

Passion, Death, and Spirituality

Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures

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Editors

Passion, Death, and Spirituality

The Philosophy of Robert C. Solomon

 Springer

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Introduction

Kathleen M. Higgins

The philosophy of Robert C. Solomon (“Bob” as we will call him in this book) is wide-ranging. As the table of contents of this book suggests, he made contributions to the philosophy of the emotions, ethics, aesthetics, comparative philosophy, the history of Western philosophy, and the philosophy of religion. His participation in so many different fields might suggest the scattered attention of a dilettante. But this is to miss the core commitments that motivated his work across its many manifestations.

In the introduction of his book *From Hegel to Existentialism*, Bob calls himself an existentialist. For Bob “existentialism” did not mean to stay within a narrow tradition. Instead, he was concerned to traverse all things human, by multiplying perspectives on all the things he thought were important in a well-lived life. His description of himself as an existentialist is a useful summary of this philosophical outlook. The term points to the coherent vision that integrated Bob’s philosophical endeavors, a vision that is one with his cosmopolitan approach to being a human being in the world.

The essays in this volume address different facets of the prism that is Bob’s work. They are grouped thematically, but the reader will observe that some themes recur across thematic groupings, a pattern that reflects Bob’s consistent concerns across the range of topics he addressed. In particular, Bob’s interest in emotion and its role in human life permeates his thought on all topics. Accordingly, emotion is central to all of the contents of this volume. Nevertheless, the first of our thematic groups includes essays that address Bob’s groundbreaking contribution to the philosophy of the emotions.

Bob’s book *The Passions*, which appeared in 1976, argued that contrary to the view that has dominated much of Western philosophical history, emotions are intelligent. Popular culture by now has embraced this idea; but in 1976 it was radical. *The Passions* in effect launched the contemporary field of the philosophy of the emotions. Over the next several decades, Bob’s view that emotion involves

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cognitive judgment became the dominant view. Subsequently, however, in light of new evidence about the biological aspects of emotion, a new generation of critics reasserted a version of the view that Bob had challenged, the non-cognitive interpretation of emotions as feelings, which had been defended by William James.

Jesse Prinz represents this younger generation. In “Sensational Judgmentalism: Reconciling Solomon and James,” he articulates the issues in the debate over cognitivism in emotion. As his title suggests, Prinz contends that one can endorse James’s position that emotions are essentially bodily feelings while still accepting key features of Bob’s position, specifically the views that emotions involve judgments, have intentional objects, can occur in the absence of feelings, and amount to strategies. Ultimately, according to Prinz, Bob’s version of cognitivism and Prinz’s version of non-cognitivism are not as far apart as they superficially seem to be.

Bob’s views on emotion and his brand of existentialism are tightly linked, as is particularly evident in one of Bob’s more controversial claims, the idea that we have a remarkable degree of choice regarding emotions. Ronald de Sousa and David Sherman both consider this existentialist side of Bob’s account of emotion. In “Biology and Existentialism,” de Sousa discusses the apparent contradiction between Bob’s contention that emotions are largely voluntary and a biological view of humanity. de Sousa argues that properly understood, these views are not in conflict; Bob’s existentialist view about our freedom to choose emotion is consistent with the view that our genes shape our goals to a considerable extent.

David Sherman takes a critical stance toward Bob’s position that emotions are significantly voluntary. Describing the transformation of Bob’s specific position over time, he contends that Bob rightly came to recognize that he had not provided an account of the grounds for one’s choices (including those involving emotions), and that in his later writings he laid greater stress on the way in which social and cultural factors mediate the choices one makes in constructing a self. Sherman argues, however, that a difficulty with this position is that it does not indicate how one gains sufficient distance from one’s culture to be able to criticize its practices. He concludes that one of Bob’s aims in emphasizing the voluntary character of emotion was admonitional: Bob sought to remind us that we have real choices and that we are able to subject social practices to critique and creative revision.

Bob took other controversial stances on emotion in addition to his cognitivism and his view that emotions are voluntary. One of these was his contention that emotions cannot be neatly classified by valence, i.e. as intrinsically “positive” or “negative.” These classifications do not consider the complex roles that emotions play in our experience, Bob argued. An emotion that is not pleasant to experience, for example, may be valuable in sorting through one’s circumstances or in motivating one to constructive action. Such an emotion, he claimed, should not be called “negative” without qualification.

