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Motivation and Emotion

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A truly subtle politician does not wholly reject the conjectures which one can derive from man's passions, for passions enter sometimes rather openly into, and almost always manage to affect unconsciously, the motives that propel the most important affairs of state.

– Cardinal de Retz

What moves people to action, especially political action? Almost anything. As Weber said of parties, his term for organized strategic efforts, “All the way from provision for subsistence to the patronage of art, there is no conceivable end which some political association has not at some time pursued. And from the protection of personal security to the administration of justice, there is none which all have recognized” (1978, 55).

I shall construe motives and motivation in their broadest, etymological, sense, as whatever moves humans to initiate or continue action. We are conscious of some motives but not others. Some well up from inside us, others arise outside us. Freud was the master of unconscious, internal motives, which he labeled drives. Rational-choice traditions derived from microeconomics feature internal but conscious motives. Sociological, poststructural, and other more “structural” traditions, in contrast, have focused on motivations that originate outside the individual, in moral, cognitive, linguistic, and other social systems. A great deal of political

analysis has sought ways of making unconscious system imperatives (“false consciousness”) into conscious ones (which can be resisted).

Through the ages, analysts have concentrated on the motivations that are explicit and widely shared. Glory used to motivate wars, money and other resources more local efforts—although in our cynical modern age money is seen as lurking behind all actions. Indeed in the modern world, motivations have become generally murky and unsettled. In cities and markets, we are never entirely certain what moves the stranger with whom we interact. As Luhmann (1987, 121-2) put it, “Traditional societies ascribe motives and do not require much exploration of ‘real’ motives – either in economic (household) or in political (public) affairs.” One result of modernizing processes is an “interest in rules and recipes [for personal interaction] in the seventeenth century and the rather desperate reliance on sentiment, taste, and natural morality in the early eighteenth century.” Motives become subject to speculation.

The concept of “interest,” so central to economics, was a solution to this uncertainty, intended to pinpoint objective motivations. You have a legal interest—an early usage—and a material interest in an outcome even if you are not aware of them. And of course, any rational actor would be aware of them. For the word implies an element of calculation, one reason it emerged as a third term between passion and reason in the seventeenth century, a constraint on the passions (Hirschman 1977). If you faithfully pursue your interests, others can predict your actions. In nineteenth-century Europe, homo economicus – a model of self-interest and materialism – proved a useful simplification for liberal reformers battling aristocratic privilege. After they won their battle, in the twentieth century, the language of interests came to represent the triumph of cynical materialism over other images of humans—which is exactly its limitation. It flatters our rationality but not our motives. Few of us are motivated primarily, much less exclusively, by money and possessions. The precision of having a single metric for human calculation and satisfactions (although even these two do not line up as well as economic models suggest) came at the cost of realism.

This shortcoming of economic theory left an opportunity for sociologists to offer additional motives. Weber, in demonstrating the importance of reputation and power, was partly reviving premodern traditions of glory and honor. Durkheim and Parsons focused on morality as the necessary underpinning of more self-interested actions. With them, motivation migrated from the individual to the social system—in the process becoming unconscious as well. Under the influence of the cognitive revolution, later sociologists continued down this road, turning to shared cultural understandings as the glue holding markets and other institutions together (e.g. Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Fligstein 2001). Like language, these cultural meanings can be made explicit but most of the time operate beneath full awareness as unspoken assumptions. Yet even the most ingrained routine can be brought to awareness—precisely what much social science aims to do.

Explicit interests and implicit morality or routine hardly exhaust human motivation. On the fringes of conscious choice and rationality lie a number of powerful urges, attachments, and habits which, although hard to model, are central to what we are as human beings. Debates have raged over whether these feelings can be raised to consciousness and controlled, whether they derail or aid rational decisionmaking (or did at some evolutionary point in the past), whether they are so idiosyncratic to individuals as to elude systematic analysis. All too often, one type of emotion is taken as the exemplar for all, distorting our ability to comprehend the many ways that our feelings attach us to the physical and social worlds around us.

