

**International Congress of Aesthetics 2007
“Aesthetics Bridging Cultures”**

**SENTIMENTALITY AS UNTRUE
EXPRESSION¹**

*Francisca Pérez-Carreño, Professor of
Aesthetics, University of Murcia, Spain*

There is no more valuable precept in moral education than this, as all who have experience know: if we wish to conquer undesirable emotional tendencies in our selves, we must assiduously and in the first instance cold bloodedly, go through the *outwards motions* of those contrary dispositions we prefer to cultivate.²

Different accounts of sentimentality have been based on a cognitivist view of emotions, after which sentimentality is an inadequacy or disproportion between two components of emotion: its content –broadly taken, a thought- and its affective attitude. An emotion is held to be sentimental when it is unjustified. Thus, sentimentality is first of all against truth, because the thought involved in the sentimental emotion is false. For instance, Maria inspires me tenderness, because I think she is a sweet and vulnerable girl. Tenderness would be sentimental, if Maria is not sweet but a nasty and bad behaved girl. It is clear that not only sentimental emotions, but also many others are inadequate because they involve false judgements or beliefs. However they do not deserve the bad press that often accompany sentimentality, since sentimentality is said to be not only a fault against truth, but also an ethical fault and an aesthetical one.

In *In Defense of Sentimentality* Solomon³ has claimed that usual criticism against sentimentality is just a consequence of philosophical and high culture prejudices against emotion in general, and has held that attempts to define sentimentality have failed. After him, even if charges against sentimentality for falsity were fair, claims about its morally flawed character would be excessive when not, unjustified. More over, Solomon and other defenders of sentimentality have pointed to its beneficial character. To have sentimental attitudes towards children, for instance, prepares us against children abuse and favours good actions in favour of childhood.

The claim of this paper is that sentimentality is not identical to a tendency to judge benevolently, as Solomon is likely to think, but a moral fault, a form of emotional self-deception, linked to insincere or untrue expression.

To its critics, cognitivism provides the argument that sentimental emotions or feelings are wrong because the proposition involved in them is false. A sentimentalist is a person with false emotions, basically false tender emotions. To its defenders, as far as the person of the emotion makes the involved judgment -that Maria is a sweet girl, for instance-, the

emotion is intelligible, and adequate. In fact, after Solomon, the emotion consists just in the judgment, or the sets of judgments, appreciations, beliefs and even desires which relate the self with the object of her emotion. Maybe the judgement is false, and Maria is not a sweet girl, but the point is that there are reasons that explain the judgment, or why the person does judge in that way. After all, our judgments are most of the time based on partial evidence, since "omniscience" is not an option. Our emotions and affective attitudes in general need not be based on complete evidence. Other ways love would often be inadequate or at least excessive, as we tend to believe our beloved to be more handsome and smarter he really is, and it is hard to think about certain emotions, as justified in any occasion.

At this point, also critics of sentimentality, like Savile, have rightly held that we often have false beliefs that, nevertheless, justify our emotions. If I was worried about you, because I thought that you had been knocked down by a car, my worry was justified even if it was not you but your brother who had the accident.

Before going on to other arguments, I would like to point out something else about falsity of sentimental emotions: it is not that sentimental emotions, as other judgments, are fallible, but that they are resistant to falsification. Moore's paradox does not apply to them, so that there is not contradiction in asserting that flying is not dangerous, and nevertheless being afraid of flying, as it is often remarked. It is neither impossible nor implausible to have an emotion, even when we get to know that the proposition involved is false, so when we have no reason for it. Or, maybe we had once a reason for it, but we can no more remember it. Anger, rage, and hate are exemplar, but also love, or admiration. Emotions have a life of their own, so that 'reasons' once might give origin to them can lose force as constituents of the emotions. Emotions change their objects, gain force or weaken, modify their content, and, in sum, develop.

Savile suggests that it is not falsity, but something else, that what characterises sentimentality, namely, an interest in feeling an emotion, and, consequently, a satisfaction and complacency found in undergoing it: "the sentimentalist seeks the occurrence of certain enjoyable emotions"⁴. Undergoing the emotion makes the sentimentalist to feel good, or having a "gratifying image of the self"⁵. Complacency in the feeling is the cause of it. The reason would be a rationale for it, but it is not its actual cause. After Savile, the sentimentalist finds a thought adequate to the feeling he wants to experience, a thought that idealizes the object. So sentimentality is a deceit about the content of the emotion, which gives explanation of the sentimental attitude. Basically I agree with Savile about sentimentality as a form of self-deception. But I do not find plausible that a voluntary idealization of the object is by itself sufficient to arouse the emotion that the sentimentalist feels, or believes to feel.

