component parts of emotions. This is the *axiological* domain of values apprehended by our emotional responses. Considered as part of that fourth domain, then, the rationality of an emotion will be gauged in terms of the intrinsic quality of the specific value that it apprehends, considered not as a means to any goals, but in terms of its adequacy to its object. And that adequacy is not unrelated to its various functions and components, but it's not reducible to them. From the biological point of view emotions, like everything else in our mental functioning, must owe their nature directly or indirectly to some practical function; but values transcend function, as gastronomy transcends nourishment and sex transcends reproduction.

**Do all emotions have formal objects, and is it by their formal objects that we can distinguish them?**

Talk of formal objects is often deemed suspect: when I try to explain it I often feel a certain resistance. But I regard it as important. So let me try and make the idea as plain as I can.

It's easiest to begin with formal objects of states that are not emotions: belief and desire. That sets up the case for emotions, with the interesting stuff stemming from both analogies and disanalogies with the cases of belief and desire.



The root idea is that some mental states can be distinguished in terms of their aim or point. I mean that in the sense in which Frege seems to have used it when he wrote “The word ‘true’ indicates the aim of logic as does ‘beautiful’ that of aesthetics or ‘good’ that of ethics” (Frege, G. 1956. “The thought: A logical inquiry.” Trans. A. Quinton and M. Quinton. *Mind* 65:289). The aim or point of a state is the state’s characteristic conditions of success as a state of that kind. So when someone *believes that p*, that state of belief is successful, in its own terms, iff *p* is true. If someone *desires that p*, the success of that state lies not in the truth of *p*, but its goodness or desirability. So the formal object of a state is given by the most trivial answer possible to the question ‘Why do you S O’ for a state S and its intentional object O. Example: “Why do you believe that p? —Because it’s true!” “Why do you want x? —because it’s good!”. In other words, the notion of formal object rests on the assumption that there is a systematic analogy between what is wrong with believing something false and what is wrong with desiring something undesirable. Although the truth of *p* would *satisfy* the desire, there is nothing odd about desiring what is not the case. There is something odd, however, in desiring what is not desirable.

Admittedly, the first case is a less controversial than the second. And the case of emotions may seem even murkier: but that’s precisely why it might be interesting. The tendency to contrast emotions with belief and desire, as if they were all on the same level, suggests that if there is a single formal object for each of belief and desire, there will be a single formal object for emotions. So what is philosophically interesting about the formal object of emotion is precisely that *there isn’t one*. If one asks the same question of any emotion: what are the conditions under which it is somehow in the most trivial sense *right* for the circumstances? What immediately becomes apparent is that there is no standard answer that applies equally to all emotions. The trivial answer to “Why are you angry at X?” is “Because X did me wrong.” The trivial answer to “Why are you surprised at O?” is “Because O was

unexpected”; to “Why are you afraid of O?”, “Because O is frightening”. And so forth. In each case, the property *F* trivially attributed to the object of the emotion in question is its formal object (and the emotion is appropriate in the specific circumstance iff the object itself actually has property *F*.)

From this it is immediately apparent that emotions are indeed distinguished by their formal objects, but that this doesn’t actually tell us anything very interesting about each emotion that we didn’t know. It does, however, tell us that no there is only a formal but no substantive *general* answer to the question of what makes an emotion appropriate.

### **Could scientific enquiry show that this view of formal objects was not correct?**

The notion of formal object as I’ve described it falls squarely in the category of conceptual analysis. So it’s a good example of something that won’t be upset by a simple counterexample or pinpointed scientific finding. That is because it belongs to the systematic level of theorizing about emotions; but it is also partly for the more boring reason that this view of formal objects needn’t insist that *all* emotions have one. Some things which we commonly call emotions, notably euphoria and depression, simply don’t have any standards of appropriateness. Some people interpret this as a reason for not including them in a list of emotions. I don’t have strong feelings about this, though it seems to me on the whole that they have enough in common with emotions to warrant the term, despite lacking formal objects (and objects of any kind, for that matter, unless “the world as I see and feel it” is an adequate object). As neuroscience explores the brain concomitants of experienced emotions, we may gather new reasons for thinking that some emotions are more “basic” than others, in the sense that—according to the research of Panksepp and LeDoux, among others—there is a consilience of neural circuits, hormonal activity, behavioural tendencies and phenomenology that is specific to each. In these cases, the formal object would relate to the function of those syndromes: to understand