At least since Plato human motivation has been framed as a battle between reason and the passions (Plato's preference appears even in the terms: there is one correct reason, but many unruly passions). Debates over whether humans were good or evil increasingly gave way in the modern world to controversies over our rationality. A major category of these have addressed motivation. How rational can we be if much of our activity lacks articulated goals? Traditions such as realism in international relations or rational-choice approaches derived from microeconomics emphasize explicit goals and means, in contrast to an even larger number of frameworks that downplay them. Freudians highlight repressed and unconscious motives. Many

cognitive psychologists see humans as trapped in their information-processing systems (Bem 1972; Nisbett and Ross 1980), roughly parallel to French poststructuralists who see language or discourse as a similar constraint (Lacan 1966; Foucault 1966; 1969). Sociologists have offered “practices” as a fundamental guide for action that is habitual and not quite conscious (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984, 6; cf. Turner 1994). In these latter views, systems of action move individuals.

All these traditions get at pieces of the truth about what drives and channels action: many things do. Giddens usefully distinguishes three levels of awareness: discursive consciousness, practical consciousness, and the unconscious. The first are things we can talk about explicitly, the second things that we know how to do without fully articulating them. We are moved by impulses originating at all three levels, often simultaneously. Emotions were traditionally seen as arising from the unconscious, especially in Freudian frameworks, but at least as often they are practical and sometimes even discursive. We can articulate our emotions, much of the time, and even be talked out of inappropriate ones.

To be sure, much human action follows “practical” routines which preclude discussion of explicit motives. Some may be of our own making, while others are offered to us by the large organizations that dominate life in modern society. But many sociologists, in particular, have adopted this as their model of action to such an extent that they lack a language for discussing purposive action (Campbell 1996). At the extreme, explicit motives are merely rhetorical justification we give for things we have already done (Mills 1940). It is no wonder the highly calculating image of rational-choice theory often seems the only alternative that recognizes intention (Smith 2003). The lack of visions that integrate system and intention only pushes those who reject rational-choice models further into the arms of tacit routine and practices.

Emotions are what make us care about the world around us, repelling or attracting us. (The depressed, incapable of many normal emotions, have a largely neutral feeling about the world—and are paralyzed as a result.) More than fifty years ago, Parsons and Shils (1951, 59), defining cathexis as “the various processes by which an actor invests an object with affective

significance,” argued that “it is through the cathexis of objects that energy or motivation, in the technical sense, enters the system of the orientation of action.” But this appears in a footnote, showing how little salience emotion actually had in Parsons’ action theory, much less his systems theory.

As the three basic components of culture, emotions, cognition, and morals (both principles and intuitions) operate in similar ways, with similar methodological challenges: they can be observed in individual or collective expressions, and individuals often diverge from “normal” beliefs and feelings. Much has been written—in an elaboration of the “boundedness” of rationality—about cognition in the form of memory, decision heuristics, and so on, as well as about morality. Only in the last few years have emotions been resurrected as a serious analytic tool for understanding politics (Jasper 1997; Holst-Warhaft 2000; Goodwin et al. 2001). They are the subject of this essay, especially since in addition to their own driving force they also permeate cognition and morality. Indeed, in most cases thinking and feeling are inextricably entwined.

To discourage conceptual overextension—a risk for all new tools—I distinguish several different categories of feelings that have often been lumped together. They typically operate by different chemical and neurological pathways, persist for different lengths of time, and affect action in different ways. Discussions of emotions in politics will remain a muddle if we pretend they are one large homogeneous category.

I. Urges

Certain impulses well up from our bodies with such force that they overpower our conscious intentions, propelling us to act. Elster (1999b, 2), calling these “strong feelings,” includes chemical addictions as well as “hunger, thirst, and sexual desire; urges to urinate, defecate, or sleep; as well as organic disturbances such as pain, fatigue, vertigo, and nausea.” These pressing

urges are relatively independent of culture and cognition. We tend to ignore other possible goals until we have satisfied the urge.

At one time, most emotions were viewed on this model, as “passions” that propel us without any thought or resistance, as events that happen to us in contrast to willed choice and action, derailing our reason. But overpowering urges are a small subset of human emotion, which perhaps should not even be dignified with that rubric. What is more, such urges come in two forms. One kind, centered on deprivation, focus our attention in such an immediate way that they rarely influence political action—except they suggest how deprivation can crowd out political concerns. Survival needs usually—but not always—crowd out other motivations (the bottom of Maslow’s [1954] famous hierarchy). But the other kind are urges that can be satisfied in multiple ways, or via multiple pathways. Immediate lust or addiction may crowd out other concerns, but I may take elaborate steps to get to those final moments of pleasure. Indeed, impressing potential lovers is a central human motivation. Like Scarlett O’Hara, we work to avoid the pain of hunger or fatigue.

