



## Causes and Objects of Emotions

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*Analysis*, Vol. 30, No. 6. (Jun., 1970), pp. 201-205.

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## CAUSES AND OBJECTS OF EMOTIONS

By A. J. ELLIS

**A** THESIS about the emotions that is now very widely accepted is that an emotion must, conceptually must, have an object, and that whilst in any given case the object of an emotion might also be the cause of that emotion, nevertheless the notion of the object is quite different from the notion of the cause of an emotion. The thesis is held to be both philosophically illuminating (it clarifies our concept of an emotion) and philosophically useful (it helps us to distinguish between sensations and emotions, *e.g.*). I shall argue that, whilst in many cases we can draw some such distinction, no *general* distinction of this sort can be made out for philosophical purposes. I shall centre my argument on Anthony Kenny's presentation of the thesis in his book *Action, Emotion and Will* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963).

What criterion have we for deciding whether something is the cause or the object of an emotion? Kenny offers only two.

The first is on p. 73. There Kenny says,

Causes are assigned to particular emotions, objects to unspecified emotions. This is because emotions are specified by their objects.

If Kenny intends this as a criterion (and it is not quite clear whether he does), it will not work. Perhaps the pattern is most commonly, as Kenny says, that we first ask of a man who shows the signs of fear what it is that he is afraid of, and then ask why he should be afraid of that particular thing. We first ask for an object, and then for a cause. But there are other possibilities. Something that has widely (and rightly) been regarded as a test case for the thesis that all emotions must necessarily have objects is depression, which often seems not to have an object at all. And if someone asks, 'Why is he so depressed?', he may very well get an answer (and might indeed have been seeking an answer) in terms of something that we should certainly want to call a cause rather than an object. The answer might be in terms of early family relationships, lack of iron, or liver trouble, things which the person in question is certainly not depressed *about*. In this way a cause will have been assigned to an unspecified emotion, thus cutting right across the criterion.

The criterion which I think that Kenny takes more seriously is given on p. 75:

Faced with any sentence describing the occurrence of an emotion, of the form 'A  $\phi$ 'd because p', we must ask whether it is a necessary condition of the truth of this sentence that A should know or believe that p. If so, then the sentence contains an allusion to the object of the emotion; if not, to its cause.

(Note that Kenny does not say that A has to know that p is the object of his emotion; the requirement is only that A should know that p.) Kenny gives no real reason for saying this (he introduces it as a consequence of the fact that the distinction he is making is not reflected clearly in the surface grammar of our talk about the emotions; we must look rather to 'the knowledge or beliefs of the subject'), he merely goes on to give a couple of examples which suggest it. This may be because what he says has a certain 'intuitive' plausibility. After all, you might think, it is pretty obvious that a man must know what he is angry about (and note that this ambiguous sentence could mean that an angry man must know what it is that he is angry about, which is not what Kenny is suggesting), although he may not know what caused him to be angry about it.

And the criterion does seem to work in some cases. Thus, if I say, 'He is melancholic because of his liver trouble' it clearly makes a difference whether or not the person knows about his liver trouble. If he does not, then we should be strongly inclined to say that that cannot be the object of his melancholy. Nevertheless, the criterion is not as clear as it might seem.

First, it is not altogether clear just what Kenny is doing. Is he merely articulating a distinction we already know how to make—rather like one who says, 'It is a necessary condition of the truth of "S knows that p" that p should be true'? Or is he introducing the word 'object' as a semi-technical term, and introducing a distinction which has at best an ill-defined counterpart in our ordinary talk about the emotions? This would be a case of trying to tighten up our concepts.

The latter of these procedures does not seem characteristic of Kenny's writing, but in case anyone thinks that it is what he is doing here (or what he ought to be doing) I shall point out a problem in it. In order to be able to use the criterion, we have already to be able to make the distinction that the criterion is supposed to be marking out. For we have to decide whether A's belief that p is a necessary condition of the truth of a sentence S, 'A  $\phi$ 'd because p'; and we can do this only by asking, If A does not believe that p, do we have to take back S? Now this means that we have to appeal to what we should anyway do—before knowing the criterion. If someone did not know how to make the distinction between cause and object, then he would not know on which occasions when he found that A did not know that p he had to take back S. He would not know when A's belief that p *was* a necessary condition of the truth of S. In that case the application of the criterion would have to be entirely arbitrary; if I decide to say, on a given occasion, that A's belief that p is a necessary condition of the truth of S, then I shall be assigning an object. But in that case, what would be the point of suggesting such a criterion? It would work where we already know how to make the distinction; and where we don't know how to make it,

it doesn't give us any way of finding out, but merely tells us to make an arbitrary choice.

In fact, I do not think that this is the correct interpretation of what Kenny is doing, and I shall now proceed on the assumption that he is in fact trying to articulate a distinction that we already know how to make. On this interpretation, we must already be in a position to decide, without applying Kenny's criterion, whether something is a cause or an object. But I do not think that we are in that position.

To start with, although some such distinction is made in our ordinary talk about the emotions, it is made very imprecisely. Thus, R. H. Thouless says on p. 72 of *General and Social Psychology*,

The name 'emotion' is usually only used of an affective condition associated with some object or situation.