in functional terms what the frightening is, is also to understand what the emotion of fear is. (Depression, I am led to infer, doesn't have a "biological function"; if it is found to have one, then I'll have to withdraw the observation that depression has no formal object.) If, as some philosophers and psychologists have claimed, there is actually no such thing as a basic emotion, and no such natural kind as emotions in general, then the fact that emotions in general don't share a formal object will seem a lot less interesting. And since the role of formal objects in the philosophy of emotion is a conceptual, structural one, its validity as a concept stands or falls with the use that can be made of it in organizing our thinking about emotions.

**Tell me about three pet hates of yours - three stubborn presuppositions in philosophy that need to be challenged, and why?**

By definition, all interesting presuppositions are stubborn, until they are unmasked, and then they are no longer presuppositions, but theses to be defended, attacked, or dismissed. So the question can't really be posed in such a way as to be answerable in a non-trivial way. Of course there are people who believe things I don't think are true, but if someone is aware of them they are no longer "presuppositions."

If you think that's a pretext, you're probably right. The real reason is that I can't think of three pet hates that wouldn't be obvious and banal—such as, for example, the obvious and the banal. And yet perhaps I can just descry one thing that might be, at least in my own mind, in transition between a presupposition and a thesis. It's the role in philosophy of *temperament*. Some recent research seems to indicate that liberals and conservatives have distinctly different personality profiles (in terms of standard dimensions of personality theory, particularly conscientiousness, openness and neuroticism), which themselves are starting to be seen as linked through such neurobiological factors as serotonin transport to genes. (See, eg., *New Scientist*, Feb.

2 2008) In much the same way, I suspect that on some deep divisions of philosophy people's views are determined not by arguments but by temperament. This is nicely summed up in a quote a friend recently sent me from Natalie Clifford Barney: "A scholar's heart is a dark well, whence deeply buried emotions bubble up in the guise of arguments." No argument will ever be persuade a consequentialist to become a deontologist, or vice versa. We should pay more attention to the philosophical implications of that fact.

Let me add just one pet peeve. I often wonder, on reading this or that journal article, about the *further point* of analytical exercises in philosophy. Placing one's neat analytical effort in the framework of a broader philosophical problem is perhaps discouraged by the urgency of the publishing imperative; so the system is to blame rather than any particular philosopher's cast of mind. But while I endorse the ideal of rigour in philosophy, I think we should remember that the point of doing philosophy is to change our vision of the world as a whole—which doesn't preclude seeing it, for good or for ill, as deeply fragmented.

### **What is the meaning of life?**

Here is one place where philosophical temperament is the key to each philosopher's preferred answer, or preference for not answering. For my part, I am bemused by most people's reluctance to accept the essential randomness of life and fortune, which seems to me to be the core of the curious survival of religion in supposedly civilized countries. It's merely silly, of course, to think events in my life can't have a meaning for me unless Life has a meaning in itself. But there's more to it than a silly mistake: and that more is a matter of temperament, and perhaps of genes. My own temperament leads me to feel it would be supremely oppressive to think of life as having a "meaning", or to believe that what the fabled mathematician Paul

Erdős called the Supreme Fascist had *a plan for me*. But many, quite obviously, have exactly the opposite stance: they just can't believe that this or that event in their own life was not significant, meant to be, *about them*—like the airplane passenger who announced that now he really believed that God existed because in a crash in which several others were killed, *he* had survived. It is a step to wisdom is to recognize, with the existentialists, that “the fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves...” But a further step is to see that fault and merit are not in ourselves either but in the awesome churning of chance and necessity, in the emergence, out of randomness, of patterns unrepeatable and uniquely precious, including ourselves and our friends. In the words of Wallace Stevens, “Death is the mother of beauty”:

*Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,  
 In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else  
 In any balm or beauty of the earth,  
 Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?  
 Divinity must live within herself:  
 Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;  
 Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued  
 Elations when the forest blooms; gusty  
 Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;  
 All pleasures and all pains, remembering  
 The bough of summer and the winter branch.  
 These are the measures destined for her soul.  
 But that's just what it is in my temperament to feel.*