A lingering doubt remains: cannot any emotion, felt strongly enough, overpower us in this way? Anger can, and it is the usual exemplar given of an irrational passion (see Harris 2001 on ancient efforts to control it in various social relations). But most forms of anger do not lead us astray, into actions we later regret. Plus, most emotions do not have this power at all. In the sections that follow, I hope to show why affective allegiances, moods, and moral emotions are compatible with reasoning.

II. Reflexes

One step up from urges are what Griffiths (1997) calls “reflex emotions.” These are quick to appear and quick to subside. Anger, fear, joy, sadness, disgust, and surprise may be universal and hardwired into us, operating rapidly through the hypothalamus and amygdala rather than

through parts of the cortex that evolved later (Damasio 1994, chap. 7). Neurology plays a big part in these reflexes, but a significant role still remains for culture, which is necessary to explain exactly what disgusts or frightens us, as well as how we express reflex emotions.

The “affect program” theory is especially suited to reflex emotions. Ekman (1972, 1980), its main proponent, uses the term program for the neurally encoded responses which he says constitute emotions, including facial expressions, body movements such as flinching, vocal changes, shifts in the endocrine system and subsequent hormonal changes, and other modifications of the nervous system. Such packages are automatic, coordinated, complex, and common across cultures. To his original six, he later added contempt (Ekman and Friesen 1971). Others would add shame, evidence of which can be seen in nonhuman primates. Ekman was inspired by Charles Darwin (1872/1965), who wrote a compelling book on the parallels in the emotions of humans and other species.

The main evidence for affect program theory comes from photographs of the human face. If you take photos in one culture of people expressing these basic emotional reactions, people of other cultures can immediately identify the emotions expressed. One apparent exception was that Japanese students did not express the negative emotions despite the proper stimuli. But it was discovered that, when authority figures were not present, they displayed the same expressions as people from other cultures. What is more, when videotapes were slowed down, very brief expressions could be detected even when the authority figures were present, covered immediately by a bland smile (Ekman 1972).

By contrasting the immediate context with broader ones, Frank (1988) and others have suggested a number of advantages that reflex emotions (and other types) confer on strategic actors. Momentary anger may lead to actions later regretted, but a reputation for angry reactions may have wider advantages, encouraging compliance from others. Loyalty, contempt, disgust, and love can also be seen as helping humans keep their commitments. Alliances may be built on reflex emotions as well as on affects (Frank does not distinguish the two). Emotions are partly signals of character.

Nonetheless, reflex emotions seem to play a limited role in politics and conflict. Mostly, we strive to elicit adverse reflexes in opponents. Brave protestors may hope to enrage a police officer so that he lashes out in front of cameras. Forces of order may try to paralyze protestors through fear (Goodwin and Pfaff 2001). But as we shall see, other forms of anger and fear, more abiding than these sudden reflexes, are more central to politics.

III. Affective Allegiances

Affects are another type of emotion, more stable and more tied to cognition. They are often little more than positive or negative clusters of feelings, mere attraction or repulsion. Love and hate are the obvious ones, but trust, respect, resentment, and some abiding kinds of fear are also examples. The opposite of reflex responses, affects are relatively enduring orientations to the social and physical worlds. They provide the goals of many of our purposive actions and projects.

In “affect control theory,” Heise (1979) and others have shown the importance of affective allegiances in a variety of social processes and socially constructed definitions, especially roles and identities (Smith-Lovin and Heise 1988; MacKinnon 1994). We try to maintain our affective sense of the world, a cognitive as well as emotional orientation. We interpret what happens to us through pre-existing expectations about types of people summed up in roles and identities and situations, specifically we try to confirm our expectations about how good, strong, and active people are (labeled evaluation, potency, and agency). Shocks to our expectations require a great deal of work, and sometimes even a rearrangement of those expectations. Out of such adjustments arise shared cultural meanings (Ridgeway et al. 1998).