Thouless is here, I think it is clear, trying to point out that emotions usually have objects, which may well be different from their causes. But the phrase he uses, 'associated with', could serve equally well for either a cause or an object. And this is true of a large number of the expressions we use in connection with the objects and causes of emotions. (Kenny gives examples on p. 72.)

And unlike the case of the application of 'He knows', where there is no question at all that A does not know that p if in fact not-p, there are cases of emotions where we do not know whether to say that something is the cause or the object. Take the following case:

The leader of a country at war learns that yet another position has been lost, through the incompetence of his generals. He goes white and rigid, grits his teeth, gnaws his lip, and then bawls at his secretary for standing around doing nothing. Now, do we say that the *cause* of his anger was the incompetence of the generals, but that its *object* was the secretary? This would be like the case where I am irritated with my friends because (causal because) I have had rather a sleepless night. Or do we say that the *object* of his anger is in fact the generals' incompetence, but that he vents his spleen (whatever exactly that means) on his secretary? We could, I think, say either; we have no way of deciding between them. Indeed, to decide at all might distort the situation.

This is surely because in our ordinary thought about the emotions the distinction is at best only partial. And if that is so, Kenny is wrong to try to give a criterion that should settle all cases. In fact, of course, since we do not know what to say in this case, we cannot apply the criterion anyway. Whether or not his belief that the generals are incompetent is a necessary condition of the truth of the sentence 'He was angry because of the generals' incompetence' depends upon whether that sentence assigns a cause or an object.

What of the cases where we *would* normally draw some sort of distinction? Is Kenny's criterion in accord with all of these?

Take a case similar to the last one; only this time, I shall try to make it unambiguously causal. The leader of the country learns that yet another position has been lost, apparently through the incompetence of his generals. This makes him liable to flare up at the slightest provocation, and when, some hours later, he sees his secretary standing about, apparently doing nothing, he becomes enraged with him. And later I try to explain to the secretary why his employer was so unjustifiably angry with him: 'Oh, it wasn't your fault; it's the incompetence of the generals that has been making him short-tempered.' My explanation is surely a causal one: his belief that the generals are incompetent has caused in him a disposition to be angry at the slightest thing.

But what if I am now told that he does not in fact believe that the generals are incompetent? Then surely my explanation was wrong. The particular causal sequence which I was postulating did not in fact obtain. In other words, it seems that A's belief that p *was* a necessary condition of the truth of the explanation, even though the explanation assigned a cause.

I think that Kenny's reply might be as follows: In this case, the sentence 'A was angry because p' is not necessarily rendered false because this particular causal chain does not hold. The sentence may still be true, for some other, more indirect, causal chain might link the incompetence of the generals with his anger. For instance, it is this which is losing him the war (even though the leader does not think so) and it is his dire position in the war which is causing him to be angry. Therefore it is still ultimately the incompetence of the generals that is causing him to be angry.

But this will not save the criterion. Suppose that when I say, 'A was angry because p', I am meaning to ascribe an object of his anger. And suppose I find out that A does not in fact believe that p. Could I not equally well say here that this does not render the sentence false, since by its form it could equally well ascribe a cause, and according to Kenny's criterion must now do so? But if that is so, then the condition that Kenny lays down as a necessary condition for the truth of a sentence ascribing an object will not in fact be a necessary condition for the truth of any sentence, whether it ascribe a cause or an object. In other words, if A's belief that p is held to be a necessary condition of the truth of S where S ascribes an object, there seems to be no reason why it should not be a necessary condition of the truth of S where S ascribes a cause. As far as A's belief that p is concerned, cause and object seem to be in the same position.

The argument of the last paragraph depends, of course, on the fact that Kenny says that the sentence 'A  $\phi$ 'd because p' ascribes an object if

A's knowledge or belief that *p* is 'a necessary condition of the truth of this *sentence*' (my italics). It is propositions, it might be said, not sentences, that have truth-values, and the problem I have pointed to in Kenny's formulation is just another of the problems that arise when we try to ascribe truth-values to sentences. So it might seem that we can save the criterion by substituting 'proposition' for 'sentence' throughout.

But this is not so. After all, when I said, 'He's short-tempered because of the incompetence of the generals' what I meant (*i.e.*, what proposition that sentence was intended to express) was that the incompetence of the generals had been preying on his mind and making him short-tempered. And that could not be the case if he did not believe that the generals were incompetent. So in this case, A's belief that *p* is a necessary condition of the truth of the proposition 'A  $\phi$ 'd because *p*' even though the proposition is ascribing a cause. Of course, some other proposition, such as that his dire position in the war due to the incompetence of the generals is making him short-tempered, might, at a pinch, be expressed by the same sentence, 'It's the incompetence of the generals that is making him short-tempered'. But that *is* another proposition, and A's belief that *p* remains a necessary condition of the truth of the proposition that was first intended.

So it seems that, despite its initial plausibility, Kenny's criterion is not going to work, and I think that the fault lies in assuming that our talk about the emotions is sufficiently precise and clear-cut to allow of this sort of treatment at all. Sometimes we can draw a distinction between the cause of an emotion and its object; and sometimes we cannot. It is therefore not surprising if we cannot find a watertight criterion for making this distinction.

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