In an earlier essay Tanner maintained that the feeling is felt "...for its (...) own sake"⁶. A sentimentalist tends to indulge in emotions that may be well not being pleasurable because she yet finds satisfaction in them. For instance, the sentimental unloved indulges herself in disappointment; she feels herself hurt, but also a better person because of that, sensitive and capable of deep emotions. I agree with Tanner that pain is not just converted into pleasure, and that maybe not every emotion might change its negative pole into positive, and in doing it transform into a sentimental emotion.⁷ However, satisfaction does not need to come from the pain itself, but from other mental conditions that accompany the pain, and that can soften or even hide the pain. When the unloved is

in pangs for unrequited love, she suffers imagining herself close to the beloved, since the envisaged scene is not possible, but she also finds pleasure in the mere entertaining of the imaginings. Remembering a lost person may cause a terrible suffering, but also being a balsam. And, of course, nice memories from the past taste bittersweet.

Now, my point is that the looked after pleasure that characterises sentimentalization of emotions comes from a reflection upon an image of the self under the experience of certain feelings. The self contemplates herself suffering of love, indignation, or melancholy, and the image she obtains pleases her. The reflective character of sentimentality explains other features of sentimental feelings and emotions. For instance, Tanner goes on the analysis aiming that sentimental emotions tend to "dislocate themselves" from their objects⁸. The sentimental unloved transfers the painful feeling of unrequited love to pain or pity for herself. And that retaining the "*cachet*" it used to have when attached to its original object. In separating from its object the emotion tends to feed on itself. That is why, to the extent that sentimental emotion is second order or reflective, the thought about the object and the object itself, is merely instrumental. The sentimental person in fact tends to react in the same way, and with same intensity to different objects, and in different contexts. She is previsible in her reactions, as the object is minimally relevant to her responses. The love lover falls in love for every person over whom to project his imaginings, the righteous indignant claims before every situation without minding whom it affects, or if it is really injustice the cause of the harm.

Finally, since feeling the emotion is an end in its self, it does not fulfil the role emotions should have in mental economy. Tanner holds that, because of the illicit pleasure the sentimentalist finds in the emotion, she tends to elude to act after the motivation of the emotion. Sentimentality can be distinguished from emotional generosity precisely on that basis. The sentimentalist loses the interrelation with reality that genuine emotions favour. She does not feel the impulse to action, as she would lose the pleasure found in mere reflection or complacency. It is not surprising that envisaging the ethical consequences of sentimentality Tanner and other tend to think that sentimentality inhibits right action. I find however more promising the idea, related to the distinction between emotional generosity and sentimentality, about "the freedom with which the generous (...) act on their feelings without anxiety about the point and value of doing it."⁹ Emotional generosity is freedom in the expression of emotions, which may be understood as naivety, ingeniousness, and lack of reflexivity. It recalls the original difference between sentimental and naïve poetry in Shiller. And as Shiller maintains about modernity, I doubt about the possibility in adult life of being naïve. Reflection is a feature of adult life and sentimentality one of its dangers.

The behaviour of the sentimentalist will probably be marked by her lack of spontaneity, and by the sentimentalized image she has of herself. And her actions marked by her desire of responding to this image. However, it is not unimaginable that precisely for that reason a sentimentalist behaves similarly to the genuinely engaged. She could carry on the same actions: being member of certain organizations, signing protests, etc. It would be not the action, but the way in which the action is carried out where she might be discovered. Of course, some actions could be described as expressions: kissing, screaming, and also uttering certain words. And certainly most of the actions are performed expressively, without taking into account that we do express ourselves all the time by our acting and way of acting. But a distinction needs to be made, and sentimentality directly concerns the expression of the emotion, and not the action upon it.