Arindam Chakrabarti’s “A Critique of Pure Revenge” and Bob’s response concern a politically problematic “negative” emotion, the emotion of vindictiveness, the desire for revenge. Bob held that despite its “nasty” character, the desire for revenge should be acknowledged as basic to our motivational nature. He argues that it is an essential aspect of our way of relating morally to the world, and that it plays a role

even in one of our apparently noblest emotions, the desire for justice. Chakrabarti, by contrast, contends that the desire for revenge should never be satisfied, summarizing his view as, “An examined revenge is never worth taking.” The essays on revenge included in this volume are those presented in quite literally the last public debate in which Bob participated. Aptly, they are presented here without resolution, as Bob’s philosophical work continues to provoke further discussion.

If vindictiveness is on the harsh extreme of the emotional range, another case Bob discussed, sentimentality, is on the other. Sentimentality is often viewed as both a moral and an aesthetic defect, but Bob argued that it was not necessarily either one. Jenefer Robinson, one of Bob’s long-term interlocutors in both aesthetics and the philosophy of emotions, challenges these views. While she and Bob agree that realistic literature can help to train the moral sensibilities of the reader, Robinson contends that sentimentality in literature does not sufficiently encourage a reflective response on the part of the reader. Bob, by contrast, finds value in sentimental literature, claiming that it exercises our sympathies without exhausting them, leaving us well equipped for applying them in everyday contexts.

Robinson’s consideration of the development of moral sensibilities segues well into the group of essays dealing with Bob’s contributions in ethics. The first two essays in this section deal with Bob’s applied work on ethics in business. Patricia Werhane and David Bevan offer an appreciative account of Bob’s Aristotelian approach to business ethics, which emphasizes the importance of cultivating virtue and recognizing one’s participation in a larger community. Werhane and Bevan see Bob’s views on emotion—in particular his cognitivism and his view that we have some control over our emotions—as of a piece with his Aristotelian emphasis on virtue. Developing virtue involves altering habits, and Werhane and Bevan emphasize cognitive habits, or mindsets, that prevail within business. Bob’s defense of an Aristotelian model of commerce, they argue, in and of itself effectively persuades readers to transform their perspective on business. This model does not oppose the ideal of profitability in business, but repositions it as part of a more encompassing aim, that of the flourishing human life.

Robert Audi also considers Bob’s Aristotelian perspective on business ethics. In “Virtues, Styles, and Rules in Business Ethics: Reflections on the Contributions of Robert C. Solomon,” Audi considers the virtue ethical cast of Bob’s approach. Drawing attention to some of the virtues that Bob sees as essential to good practice in business, and praising Bob’s conception of diverse “ethical styles” that various individuals exemplify, Audi takes up the question of whether virtue ethics offers sufficient guidance for action. Audi submits that it does not, but he suggests that Bob might see the contrast between virtue ethics and theories that focus on right actions as a false dichotomy. Audi concurs with Bob in embracing Aristotle’s point that we should optimally cultivate character so that doing the right thing comes to seem natural.

While Audi emphasizes the relationship of Bob’s business ethics to Aristotelian theory, Christine Swanton brings out Bob’s connection to Nietzsche in his formulation of a virtue ethical model. In “Robert Solomon’s Aristotelian Nietzsche,” she observes that Bob saw Nietzsche as much more closely related to Aristotle than

Nietzsche saw himself. Swanton elaborates a Nietzschean virtue ethics based on this Aristotelian reading of Nietzsche. She shares Bob's view that while Nietzsche tended to see some virtues as optimal for everyone, he relativized some virtues to particular types of individuals. However, she disagrees with Bob on the relevance of will to power for Nietzschean ethics, on the importance of the passionate, "overflowing" virtues in Nietzsche's account, and on whether the virtues of the herd constitute real virtues for Nietzsche.