In addition to these interpretive goals of confirming our view of the world, affects also provide something close to basic values. Solidarity with various collectives—a nation, organization, family, and so on—consists of affective loyalties surrounded by considerable

cognitive reinforcement and interpretation. (Although the literature on collective identity slights its emotional underpinnings: Jasper 1998; Polletta and Jasper 2001.) Trust, for instance, arises out of the interaction between expectations and experience with groups and individuals (Hardin 1993). These positive affects—along with negative ones toward outsiders, enemies, and other threats—motivate or allow much political action. The nationalist banner under which so many Europeans clamored for and marched off to war, especially until 1945, was a complex cluster of positive and negative affects (Berezin 1997).

Affects are not easily changed. We may fall out of love with someone, become disenchanted with our team (although more often with its current leaders), or come to modify our hatred and suspicion of foreigners. Often, we change our affects through some kind of moral shock that forces us to reinterpret our experiences, as we'll see below.

Tightly interwoven with our cognitions, our affects influence how we process information, especially about political leaders (Ottati and Wyer 1993). Most obviously, we remember positive information about (and associate positive character traits with) those leaders whom we like, and negative ones about those we dislike. Negative information tends to be noticed and remembered more than positive, however, so that we have to work harder to maintain positive sentiment (Kinder 1978; 1986). Negative information especially affects “short-term mobilization,” but its influence fades over time (Taylor 1991; McGraw et al. 1996). Because so much politics is about group solidarities (Schmitt 1932/1976), affects are crucial motivations.

IV. Moods

Moods are another category, typically lasting longer than reflex emotions but not as long as affects (although moods can sometimes be almost permanent, something like aspects of temperament). We usually carry moods with us from one social setting to another, perhaps

because of the biochemical states associated with them (one reason that drugs affect them and one reason individuals differ temperamentally). The obvious contrast is between positive and negative moods, which have been shown to affect judgments (Schwarz and Clore 1983, 1988; Ottati et al. 1989). Moods may also affect our propensity to feel and exhibit other emotions, as in the case of a depressed person inclined to sadness or irritation. (Just as reflex emotions may leave us in a certain mood even after the original triggering emotions fade.) Moods filter our intentions and actions, strengthening or dissolving them, changing their tone or seriousness. If other emotions give our actions direction, moods affect their pace (Geertz 1973, 97).

I suspect that esthetic emotions—those brought on by art—are moods, as we “try on” feelings such as sadness or elation. Nostalgia, often found in artistic appreciation, may be a kind of wistful mood. (In addition to the moods aroused by art through our empathy with characters portrayed or the mysterious influence of music, we also may feel a kind of wonder or awe at the beauty of the work as art—a cognitive accomplishment that is perhaps close to the complex moral emotions described below, and which is useful for understanding how political rhetoric works.)

The example of nostalgia suggests that cultures can embrace certain moods and discourage others. There can be “official” moods, fostered by government, intellectuals, and mass media. Weber believed that ideologies of predestination fostered anxiety. Moods of despair appear frequently, often through the interpretation of economic and political trends (as downward). Widespread fatalism, resignation, and cynicism work against political action, since they entail a loss of a sense of agency. Political efforts will avail little. Optimism and pessimism are possibly moods, with substantial effects on our sense of agency and visions of potential social change. Anxiety, too, is likely to affect the ways we scan the world for dangers.

Certain social settings are designed to affect participants’ moods. As crowd theories waned after the 1960s, it was unfashionable to refer to Durkheim’s collective effervescence and other processes that gave emotional energy to groups. Nonetheless the joys of crowds (Lofland 1985) have been analyzed, along with the effects of collective marching, dancing, and singing (McNeill 1995). Collins (2001) has recast the emotions of participation as an interaction ritual in

which emotional attention is a major reward. (These mobilizing moods have their opposite in efforts to intimidate and paralyze, to demobilize people: Goodwin and Pfaff 2001.)