Tanner makes a good picture of the sentimentalist, however, he admits that the features of sentimentality are neither sufficient nor necessary conditions for a definition. Emotions in general could change their objects, and tend to nourish on themselves. Besides, their motivational force is not direct, but mediated by desires and beliefs, that may collaborate with the emotion or counterbalance its force, and there are many reasons to act or not under the influence of one and the same emotion. On the other hand, as Solomon holds, it is not proved that sentimental people be hard to motivate for action, the contrary could be the fact. It is in this aspect of lack of effect on the personal behaviour than Tanner insists the most, but dishonesty, which is the cause, needs not be manifest. As Tanner says in relation to Wilde's famous phrase, the relevant fact is that sentimentalist is not ready to pay for her emotions, although she sometimes cannot avoid it: "It is the attitude they adopt towards the payment that marks them as sentimental or not."¹⁰

Sentimental emotions are prone to use all mechanisms that mental life offers, but none of them characterises sentimentality. What has so often been marked as its central feature, indulgence on the own feelings, is a type of reflection, or being aware of the proper mental motions, which is proper too of aesthetic experience, and self-analysis. In their stories emotions emancipate from their original objects, change them, transform into different emotions, give rise to feelings, beliefs, phantasies, etc. Anger, fear, jealousy are paradigmatically feed on their self, without turning necessarily into sentimentality. Some emotions, such as nostalgia in which sorrow for the lost is softened by recalling, stimulate melted sensations. And in many others there is a pleasure in feeling some previous emotion: so one of the pleasures of love is to feel being in love, and be proud of the own children is joy over the joy of loving and being loved by them.

What is distinctive about sentimentality is that these devices are used voluntarily to please the person, who finds satisfaction from the entertaining of emotions that are wrong formed. I take sentimentality to have two steps: first, an emotion is malformed; second, a satisfaction is found in undergoing the emotion¹¹. Sentimentality is in the first place a flaw of sincerity, because the emotion is fabricated. Second, self-deception is the result of the fabrication. Contrary to other pleasures of reflection the sentimentalist is deceived about the true nature of her feelings.

Now two kinds of questions arise. First: How is it possible to fabricate emotions? And second: How is self-deception possible? I shall begin by the second class of questions, with a tentative answer, in two parts. In relation to emotions, I take self-deception to be easier than in relation to beliefs. That is, it is easier to be mistaken about one's emotions, than about one's beliefs. May be this is anti-intuitive after a Cartesian image of the passions, which are so close to the soul that the soul cannot but perceive them as they actually are. But precisely that intimacy of the will and the passions could permit the manipulation of the latter. I will come to the issue later on. Now, what I look after is the possibility that the self does not acknowledge an emotion as false. Evidence about our emotions is not always easy to obtain. And the sentimentalist lacks the aim to obtain it:

It is characteristic for sentimentalist to inhibit those checking devices which are available, though hard to handle, for interrogating one's experiences, for asking whether one's feeling are primarily controlled by their object if they have one, and what *kind* of communication they are maintaining with it.¹²

The way to test our belief about beliefs is to test the beliefs we take to be ours. Is what I take to be true really true? Have I evidence of it? Have I seen it? Have I obtain the information from a reliable source? Is it coherent with the rest of my beliefs? And so on. In the same sense, Tanner seems to think that one could test the truth of the thought involved in one's emotions. But to know about one's emotions is quite different. For instance, we can investigate if our beloved deserves our love. This is something different than to think about his virtues, and it is quite difficult if not impossible to identify the valuable property, or that what makes our beloved worth the love we have for him. Even though we could falsify a thought, for instance, to find out that he is not a doctor as he pretended, the most we could become to know is that our emotion is not adequate, but not that we do not have it. As I said, Moore's paradox does not apply.

Above that, believes are propositional, but the thought involved in emotions are not always propositional. A picture of the object, a conception of it can be the content of the emotion. May be he is not the doctor he pretended, but my picture of him does not disappear with the falsity. I do not need to be more precise about the difficulties of verifying the thought of the emotion.

Besides, testing an emotion does not consist just in investigating the truth of the involved thoughts. To know about our emotions implies to know about the subjectivity of the emotion as much as about its intentionality, to know about oneself, about one's attitude. Probably this is what Tanner describes as to test the "*kind* of communication" that the emotions keep with their objects. I understand him to refer here to the connexion between the object and the attitude of the self. For instance, one may believe that the political situation in her country is unjust. And one may believe that indignation is an emotional appropriate response. And nevertheless, one may feel depressed. Or remain indifferent. Feeling one or other, in spite of what narrow cognitivism has defended, may be a form of distinguishing among emotions. There is not a right attitude and wrong ones. Again, one could reasonably find that she should be indignant, and be depressed. And knowing about oneself means to find out the attitude the thought has actually provoked, not that which should have been appropriate.

