



**Love and Vengeance:  
A Course in Human Emotion**

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Professor Robert Solomon received his undergraduate degree in molecular biology from the University of Pennsylvania in 1963 and his masters and doctoral degrees in Philosophy and Psychology from the University of Michigan in 1965. After teaching at Princeton and the University of Pittsburg, he moved in 1972 to the University of Texas where he is now the Quincy Lee Centennial Professor of Philosophy. He has had visiting appointments at the University of Pennsylvania, The University of Auckland, New Zealand, Harvard University and Mount Holyoke College.

He is a recipient of the Standard Oil Outstanding Teaching Award and the President's Associates Teaching Award.

Professor Solomon has published a dozens of articles and more than a dozen books in philosophy and psychology. Some of his books include: About Love (1988), Love: Emotion, Myth and Metaphor (1990), From Rationalism to Existentialism (1991), Ethics and Excellence (1992).

## Lecture One: Love, Vengeance and the Nature of Emotion

Love and vengeance lie at the extremes of emotion, and yet, curiously, they are, technically speaking, not emotions at all. Love is often treated as a force, a disposition, an attitude, a desire or set of desires or an entire system of attitudes and desires. (Camus) But it is not treated as an emotion as such. The word “vengeance” literally refers to the act of revenge, or rather, its satisfaction. Thus one “demands vengeance” and “gets revenge,” but one doesn’t feel vengeance in the same way that one feels, say, anger. In fact, I find no contemporary word in English (or in several other languages) for the feeling of wanting vengeance. The closest I have come is the Biblical word, often used to refer to God, “wrath.” I take it that the lack of a vocabulary here, (think of the multitude of eskimo words for snow) reflects a cultural timidity. We don’t like to talk about these things, at least, not clearly.

It is important to appreciate the power of love and vengeance, both in relationships, and in that broader political concept of justice. So much of our culture, as reflected in Western philosophy (eastern too) distrusts and neglects the emotions, especially the extreme emotions. Philosophers much prefer the calm deliberations of reason. Generations of philosophers and religious thinkers have encouraged us to adopt an attitude of *apatheia* (apathy), the Western version of the Buddhist Nirvana. The history of philosophy is, for the most part, the history of the abuse of the emotions. (But consider David Hume’s heresy, “reason as slave of the passions.”)

What is love? Let’s get a first approximation, largely negative, by just saying, somewhat dogmatically for now, that it is not, strictly speaking, a feeling. It is not just a desire. It is not a physiological upset. It is not the prick of Cupid’s arrow or an inspiration from God. It is an emotion, and what that means is the topic of these lectures. For now, let’s say it’s a bit of passionate philosophy, not abstract, not always articulate, but one that really matters. It is readily (but not encouragingly) in some of our favorite love myths. (Consider, for instance, Romeo and Juliet.)

With vengeance, we take a different strategy. Everyone will sing the praises of love, often thoughtlessly, irresponsibly. Virtually no one these days, at least no one in any position of responsibility, wants to speak in support of vengeance. They prefer to insist on “justice.” I want to suggest that vengeance is an essential aspect of justice, that it is sometimes legitimate and even justified. As in all discussions of emotion, these topics will take us deeply into ethics.

## Lecture Two: Love and Plato's SYMPOSIUM

Consider the phrase, "I love you," and the many meanings it has. It is not a description or report of one's mental state. It can be a promise, a threat, perhaps, an act of aggression.

Love as an emotion is, first of all, a system of ideas. Those ideas have been around a long time, and there is by no means agreement about them. The classic text on love is Plato's great dialogue, The Symposium. It consists of a series of speeches by increasingly drunken Greek men concerning the nature of eros, or what we would call erotic love. It is not just sex or sexual desire, but it certainly includes a very healthy dose of that. I want to talk about three of the theories discussed in the Symposium, by the playwright Aristophanes, the great philosopher Socrates and the international playboy and scoundrel Alcibiades. Briefly, Aristophanes had lampooned Socrates (Plato's teacher) in his play, the Clouds, and Plato here gets even. (Among other things, he gives Aristophanes the hiccups in the middle of his speech). Socrates is almost always the mouth piece for his faithful student Plato (Socrates himself did not write anything) but in this dialogue Plato seems to register some doubts about Socrates' very effete interpretation of love. Alcibiades was supposed to be the most beautiful and most desired young man in Athens. The nephew of Pericles, he fled to the Spartans to help them make war on Athens, and he was finally killed in Persia after betraying Athens again. Plato is making some political points, but they need not concern us here.