A great deal of political mobilization appeals to people's fears and anxieties, especially in what have been labeled "moral panics" (Cohen 1972). One tradition views these anxieties as pre-existing moods, for which political leaders find scapegoats (Lipset 1960; Lipset and Raab 1978). Critics, skeptical of pre-existing anxieties, argue that these leaders sustain and transform reflex fears into more cognitive analyses and affects, including the demonization of opponents (Rieder 1985; Edsall and Edsall 1991). Moral shocks are only the beginning. In some cases the media amplify existing moods, in others they seem to create them. If nothing else protest leaders and elected officials take advantage of what they perceive to be citizens' moods (Goodin 1988).

V. Moral Sentiments

In my final category are complex moral emotions, which require considerable cognitive processing. These include shame and pride, but also compassion, outrage, and more complex forms of disgust, fear, or anger (which are cognitively processed more than the reflex forms: ongoing fear of a nuclear plant has little in common with sudden fright at a lunging shadow).¹ Our anger may begin as a reflex, but sustaining it requires an admixture of hateful affect or moral indignation (Katz 1999). Elster (1999a) has written interestingly about these, especially about humans' ability to have emotions about their emotions. We are ashamed of our anger or fear, say. We monitor our actions, thoughts, and even feelings, in the kind of reflexivity dear to social constructionists.

Post-Kantian theorists distinguish too sharply between morals and emotions, portraying the former as an austere cognitive judgment which mysteriously moves us. Older theorists, including the French "moralists" who took this idea to its cynical extreme, recognized that we only obey moral precepts because of the accompanying emotional pleasures. As Spinoza (1989,

277) put it, “Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself; neither do we rejoice therein, because we control our lusts, but contrariwise, because we rejoice therein, we are able to control our lusts.” Doing the right thing feels good directly; it is not the side effect of other actions. When we do the right thing, it is because we are driven by emotions—not, as Kant would have it, out of a spare recognition of duty.

We do not follow the moral rules of our society automatically, as Parsons’ notion of values, into which we are socialized, also seemed to have it. We either obey moral rules because we fear sanctions if we do not, or because it feels good to do the right thing—Spinoza’s “rejoicing.” The Kantian “deontological” tradition, in which we do what we believe is right simply because of that belief, has discouraged attention to the many satisfactions that accompany this kind of action. We can be proud, sometimes smugly or invidiously so, comparing ourselves to those less righteous. We may feel relieved to have overcome temptations to act differently. We may get a charge from being agents rather than victims. We get these feelings especially when we obey explicit moral rules recognized by those around us, but also sometimes when we follow vague moral intuitions. And some are especially pleased to follow their own moral rules in the face of opposition. Following moral norms when we have little choice in the matter doesn’t have the same satisfactions (although it has others) as when we choose to obey them.

Outrage over unfairness has even begun to make inroads into game theory, as experiments show that people are willing to pay a great deal to remedy perceived injustices. The Ultimatum game is a simple way to measure the price of fairness. One player proposes how to divide up a sum of money provided by experimenters, and the second player can either accept or reject the proposal. If the deal is rejected, neither player gets anything. If responders were out to maximize their gains, they would accept any offer. Most proposers offer half or nearly half (40 percent on average)—already showing some concern for fairness—and responders tend to reject offers of less than twenty percent. The amount they reject shows the price they put on a fair distribution. Countless variations have uncovered variables that affect preferences for fairness, including cultural background, how the interaction is labeled (inequalities are tolerated when the

game is labeled a market exchange), how much discretion is attributed to proposers (when they do not choose the amounts they offer, they are not punished for unfair offers), and the number of proposers and responders. Interestingly, players punish unfairness to themselves more than unfairness to others, suggesting that emotions such as anger and vengeance are at work more than abstract norms of fairness. (Camerer [2003 chap. 2] summarizes this literature.) Because it addresses distributional issues like these, fairness is one of the few moral topics that can be inserted into games with monetary payoffs—but there are many other sources of outrage.

Moral emotions are necessarily social, and they are affected by one's place in social hierarchies. As Kemper (1978, 2001) especially has argued, changes in status and power—of our own and others'—frequently trigger emotions. Increases in our power relative to others (and relative to our expectations) make us feel secure and safe, decreases anxious or fearful (although we may also feel guilty if we think the increase is undeserved). Increases in our status, similarly, lead to emotions such as pride or contentment, decreases to shame, disappointment, or depression. Kemper's scheme is further complicated by factors such as whether we are dealing with someone above or below us in some hierarchy, by whether we were the agents who caused the changes, by the perceived permanence of the changes, and so forth.

