



Emotional Truth

Ronald de Sousa

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The word "truth" retains, in common use, traces of origins that link it to trust, truth, and truce, connoting ideas of fidelity, loyalty, and authenticity. The word has become, in contemporary philosophy, encased in a web of technicalities, but we know that a true image is a faithful portrait; a true friend a loyal one. In a novel or a poem, too, we have a feel for what is emotionally true, though we are not concerned with the actuality of events and characters depicted. To have emotions is to care about certain things: we can wonder whether those things are really worth caring about. We can wonder whether our passions reflect who we are, and whether they constitute fitting responses to the vicissitudes of life. So there are two aspects to emotional truth: how well an emotion reflects the threats and promises of the world, and how well it reflects our own individual nature. That is the starting point of this book, which looks first at the analogies and disanalogies between strict propositional truth and a looser, "generic" sense of truth. As applied to emotions, generic truth is closer to those original meanings: as in a portrait's fidelity or friend's loyalty. Taken in this sense, the notion of emotional truth opens up large vistas on areas of life essential to our existence as social beings, and to our concerns with beauty, morality, love, death, sex, knowledge, desire, coherence, and happiness. Each of those topics illustrates some facet of the dominant theme of the book: the crucial but often ambivalent role of our emotions in grounding and yet also sometimes undermining our values. Emotions act, in holistic perspective, as ultimate arbiters of values where different and independently justified standards of value compete.

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