

## DIY psychology: command your emotions

Are you tired of being enslaved by your emotions? Say goodbye to your psychologists couch! This philosopher claims to have all the answers. How can we command our emotions?

Matthew Liao argues in his book 'The right to be loved'<sup>i</sup> that we have a duty to love children. To claim that something like a duty to love is even possible, he needs to counter the objection that the emotion(s) involved in love can be commanded. A strong objection, held by many philosophers. Kant, for example, claims that love is a matter of feeling, not of willing. Emotions like these are not under our control and we cannot be obliged to do something that is not under our control. Liao attacks the second premise and argues that we *can* control our emotions. He gives us three methods: take your pick!

### Internal control

You can appeal to reasons: we can give ourselves reasons to have particular emotions and we can reflect on these reasons. Suppose you feel disgust every time you see Thierry Baudet<sup>ii</sup>. What are your reasons for this feeling? Do you dislike his slick haircut, loathe his dominant attitude or do you feel disgust every time he opens his mouth? When you have established your reasons for your disgust, you can reflect on whether your emotions are supported by *good* reasons. A haircut might not be the best reason to loathe someone. And is his attitude really that dominant? If so, is this a good reason for your attitude towards Thierry? Maybe, in reflection, you see that you totally misread his attitude (and maybe not). Does he really say those things that you think he says? To control your emotions in a responsible way, you have to find out if you understood his statements correctly. If not, and you have recognized that you don't have any good reasons for your feeling; you might begin to view Thierry in a different way. Your disgust could evaporate and even make way for emotions that come with respect, admiration or love. By reflecting on your reasons for your disgust, you discovered that they weren't at all appropriate and have commanded the emotion to go away. However, it could also be the case that you understood his statements correctly, and that they *don't* match your values. In that case you might have good reasons to continue your disgust for Thierry Baudet.

### External control

The second method of control is external control: deliberately place yourself in a situation of which you know that you would probably experience the particular emotion. Any Q&A section in a glossy will tell you that if your romantic relationship is more dead than alive and you want to command the emotions involved in love, it will help to get actively involved in doing things together. You don't need to wait for a loving emotion to act upon (spontaneous dates because you want to be with her!), but in this case you need to act to invoke the desired emotional response (date night, quality time, deliberately letting your love bloom by creating the right situation).

### Cultivation

Practice makes perfect. The method of cultivation involves, according to Aristotle, habituation as well as reflection. You can achieve it by different strategies or by combining them. First you could try to behave 'as if'. Do you want to be joyful? Behave as if you're joyful! (Command: smile!) Since nobody likes a fake and it's quite exhaustive to pretend, the following strategies are advised, too. Repeatedly use the method of external control: place yourself in situations where you would probably experience particular emotions. Combine this with repeatedly use of the method of internal control: recall your reasons! Most important: use deep reflection on the reasons why you tend to have particular emotions and whether these are good reasons.

In case you are planning upon following this program step by step: a little disclaimer. These methods are not guaranteed to work. Maybe you did not find any good reason for your negative attitude towards Thierry, but still you turn your head with disgust every time you see him. No matter how often

you arranged a romantic date, your feelings of love just don't seem to come back. And no matter how much you behaved as if you were joyful, the last thing you got out of that was joy. Liao acknowledges this. His methods might not guarantee success, but he claims that at least these methods enable us *sometimes* to bring about the desired emotional aspects. In other words: it doesn't hurt to try.

If we are unable to command our emotions ourselves, we might go look for alternatives. Could a more 'artificial' method bring about similar emotions? Could a spray with pheromones for example bring about the emotions involved in love? Discussion about whether these biomedical enhancements could bring about 'real' or 'true' emotions is widespread (see for example another blogpost on a 'lovepill').

Since it seems that (at least sometimes) it is possible to command our emotions by ourselves, the following question for philosophical inquiry arises: *should* we command our emotions? The previous examples portray personal goals of wellbeing. We could make our lives better by getting rid of negative emotions and live a more joyful life. But however responding with joy to every situation might make your personal emotional life much easier; it might not be the appropriate response. Mark Alfano writes in his book 'Moral psychology: an introduction'<sup>iii</sup>: "Presumably, a life of many joys and few sorrows (and angers and disgusts) in a context that warrants joy would be ideal. And when things are good, it's clear that the agent needn't endure frequent negative emotions. But when things start to go badly, we encounter a fork in the moral psychological path. To the left: negative emotions that correctly register what's going on. To the right: positive or neutral emotions that fail to do so." A responsible way of commanding your emotions might involve knowing the appropriate response to certain situations. It would be so much easier to feel joyful, lightly and happy when you see Thierry – but it just might not be the appropriate response.

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<sup>i</sup> Liao, S. M. (2015). *The right to be loved*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>ii</sup> Thierry Baudet is a Dutch politician and leader of the party 'Forum voor Democratie'.

<sup>iii</sup> Alfano, M. (2016). *Moral psychology: an introduction*. John Wiley & Sons.