Kelly Oliver considers Bob's ethical theory from the standpoint of a particular pair of emotions that he considered in depth, grief and gratitude. She focuses on Bob's view that grief is a continuation of love and his contention that we produce memorials as means for expressing that love. She raises the issue of how we relate to the deaths of those whom we do not know and never met, and who may be on the other side of the world. Do we have an obligation to mourn for them? Oliver shows that Bob's views on such personal emotions as grief and gratitude can have important political implications.

Bob took up the idea that we should look beyond our immediate neighborhood, both emotionally and theoretically, in his consideration of non-Western philosophy. He rejected arbitrary intradisciplinary distinctions that tend to dichotomize between the West and the rest, and he recognized how many of the issues that arise within the Western tradition are also dealt with elsewhere. To come up with a more enriched perspective on these issues, he did not hesitate to explore the philosophical traditions of the non-Western world. Accordingly, unlike many American philosophers, he proselytized on behalf of comparative philosophy, the focus of our third group of essays. The theme of grief, interestingly, is the focus of several authors in this group, which relate to Oliver's essay in this respect as well as in their insistence that we transcend philosophical parochialism.

In "Grief and the Mnemonics of Places: a Thank You Note," Janet McCracken contemplates the role that commemorations play in honoring the dead. She compares the Zoroastrian tradition's approach to funerary rites with those of the ancient Greeks. She suggests that the Greeks performed their rites—including the performance of funerary games—with the aim of offering a place for remembering the dead. The Zoroastrians, by contrast, did not inter the bodies of their dead; instead, they honored the deceased by having a dog look upon the corpse, which was supposed to free the soul of the deceased from the place at which death occurred. McCracken sees this Zoroastrian ritual as highly symbolic, drawing on dogs' loyalty to their human companions and their ability to witness and move on. Nevertheless, she suggests that the impulses behind both kinds of rituals are evident in the responses of those who mourn Bob.

Prompted by loss in his personal life, Purushottama Bilimoria explores the gap between philosophical accounts of grief and the powerful feelings it involves. He acknowledges Bob as an interlocutor, but he is dissatisfied with the approaches to grief taken in the philosophical literature, including Bob's. In particular, Bilimoria rejects any philosophical theory that would equate grief with a propositional judgment. While he acknowledges that Bob increasingly moved away from extreme cognitivism and emphasized the importance of affect and the phenomenology of

emotion, Bilimoria nevertheless thinks that Bob's theory under-emphasizes the feeling dimension of grief. He explores the ways that the practices and literature from various cultures deal with the painful and disruptive feelings involved in grief.

Bilimoria also challenges one of Bob's more theoretical claims about grief, the suggestion that in some circumstances it is not only appropriate, but morally obligatory. While it may indeed be appropriate, Bilimoria argues, to grieve solely because it is morally mandated would be highly undesirable; and the actual experience involves more improvisational responses than any "required" mourning behavior. Nevertheless, he concludes that theoretical accounts are still called for, and he encourages further philosophical work on the subject.

Like Bilimoria, Padmasiri de Silva engages with Bob's perspective on grief. In his essay, "The Lost Art of Sadness," he situates the consideration of grief within a broader discussion of sadness. He credits Bob as an influence on his thinking about emotion, particularly about "the rhythms of our emotional life." de Silva considers these rhythms in connection with the Buddhist practice of mindfulness, and he discusses the approach to sadness taken by the mindfulness-based emotion focused therapy to which he has devoted himself as a practicing clinician for many years. He utilizes this therapeutic perspective as a basis for disputing the common view within the psychiatric community that sadness amounts to a mental disorder. Instead, de Silva argues, sadness is part of the human condition that can, in its own way, enrich one's life.

Shifting to a consideration of emotion in the thick of political activity, Henry Rosemont draws on Bob's emphasis on the importance of emotion to discussions of justice and analyses the truth and reconciliation commissions that have been used in many nations in efforts to recover from violence between ethnic, racial, and religious subgroups within their populations. Rosemont observes that the goals of such commissions—to set the record straight about who has victimized whom and to effect reconciliation—have been inconsistent. Truth and reconciliation commissions will be hindered in achieving reconciliation, he argues, so long as they are premised on the notion of society as constructed of free, autonomous individuals. Rosemont commends Bob's emphasis on the need to transform our sense of the self if we are to properly understand justice. He sees Bob's perspective as bearing some resemblance to the Confucian tradition, which understands human beings as essentially related to each other. By comparison with models that consider society the aggregation of autonomous individuals, a relational approach would serve as a better theoretical basis for structuring the work of truth and reconciliation commissions so that they actually achieve reconciliation.

