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Proverbs

William Ian Miller



ALCHEMIES OF THE MIND: RATIONALITY AND THE EMOTIONS

by Jon Elster.

Cambridge, 450 pp., £14.95, March 1999, 0 521 64487 9

Suppose that 16 years ago you had written not one but two superlative books. Would you suffer from anxiety of influence with regard to early versions of yourself, as if, to twist Harold Bloom, your early self now played an insurmountably glorious Milton to your later romantic phases? Did Shakespeare say to himself: ‘No way I can beat Hamlet, so why write again?’ Jon Elster wrote two gems in the 1970s and 1980s, *Ulysses and the Sirens* and *Sour Grapes*. Not that they have deterred him from publishing at a stupendous rate since, though he has never recaptured that earlier refulgence. In *Alchemies of the Mind*, he explicitly means to revisit *Sour Grapes*, to add emotions to the more unabashed rational-choice style of the earlier work. What he gains in nuance he loses in freshness and surprise, but not all that much. If *Sour Grapes* was his *Hamlet*, *Alchemies* is his *Cymbeline*; the book is too long, but it gives much pleasure and instruction.

Alchemies is a collection of five substantial essays, almost five books in one. All but the first feature the role the emotions play in behaviour and mental life, and all of them develop a multitude of related themes rather than hammer home a single thesis. The essays delve into the perversities of human motivation and desire – wishful thinking, counter-wishful thinking (‘if I bury the treasure here someone is sure to discover it’), sour grapes, forbidden fruit, the grass is greener – especially as they play havoc with rationality. One even detects a certain grim delight (or am I projecting?) that experimental psychology has finally proved what we already suspected: that the depressed see the world as it really is; self-esteem is mostly delusional. Truth and happiness are like pygmies and cranes, incessantly at war with each other.

Unusual for a theorist of any stripe these days, Elster has read books, especially by those writers whose most telling virtue is their eye for human foolishness and knavery. Nothing as strong as Swift, but he is addicted to those exposers of knavery, La Rochefoucauld and Stendhal, and those exposers of foolishness, Jane Austen and Montaigne; all have major speaking parts in Elster’s play. In fact, his usual audience of economists, political scientists and psychologists are liable to take exception to his overt pleas for belletrism. In disciplines that frown on any citation that is older than a decade, Montaigne stands no better chance than Erving Goffman. Wheels are reinvented with astounding regularity – if we’re lucky; just as often we lose the skills and talents to reinvent them or reinvent them looking more like triangles and squares.

Elster's first essay – 'A Plea for Mechanisms' – concedes, given the perversities and complexities of human motivation, the impossibility of lawlike generalisations in the social sciences and instead argues for a more modest means of explaining human behaviour short of admitting total defeat by settling for 'mere description'. I've never understood what this bugbear of 'mere description' is. If only a few illustrious theorists in the social sciences and especially the humanities would go in for it a little more, for clarity's sake or to prove to us that they actually know something before they begin to theorise.

Elster tries to construct a middle position which history, some anthropology and good social theory has always occupied. He takes his best examples of mechanisms from Tocqueville. A mechanism is a causal pattern, a causal story, that cannot predict like a law but can supply sense after the fact. Many mechanisms have the form of proverbs and it is to Elster's credit that, rather than take that as a cause for dismissing his observations as so much folk psychology, he celebrates, within limits, proverbial psychological wisdom. No trite social constructionist mantras about there being no such thing as common sense, the presence of so many of the same proverbs across time and space gives the mantra the lie. Proverbial expressions – sour grapes, forbidden fruit, out of sight out of mind and so on – give accounts of behaviour that let us answer the question 'why did he do that?'

Elster delights in paradox. Almost every proverb has another proverb that points in the opposite direction. And no wonder, for in so many settings it's just as likely for someone to do X as minus X. Such contrary possibility is often lodged at the core of our being. When afraid, we can fight as easily as take flight. We can't tell who will attack and who will retreat, but we have an account for whichever happens once it has happened. Similarly, we can identify the mechanism, again after the fact, that lets one child raised by alcoholics become a teetotaler and another follow in his parents' footsteps. Not all mechanisms come in proverbial pairs but the ones that do are the ones that motivate Elster to his most interesting observations and make him seem a radical indeterminist at times when that is precisely what he would wish to avoid.