Aristophanes' theory is no doubt familiar to you. His point: where does love come from? The original human beings were "double" creatures, perfectly shaped (that is, spherical), two sets of arms and legs, two heads, twice as smart, twice as arrogant, twice as much *hubris*. Zeus split them in two, and ever since they've been "trying to find their other half." Love, in other words, is a completion of the self, becoming a unified whole (again).

Socrates' theory is quite complex, and it begins with the sharp exchange for which Socrates became famous (and hated). He argues that "love is a lack," and, so far, it sounds like Aristophanes. But then he goes on to argue, that one can truly love only what is good. He introduces the muse Diotima, who has taught him, he says, about love. He speaks her words, as if instructing himself. Love, he says, is not the desire for another person but a purely rational, impersonal, transcendental desire for Beauty and the Good. (The philosopher is therefore the ultimate lover.)

Alcibiades does not really give a speech. He comes crashing in late and starts abusing Socrates, telling him how much he loves him and how badly he has been treated. The point is for Plato to show that love can also be an obsession for a particular person, and not rational at all.

### Lecture Three: “Wild Justice” – The Nature and Legitimacy of Vengeance

Love and vengeance may seem like opposites but they can be perverse complements, given the importance of love for the integrity of the self. Betrayal in love naturally invites revenge.

In a book called Wild Justice (the term is borrowed from Bacon), Susan Jacoby argues that our society’s suppression of vengeance and revenge, usually in the name of justice, is akin to the repression of sexuality in the Victorian era, with probable consequences just as dire. It doesn’t take much imagination or social sensitivity to see that that is happening around the world today, and in our own streets as well.

To understand vengeance, we must first raise the noble question of justice, raised by Socrates (Plato) in the Republic, two and a half millenia ago. “What is justice?” Socrates and his colleagues entertain a number of theories, ranging from “doing good for your friends and harming your enemies” to “might makes right.” Socrates rejects them all, and asserts the astounding thesis that it is always wrong to “return evil for evil.” This is shocking because the original meaning of justice in Greece was revenge. (The Iliad) Socrates also suggests that justice is a pure objective idea, not subject to particular human interests and emotions.

This objective vision of justice continues with us to this day. For two thousand years, of course, it has largely been delegated to God. What it continues to reject is the idea of vengeance “getting even.” But vengeance is not yet out of the picture. “Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord.” In other words, vengeance is deemed **too important** for our clumsy hands.

It is important to distinguish revenge and retribution. Retribution is punishment. But most legal theorists today reject the idea of retribution, and prefer instead to talk about deterrence and rehabilitation. But punishment is not punishment unless it is also retribution, that is, punishment in return for a wrong. Revenge is a form of retribution, but it is personal and passionate; retribution as such, on the other hand, can be impersonal and dispassionate.

It is said that vengeance is irrational. This is a multiple confusion. Sometimes, the idea is just that vengeance is a strong emotion, and all emotions, according to the age-old prejudice, are irrational. Sometimes it is thought that vengeance is always violent. This comes from watching too many samurai and Clint Eastwood movies. Vengeance can be subtle, civil and often amusing. It serves our “poetic sense of justice.”

An adequate defense of revenge would involve an investigation into the nature of human nature. We are, I want to argue, essentially social beings, who are both caring and compassionate and vindictive.

The evolution of cooperation suggests that vengeance might be essential to human survival.

## Lecture Four: Emotions and Feelings (from Aristotle to James)

An emotion is and is not a feeling. It depends what we mean by “feeling.”

If a feeling is any affective mental state, any sense of pleasure or pain, any reaction to the outside world, other people or the responses of our own bodies, then, of course, emotions are feelings. Einstein presumably had a “feeling” (intuition) about the implausibility of cosmic simultaneity. Gandhi had strong feelings about God and justice. Some feelings can be very sophisticated, cultivated, articulate and knowledgeable.