One way to know about one's emotion is through the feelings linked to it. Some emotions manifest in feelings, and some feelings are the origin of emotions. Feelings consist in the awareness of certain mainly bodily changes linked to the presence, the thought of, or the imagination of an object. It is not inadequate to think that the weakness of limbs I feel when he is near to me has something to do with my being in love with him. Knowing about our feelings, and indirectly our emotions, consist also partly in artificially provoking those feelings by recalling or imagining. So it is not inappropriate to think that my imagining of him approaching me, and my imagining of sensations when he approaches me, are also a proof of my love. Imagined sensations and feelings need not to be phenomenologically different from 'genuine'.

Imagining feelings involves mental dramatization that provides the self with images of itself that have the benefit of intimacy and that are at the same time the best proof and the best deceiver about itself. Reflection as the activity of looking into one's recalls, one's actions, or one's imaginings or phantasies, is subject to the intervention of the will, the manipulation more or less conscious of this dramatized material. The sentimentalist accepts without reserve the image of himself obtained from a dramatization controlled by the will.

We are ready now to turn to the question "How is possible to fabricate emotions?" Two explanations are at hand: first, thinking of or imagining the objects or events that would paradigmatically provoke such sentiments. It is relevant to point that the thought is not a neutral description of the object or event, but that the thought is the result of my thinking, appreciating or envisaging the emotion. In so far as a "feeling towards the object"¹³ is in the kernel of every emotion, the fabrication of the emotion implies the representation of a self that entertains the thought, and not just the thought. To imagine oneself feeling is needed.

The second way to fabricate emotions, which I take to be basic, consists in making up the expression corresponding to such feelings. It is in this sense in which I think that sentimentality is basically untrue expression. The sentimentalist is not acting or pretending to express genuine expression for the rest, but acting for herself. She ends undergoing the emotions whose expression has made up, and not due to her credulous character but because of the very nature of expression.

Gombrich¹⁴ held that in artistic expression the symptom often causes the emotion that is thought to be its cause. Singing with expression moves, pronouncing the words of the poem with appropriate intonation provokes the feelings that would explain the uttering. In order to make an expressive image, the artist produces first through the schemes inherited from tradition an expressive form. Then the expressive form provokes in the spectator an affective response.

Now, neither the artist nor the sentimentalist express an inner state merely uttering certain words, moving certain parts of the body, or reproducing the graphic schemes thought to be significant of the emotions. Anger may begin by artificially elevating the tone of voice, getting the muscles tensed, but only when the bodily movements are made as the result of the activity of getting angry, or imagining getting angry. Sentimental or artistic expression is not mere imitation of the form of a genuine expression. To scream in the grip of anger does not consist in making certain movements with the vocal organs, but that the movement is the manifestation of the activity of screaming in anger. There is expression when a voluntary or not inhibited bodily movement goes with a feeling or is the outer look of a feeling.

It is a well-known fact about feelings that uttering the expression stimulates the feeling. After James, having an emotion is nothing but being aware of the physiological or bodily changes provoked by certain states of facts.¹⁵ So weeping is not a symptom of sadness, but a form of it. Being angry is to elevate the voice, to adopt an aggressive face, to scream, etc... At least in so far as the feelings find an object to be directed to. And here it comes the relevance of thinking of or looking at the object of the emotion. Both mechanisms of creation of feelings collaborate. To simulate the expression of a feeling may provoke a sentimental reaction once it finds an appropriate object.

While in artistic interpretation, let's say, of narrative, we are aware of the imaginative nature of our make-believed thoughts, and the corresponding attitudes towards the objects and characters of the fiction, in sentimentalization we create the feelings, and we take them to be true. In the involved partition of the self, the self-deception consists in the reflexive-self accepting without resistance the creations of the dramatized self. Why? Or, why so easily?

To finish I want to point to one reason of the uncritical position of the sentimental self. The sentimentalist indulges in the feelings because she obtains pleasure from it. I take the force of the satisfaction to come from the force of a fulfilled desire.