The next essay – 'Emotions before Psychology' – is a polemic mostly directed at social science. The claim is baldly stated: we can learn more about the emotions from moralists, novelists and playwrights than from the cumulative finds of scientific psychology. Don't snigger, Freudians and Lacanians. Elster finds only mystification, banality and error among you; and many readers will welcome the lucidity and benefits of talking about our experience of the world using the language of passions – anger, fear, envy, shame – rather than that of 'le petit objet a', 'le Nom du Père', even id and superego. So-called theory in literary and cultural studies could do worse than attend to Elster, or any number of books written before 1800.

Elster concedes that scientific psychology has done better with emotions like fear and surprise than with envy, shame, hope, relief and pity, but can anyone deny his larger claim? He credits Aristotle, with considerable justice, with the most perspicacious philosophic discussion of the emotions. My own nominee for that role would be Adam Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which Elster surprisingly ignores. But he makes his case forcefully by letting loose Montaigne, La Rochefoucauld, Austen, George Eliot and Stendhal. He has an eye for the perfect quotation and sends you back to these writers better equipped to read them.

Few are as good as the French moralists at fathoming the ways of vanity, pridefulness, hypocrisy and self-deception. If the moralists had nothing to recommend them other than their studied mistrust of all aspects of satisfaction and self-satisfaction, that should be enough to recommend them, caught as we are in an age of low-cal self-esteem. Elster treats us instead to the wisdom of

the moralists, especially on amour-propre, adding to theirs his own by reading them astutely and generously.

Sometimes too generously. The moralists, Elster says, were highly aware of ‘the paradox of honour’, which is ‘that people seek the esteem of those whom they do not themselves esteem.’ But he lets the moralists off too easily by joining them in picking on the target of the vain honour-seeker. There are competing mechanisms at work here that Elster ignores. When those below us esteem us we often find them more discerning and wiser than they at first appeared to us. But then a contrary effect sets in; we suspect that the real reason they are beneath us to begin with is that they are so undiscerning as not to discern our fakery. The wheel of fortune effect, too, is at work. Those below us now will sometimes be above us; we take turns in the relative rankings and when they are up, they will then be enviable and we will esteem them for the position they hold above us.

A long essay – ‘Social Emotions in Historical Context’ – is largely a treatment of honour, envy, shame and guilt, with extended discussions of ancient Greece, saga Iceland, 19th-century Corsica. Elster wisely refuses to see shame as simply a cost to be borne in a rational cost-benefit analysis. ‘A person who thought of shame as a cost, similar to a parking fine, would probably not feel any.’ He is not given to bland pieties; it is a consistent virtue of his writing to follow out the necessary consequences of his arguments. So it is with some surprise that one finds him accepting the ancient moralisms regarding envy. ‘Compared with the praise of the good by the good, the enjoyment of [others’] envy [of us] is like ashes in the mouth.’ But isn’t the enjoyment of the envy others may have for us a lot more pleasant than ashes in the mouth? Praise that doesn’t cost the praise-giver anything to give lacks conviction. Doesn’t their envy of us imbue with sincerity whatever praise they might give us? Envy is no less sincere than imitation.

Elster takes me to task on one point in my account of honour in an otherwise generous treatment of my work on saga Iceland, and in good saga idiom ‘I would scarcely be a man’ if I did not tax him somewhat in return. Elster wants to distinguish glory, a pure positional good – more for me means less for you – from honour, which can be more than zero sum – more for me may not mean less for you. But the Icelanders made no such distinction, nor the Greeks or Corsicans either for all I can tell; they saw the whole world of honour as fixed, or as less than zero sum. Hence the belief that the heroes of old were always grander than any of the present day; there is less honour to go around now than before. The point is not that two male combatants cannot both come away from a duel with their honour enhanced, it is that someone still has to pay the price. One saga example shows the honour both principal male adversaries gain to have been funded by their lesser ranked constituents, by their women and servants. Elster says this is implausible since the women are not players in the honour game. But honour is not just a play among men, it is also about keeping women and slaves in their place by asserting the entire male honour system against them. And when two men both walk away from an encounter looking good it is not unusual for them to claim that they did so because they knew better than to act like brawling slaves or squabbling, irrational women. The male honour system thus gets an influx of moral funds to distribute by kicking the low in the teeth. In other words, there is a gendered story to tell about how the male ethic of honour is situated in feuding culture which Elster is blind to.