Consider anger as an example. What does it mean to get angry? Aristotle tells us that anger is the proper response to a slight, and those who do not get angry are fools. Contemporary psychologist Carol Tavris points out, in her book on anger, the justification for many women’s anger, and she discusses the political ploys that have been used to demean, defuse and suppress it. It involves certain kinds of thoughts. Perhaps most important, it motivates certain kinds of actions, in particular, those that we would characterize as “getting even.” And, anger also involves certain characteristic feelings and physiological reactions, but these are by no means central. The ingredients of feelings: autonomic nervous system, hormones, muscle tension, action tendencies, semi-voluntary expressions (e.g., facial expressions, smiling, frowning.)

After Aristotle the Stoics in Greece and Rome taught that anger is a judgment, but an irrational, mistaken judgment. It presumes that we should expect justice in our lives. Accordingly, anger is pointless and can only be self-destructive.

Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, tells us that anger is an agitation of the “animal spirits.” Anger occupies an odd position between the mind and the body, but it is essentially physical with repercussions in the soul.

David Hume, who argued that “reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions,” analyzed anger as an unpleasant feeling in a causal nexus with a couple of ideas (Cf. pride, humility.)

William James insisted that anger is a set of sensations of “feelings” caused by a visceral upset caused in turn by a disturbing perception. His model still stands as a classic (though much modified) in psychology. What is missing is an adequate conception of the **object** of emotion.

## Lecture Five: Emotions, Intentionality and Behavior

Emotions can and must be characterized by their **intentionality**. They are **about** something. Here is the distinction between emotions and moods. Emotions have determinate objects. Moods have indeterminate objects. (Anxiety, dread, depression and joy.) Heidegger says the moods “tune us in” to the world.

The notion of intentionality will help us to distinguish the various emotions. Consider, for example, the difference between shame and embarrassment. Is it a difference in feeling? Is it simply a difference in behavior? I want to suggest that shame and embarrassment differ in a much more interesting way, in different assumptions about responsibility in a particularly awkward situation.

The French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre argues colorfully that anger is a “magical transformation of the world.” It is a strategy for coping, not a feeling, not something that happens to us. Sartre argues, against James, both that emotions are intentional and, more fascinating, that they are purposive. They are “magic” in that they are ways of changing [our perception of] the world without actually changing the world. An example from Aesop.

Despite these “phenomenological” arguments, the prevailing emphasis in the scientific study of emotion tends to be physiological and behavioral, not “subjective” studies of emotion. One of the most influential attempts to eliminate the complexities of accounting for the experience of emotion has been behaviorism, which simply denies the existence of the “mental” altogether.



## Lecture Six: Emotions and Choice (Emotions and Existentialism)

The problem with physiological and behavioral accounts of emotion is that they ignore, neglect or deny subjectivity. Of course, there is an interesting story to tell, most of it unknown, about emotions and the brain. But emotions need first to be adequately described and accounted for in terms of experience and their context, especially their social context. What also gets lost is the ethical notions of choice and responsibility. In a sense that I want to explain, we “choose” our emotions.

Sages and teachers have always advised: Control your emotions. But how do we control our emotions? The master slave image has been with us since the Greeks, reason the master, emotions the slaves. (Hume just reverses this.) Freud employs the metaphor of “psychic energy” and “forces,” which are then damned up (*cathexis*), channelled (*sublimated*), released (*catharsis*). But emotions are not forces or “animal spirits” to be corralled. Emotions are taught, learned and cultivated.

The problem of jealousy: is jealousy “natural” or cultivated? Is it controllable, and why does it tend to get “out of control”? Is it ever justified? The myth of the Sixties: what do we make of it now?

Emotions display many different kinds of “expressions.” There are involuntary gestures. There are semi-voluntary facial expressions and quasi-voluntary gestures. There are full-blown actions. There are long-range plots and plans. Emotions are not, for the most part, momentary displays or disruptions. They are long term processes, narratives by which we live our lives.

The expression of emotions in behavior also raises the question of the rationality of emotions. It is often thought that emotions are irrational as such. I hope I have started to convince you otherwise. It is even said that emotions are non-rational, not even candidates for rationality. But emotions can be justified, warranted or illegitimate, unwarranted. They can be wise or foolish. They can be life-enhancing or life-stultifying.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche treated resentment as such a life-stultifying emotion, one which “drags us down with its stupidity.” Yet resentment can be very clever. Is vengeance like this too?

Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard tells us that emotions are a passionate leap, using faith as an example. The “objective uncertainty” of God’s existence, contrasted with a personal commitment.