The desire to lead a good life is nowadays conceived to a big extent as to have an intense emotional life. And this desire has turned to be a cause of anxiety for many people, at least in the west. Mass art, and art in general, tourism, adventure, sports, television and global information provide the people with material enough when everyday life does not, but also excite its necessity to feel, to be aware of her own emotions. In relation to sentimental emotions it is the desire more or less diffuse to lead an intense emotional life what explains self-deception. The satisfaction of this desire could come from the genuine experience of an emotion, but also from the false believe or imagining that one is experiencing an emotion. What is wrong with the sentimental emotion is not the inadequacy of emotion and object, but that the emotion is vicarious of a desire with no connexion with its object. In order to satisfy the desire of emotional completeness the sentimentalist fabricates the feeling towards an object or event. The sentimental feeling is not about the object, but related to a hidden desire whose satisfaction consists in having that feeling. The desire is one very general of leading an intense emotional life: desire to be loved and love passionately, to be sensitive to big or small injustices, to enjoy adventures, be witnesses of disasters and catastrophes, to belong into an exquisite community, to be a revolutionary or a saint. To have the opportunity of experiencing such events give sense to life, and the emotions that accompany the experiences give the life the quality it has. The desire influences the development of attitudes to objects than do not deserve it, attitudes that are surrogates of emotions rooted in desires and attitudes harder to obtain and less subjected to will.

The object may well be worthy of the feeling, and that is not what makes the emotion sentimental, but that an appropriate desire is not in its origin. A sentimental taste arises not from a taste for beauty or for poetry, but for a desire to be cultivated. There could be nothing wrong with the object that satisfies both desires. Sentimentality is about the relation of the self with its mental conditions. Instead of an object making an impression on the person, it is the person who makes a voluntary move to consider the object a good occasion to have a good emotion. A previous desire, powerful as it can be, can control the move, but it is a move from the will. The sentimentalist fabricates an emotion on an object at her election, and she is able to do it because she knows the kind of objects that stimulates genuinely emotion, but the conditions of a genuine or deep emotion has not grown in her.

Sentimental reactions should not be more irrational than genuine emotions, but pathological in the sense that they are directed to one's inner condition pretending being directed to outer objects. A sentimentalist adopts the attitude known to be more adequate on the objects known to excite them: she seems to be indignant in front of injustice, and only secondarily precipitation or anxiety makes him exaggerate the expression of the feeling. And once the feeling has been expressed, it is not surprising that the object that served to excite it loses force, or disappears, since it does not belong to the true story of the sentimental emotion, whose real object is the vicarious feeling.

Genuine emotions are not so easily under the control of the will, anyway. Actually what we call sentimental feelings are fabricated, but the pathological tendency to indulge in fabricated feelings can overwhelm the person. One can only try, as James advised, to

educate her emotions, going against the expression of those feelings that seem suspicious of being to nice / intense to be true.

¹ Research Project The Expression of Subjectivity in the Arts (HUM2005-02533), funded by the Ministerio de Educacion y Ciencia (Spain).

² James, W., "What is an Emotion?" *Mind*, 9, 34, 1884, p.198.

³ Solomon, R. C., *In Defense of Sentimentality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁴ Savile, A., "Sentimentality", Neill, A. & Riedley, A., *Arguing about Art. Contemporary Philosophical Debates*, London, Routledge, 2002², p. 316.

⁵ *Idem*.

⁶ Tanner, M., "Sentimentality", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 77, 1976-7; reprinted in Bermúdez, J.L. y Gardner, S., *Art and Morality*, Londres, Routledge, 2003, p. 99.

⁷ Tanner says that jealousy is impossible to turn into a sentimental emotion, as it is not possible to invert its negative affective quality. Savile, on the contrary, finds that jealousy can be imagined as "self-gratifying". I think it is possible to make a difference between sentimental and genuine jealousy. For instance, in *La fugitive*, feeling jealous, Marcel found some security –he did not have- about his love for Albertine. His jealousy –no matter the anxiety they caused- were sentimental. (Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*).

⁸ Tanner, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

⁹ Tanner, *op. cit.*, p.104.

¹⁰ Tanner, *op. cit.*, p.105. Wilde's words are: "...a sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of emotion without paying for it." (Quoted in Tanner, *op. cit.*, p. 95.)

¹¹ See Kundera, M., *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, New York: Harper & Row, 1984, p.251.

¹² Tanner, *op. cit.*, p.100.

¹³ Goldie, P., *The Emotions*,

¹⁴ Gombrich, E. H., "Four Theories of Artistic Expression",

¹⁵ James, W., *op. cit.*, p. 190. Contrary to James thesis, I follow Wollheim on the distinction between emotions as dispositions, and feelings as mental states. On the interpretation of James seminal article see Wollheim, R., *On the Emotions*, London and New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999, pp. 118-128.