The fourth essay – ‘Rationality and the Emotions’ – is as good an introduction to the study of the emotions as any I know. It is well-informed, judicious and consistently acute. The literature on emotions still hasn’t come to terms with whether there is a ‘real’ category that can include such disparate things as love, disgust, regret, boredom, but not sexual desire, pain, thirst or hunger. Few of us, however, who accept that there is a group of affects called emotions will agree on what to include; and emotion theorists’ lists of the basic emotions are as varied as are emotion

theorists. Many individual emotions provide enough matter for a volume each. Think how rich – socially, psychologically and morally – sentiments like disgust, envy, shame and anger are. Even the emotion of relief exfoliates beyond belief: why is so much pleasure as much a matter of relief as simple joy? Relief when you stop banging your head against the wall, relief when an impending disaster veers off or fails to materialise, relief at escaping the boring colleague heading in your direction, makes you feel better than the neutral position you were in before whichever disaster loomed. We find solace in thinking just how much worse off we could have been.

With such material, how can anyone go wrong? Well, just try reading emotions studies; many do go wrong. Elster is a relief, because of his eye for the interesting, his crisp manner of presentation and his way of developing the big issues – the passions' relation to reason and interest – by means of concrete examples drawn from history and literature. He joins many in arguing that emotions are more than just feeling states or are reducible to chemical and electrical effects in brain circuitry. Emotions are intimately connected with cognition and they have intentional objects: they are about something. He aligns himself with the traditional view that emotions are undergone, that we are more or less at their mercy, that we cannot choose them. His treatment of their appropriateness, however, is thinly limited to the proper relation between emotions and the beliefs that give rise to them, rather than to the Smithian issue of the proper display and modulation of emotion. Though we may not quite be able to choose our emotions, we have considerable control over the extent to which we show them or whether to fake them. Proper socialisation is a function of gaining competence in managing their display.

Elster makes room for unconscious emotions (he calls them 'proto-emotions'), a tricky notion: in what way can an emotion be entirely unconscious given that feelings are involved? He argues for weak proto-emotions – those for which the relevant culture has no concept – and strong proto-emotions: those that a person might become aware of and probably will, since the culture has made the concept available, though the person currently does not recognise what others can readily observe about him – that he is in their grip. With his dizzying propensity to taxonomise, Elster even adds semi-strong proto-emotions: when the emotion is available in the culture but something in the person won't let him access it. Here we seem to enter the world of the still very useful Freudian notions of sublimation and repression, though Elster would prefer not to talk that way.

To those who think of the Elster of *Ulysses* and *Sour Grapes* as trying to save rational choice from its friends in economics departments, this Elster goes farther and rejects the notion that the emotions can meaningfully figure in any intrapersonal cost-benefit analysis. The interaction between emotions, interest and reason is more complex than simple theories of rational actors and *homo economicus* would ever let it be. These interactions are the topic of his last chapter, from which the book takes its title. Here Elster distinguishes between the unconscious transmuting of our motives into more acceptable ones and the conscious misrepresentation of our motives, the first the mechanism of tricking ourselves, the latter the mechanism of tricking others. But transmutation and misrepresentation mix and mingle. Both are, in La Rochefoucauld's idiom, the homage vice pays to virtue. The desire to look good to others and to look good to ourselves imposes enormous burdens on the way we pose, posture and argue our interests. Bending the body and the tongue so as to be estimable and self-estimable sets in motion strange alchemies in which we start to accord our actual motives and beliefs with what we say. What starts out a fake ends up with us a bit more decent than we supposed ourselves to be. Lip service has the capacity to become service itself, as intolerant orthodox authorities have long known. Just saying the credo is enough to make most of us safe and sound.

Much of what we think of as the blatant, convictionless hypocrisy of politicians is better described in Tocqueville's words as 'the creation of ephemeral convictions in accordance with the feelings and interests of the moment'. Convictions of some sort there are. The present American President can sincerely believe contradictory propositions uttered within minutes of each other. For Elster, 'durable and consciously hypocritical stances are probably quite rare.' So great is our capacity for self-deception that the trickster ends up undone by his own tricks. Consider, too, what this means to the compulsive ironist. He simply becomes what he appears to be; there is no deeper self obscured by the shifting poses, the wit or the mockery; the ironist is all surface, having hidden the inner self for so long that neither he nor anyone else can find it. But Elster's achievement is to show that the 17th and 18th century's clearly accessible idiom of passions, interests and reason, is a very good way of talking about our inner states and the relation they bear to our words and deeds. Our era seems to have rejected, if not quite lost, real psychological wisdom in favour of mystifying visions that see us as having one interest only: getting laid. Smith, Mandeville, Austen, Montaigne, please help.