The relational emphasis of Bob's work is evident throughout the final grouping of essays, which conjoins some of Bob's work in the history of philosophy with his relatively late writings on spirituality. These essays, despite their various topics, all accentuate the stress Bob placed on the importance of recognizing one's individual life in the context of something much larger than oneself.

Shari Neller Starrett draws attention to the theme of human interconnectedness in Bob's innovative interpretation of Hegel. She contends that his many startling themes cohere around a view of Hegel's dialectic as a metaphor, not a method.

The upshot of Bob's interpretation is that Hegel's philosophy is more art than science and the dialectic more about growth and development in experience than about logical relations. Starrett draws attention to Bob's controversial views that Hegel did not posit the Absolute as literally attainable and that the Hegelian Spirit, our collective presence in the world, never reaches a final goal. In keeping with this idea, Starrett suggests, we can see Bob's spirit as continuing beyond his physical death, for it is part of Spirit writ large.

Richard Schacht also takes up Bob's relationship to Hegel and his understanding of Hegel's notion of *Geist*, the term usually translated as "Spirit." Schacht points out that the term *Geist* in German is much richer than "spirit" or "mind" (alternative translations) are in English, and he urges us to leave the term untranslated. He concurs with Bob that Hegel's *Geist* is not an otherworldly concept, and like Bob, he is unwilling to dispense with the idea, as many contemporary philosophers are happy to do. Schacht relates the conception of *Geist* to Bob's conception of a naturalized spirituality, developed in his book *Spirituality for the Sceptic*. Although Schacht doubts that the many features of spiritual life that Bob indicates are genuinely necessary for spirituality, he views Bob's account as a welcome invitation to think further about spirituality, spirit, and *Geist* in naturalistic terms.

Markus Weidler considers Bob's contention that gratitude is essential to spirituality, whether or not there is really any God or gods to be thanked. Weidler interprets this stance in light of Bob's criticism of what he called "death fetishism," a delusory view that sees death as endowing one's life with its true significance. Weidler analyzes fanaticism as a manifestation of death fetishism, for fanaticism seeks to manifest devotion so extreme that one is willing to die for one's cause. The fanatic is so uncompromising in his insistence on his own dogma that he violates his own highest values, even imposing his demands on his god(s). Bob's proposal of gratitude without dogma, even about that gratitude's possible recipient, according to Weidler, offers a salutary spiritual alternative to fanaticism, which from time to time represents a dangerous temptation to all of us.

John Bishop considers Bob's idea of spirituality in relation to revisionary theism that rejects the notion of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-benevolent God ("the omniGod" in Bishop's parlance) and seeks an alternative conception of God. Bishop sees a certain commonality between Bob's naturalized spirituality and the kind of revisionary theism he embraces, particularly with respect to the question of how appropriate it is to commit oneself to a certain spiritual vision of reality in the absence of compelling evidence. Bob analyzes spirituality in terms of central spiritual passions, including reverence, love, gratitude, and trust, all of which involve taking the world to be fundamentally deserving of such attitudes despite the fact that we lack evidence that this belief is justified. Bishop argues that both the attitudes entailed by the spiritual passions and belief in a God as conceived by revisionary theism can be defended as epistemically responsible. He also concludes that Bob's account of spirituality is rooted in similar motivations to those of the revisionary theist, for both seek a spiritually optimistic outlook toward the world without a controlling deity who runs things.

In the concluding essay, “Bob on Meaning in Life and Death,” Kathleen Higgins picks up on Bob’s spirit of optimism in the face of death, despite his skepticism about personal experience beyond it. Appropriately, given the character of his philosophy, Bob’s solution to the problem of finding meaning in life in the face of death is emotional as well as philosophical. His claims that spirituality is “the thoughtful love of life” and that gratitude is the best response to tragedy summarize his life as well as his philosophy.