Moral emotions are the “hot cognitions,” as Gamson called them, which motivate so much protest. Emotions that follow from a sense of threat—anger, indignation, condemnation, hate—are common motivations to engage in politics and other strategic projects—a decision that is otherwise rather daunting. (To be sure, there is also a path that leads to fear and paralysis, often via moods of resignation or cynicism.) When the world proves to be different and more threatening than thought, “moral shocks” frequently lead to action, especially if blame can be attached to human agents, villains and victims and heroes identified, and the infrastructure for action created or commandeered (Jasper 1997). Moral emotions are the core of political rhetoric.

The moral emotions are especially important when we try to build from micromotives to broader political systems. Kemper shows how our place in hierarchies conditions the emotions we feel, and many emotions arise out of structured strategic interactions in a number of

institutional arenas. Many of our moral emotions arise out of our reactions to and beliefs about the social systems in which we live, especially outrage, indignation, and other feelings tied to our sense of justice. (Fairness, in contrast, has more to do with our dealings with other individuals, not our sense of the system.) Finally, many aspects of our institutions are designed to curb the social effects of individual emotions, for example anger (Harris 2001), love (Goodwin 1997), and disgust (Nussbaum 2004).

Moral emotions can involve evaluations of one's own or someone else's behavior, character, or possession of something valued. We feel guilt over one of our actions, but shame over our general character. We feel contempt for those we believe are morally inferior. We feel malice over someone else's undeserved misfortune, gloating over their deserved misfortune. This class of emotions frequently involve our sense of how good and bad eventualities should be distributed, clearly a moral sensibility. Scheff (1990, 1994) has suggested a range of effects that shame can have on political and strategic action at both the individual and collective levels.

Morality consists of intuitions as well as principles, and these are even closer to emotions. We often feel moral shock, disgust, or indignation faster than we can articulate our reasons—if we can articulate them at all. Our cognitive, emotional, and moral processes are in many cases inextricable.

Perhaps Hemingway best expressed the difference between moral and reflex emotions when he said, “What is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after.” Many reflex emotions lead us into actions that feel right (or inevitable) at the moment, but later leave us with regret. Moral emotions leave us with pride and satisfaction.

VI. Decisions

Most social life operates through routines, familiar activities about which we rarely stop to think. But politics is one arena where we frequently consider and articulate our goals and choose means

to attain them. For whom shall we vote? Shall we join the protest march today? Volunteer to work for the trade union? There are a number of choice points, which in turn influence our daily routines. Sometimes our routines themselves break down, and we are forced to make decisions about new ones.

The motivations that shape our goals and choices are never all entirely conscious. If nothing else, there are too many of them to juggle in our heads. A few are, as Freudians would say, deeply repressed and unconscious. Far more, I suspect, reside in Giddens' practical consciousness and can be brought to awareness when we are puzzled, thwarted, or challenged to give our reasons. Finally, a fair number are explicit. We may know we're angry, and know what we're angry about.

When political researchers have made micromotives central – in the behaviorist revolution of the 1950s or more recently in game theory² – they have typically combined this emphasis with empiricist methodological prescriptions and aspirations to universal theories. Neither is necessary. We can and must carve out a thoroughly cultural and interpretive understanding of individual motives, emotions, meanings, and choices (this is not incompatible with recognition of neurological pathways). There is no reason to proceed with a positivist psychology that leaves out most of what we want to understand. If we wish to understand the motivations of political action, we must be prepared to grapple with an extremely diverse lot. Reductionism will only mislead us.

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Notes

¹Thomas Scheff believes that shame is a reflex emotion (personal communication), a recategorization I am willing to entertain based on evidence that other primates demonstrate shame behavior such as staring down. This may be a form of submission and acknowledgment of a lower place in the pecking order. In humans shame may have more complex moral sources built upon this simple basis. Guilt, at any rate, seems to necessarily entail complex moral and cognitive judgments.

² On the behavioralist revolution see: Easton 1953; Truman 1955; Eulau 1963. On game theory see: Ordeshook 1986; Baird, Gertner and Picker 1994; Morrow 1994.