III.3. Emotions and Narrations

Is it by chance that we often tell stories when we talk about feelings? I do not think so, anymore than I think it was by chance that the first great narrative in the West, Homer’s *Iliad*, is about an emotion, the wrath of Achilles and its consequences.

In this chapter I want to show first that emotions have a storied and a narrative structure, besides being shaped by stories and narratives in other ways. Secondly, I want to demonstrate that narratives play a decisive role in the justification, identification, explanation, and understanding of emotions. Thirdly, I shall add a short discussion on the issue of whether stories and narratives as such are constituted by emotions.

3.1 The Storied Structure of Emotions

We have already discovered that Wilhelm Schapp said, over fifty years ago, that emotions are constituted by narratives. Alas, his treatment of the relationship between narrations and emotions remained sketchy. The same holds for Martha Nussbaum’s analysis. She presumes that there is an important link between narratives and emotions without invoking any empirical evidence that we learn to emote with the aid of stories (Nussbaum 1990: 287). William Gallie also said something similar four decades ago (Gallie (1968): 48). But, just like Nussbaum, Gallie never elaborated this idea. Yet British-Canadian philosopher Ronald de Sousa has. According to de Sousa, our emotional vocabulary is made familiar to us by association with paradigm scenarios. They are first drawn from daily life, later reinforced by stories and fairy tales, and then supplemented and refined by literature and art. A paradigm scenario involves two aspects: first, a paradigmatic situation providing the characteristic objects of an emotion, and second, the scenario provides us with characteristic responses to the situation. More than this, the role of scenarios in relation to emotions is analogous to the ostensive definition of a common noun. Unfortunately, even though extremely absorbing, de Sousa’s theory is somewhat
limited in scope; it only focuses on the way emotions are taught. Further, his theory is strictly empirical, although it certainly can inspire analyses of emotional concepts (de Sousa 1987: 181-184). Despite it being empirical, de Sousa just like Nussbaum does not invoke any empirical evidence in favour of it. Until that evidence is provided, I cannot take stance upon the theory.¹

Peter Goldie has, however, analysed the relationship between emotions and narrations in depth. I shall, therefore, devote considerable space to a discussion of his analysis.

I myself maintain that E cannot count as an emotion unless it does have a storied structure or is constituted by narratives in other ways. An emotion is a mental state and as such it has a beginning, middle and ending. And like other mental states it has a plot-like theme that organises sensations, perceptions, actions etc. into one whole. Being angry-at-John for having stolen my car is the theme of a certain emotion and certainly unfolds in time like a story. This is the main thesis of this chapter. But I shall vindicate this thesis by route of vindicating my other thesis. The second thesis is as follows: emotions are (at least typically) embedded in narratives in such a manner that the way they are embedded is crucial to their identification, justification, explanation, and understanding.

I am not saying that it is a necessary condition for E to be an emotion that it has to be embedded in all these ways, even though that might very well be the case. There might be emotions that are neither, say, explainable or justifiable narratively. But I find it hard to imagine that there is an (at least human) emotion, which is neither narratively explainable, identifiable nor understandable.

In order to show that this is the case, I want to argue in favour of the following: narratives can function i) as indispensable tools for the identification of emotions; ii) as part of reasoning in favour of person P being justified in having E (call such narratives ‘justificatory

¹ As for the empirical aspect of emotions, I dearly want to know how spontaneous stories function in certain emotions like anxiety, hatred, and anger. The anxious, hateful, and angry often seem to be enthralled by recurring scenarios. I do not exclude the possibility that the experience of such recurring spontaneous stories is an essential part of some brands of hatred, anxiety, anger, and other similar emotions. But now I am indulging in possibilology, yet again!