## Lecture Seven: Emotions and Meaning

Here is my main thesis: emotions give meaning to life. For two and a half thousand years, philosophers have tried to find meaning through reason. It has never been convincing. Meaning isn’t something beyond life but in life (even if the emotions in life themselves refer to something beyond life.) But meanings aren’t all the same. It is as much nonsense to say that all emotions are good as it is to say that all emotions are bad. Some meanings are demeaning. And some are very painful, even while (and because they are) meaningful.

Consider, in this regard, the emotions of shame, sadness, depression, grief and mourning. These are all very painful, but, at the same time, they teach us what is important in life. Aristotle called shame a “quasi-virtue.” What he meant was that it is good to be able to feel shame, wicked not to. Sadness, grief and mourning are all very painful, but they often allow us to recognize what is truly important. The idea, of course, is to make sure that it is not too late.

Because of the painfulness of these emotions, some philosophers have renounced and recommended against attachment of any form. The ancient Stoics, Buddhists and some ascetics. Against this view I want to defend the “grand passions,” love, a sense of justice, a love of humanity, compassion, hatred of evil, injustice and oppression.

The complexity of the meaning of emotions and moods can be seen in a brief examination of the meaning of depression. To what extent is depression chemical (clinical)? To what extent is it cognitive, evaluative, even willful? Depression can be a source of philosophical insight.

The meaning of emotion can also be explored through an examination of grief and gratitude. These emotions are very different and very differently expressed around the world. The differences are revealing. For example, American men cannot handle gratitude.

In Camus’s novel The Stranger, he gives us a character with no feelings. He does not grieve the death of his mother. He is not repulsed by the activities of his neighbors. He has no ambitions. He does not respond to love. He does not respond to the fact that he has killed a man and will himself die on account of it. He is not human. Some of my students: He’s “cool.” (Cf. Invasion of the Body Snatchers.)

Finally, we can say that the locus of meaning in all emotions is the self. This does not mean that all emotions are selfish, or even self-interested. What is at stake is self-esteem. The self gets redefined in love, as we redefine ourselves with and through the other person. (Aristophanes’ story again).

## Lecture Eight: The World(s) of Emotion

Every emotion and mood, declared the Viennese Cambridge philosopher Wittgenstein, is its own world. "The depressed man lives in a depressed world." "The angry man lives in a angry world." Emotions are not just "inner events," but neither are they but a single beam of intentionality. They define a world. That is why it is a mistake to talk, as many people do, about "coloration," as if emotions just "color" the world. Our emotions structure and give shape to our world.

We can look at some of the worlds of emotion, anger, love, resentment, jealousy. That is why emotions tend to be so intractable. We make an "investment" in them. We "get caught up in them," as in Sartre's notion of a "magical transformation of the world."

If we are going to talk about worlds of emotion, we now have to face up to the difficult problem of the cross-cultural comparison of emotions. It is not that there is no way that we can understand one another (which is one more way of not trying) but it is a matter of understanding how these worlds differ and why. Examples from the South Pacific and the frozen north. There are emotions without names, and there may be new possibilities for new and unknown emotions.

In the light of our understanding of other peoples' feelings, we may better be able to evaluate and cultivate our own.

## SUGGESTED READING TO ACCOMPANY

Love and Vengeance:  
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Ames, Roger and Joel Marks, Emotions East and West. (S.U.N.Y. Press) A series of cross-cultural studies.

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics and Rhetoric, in R. McKeon The Works of Aristotle (Random House).

Bedford, Errol, "Emotion," in D. Gustafson, ed. Essays in Philosophical Psychology (Doubleday-Anchor). An analytic classic.

Briggs, Jean L, Never in Anger. (Harvard). Calhoun, Cheshire and Robert Solomon, eds., What is an Emotion? (Oxford). A good collection.

Descartes, Rene, Passions of the Soul (Hackett).

de Sousa, Ronald (1989) The Rationality of Emotion (Cambridge: M.I.T.) Witty, entertaining, insightful.

Freud, Sigmund, "The Unconscious" in Essays in Metapsychology (Liveright).

Gaylin, Willard, The Rage Within. (Viking). A polemic against modern anger.

Heidegger, Martin, Being and Time (Harper and Row). But see also explications of Heidegger in C. Guignon, "Moods in Heidegger's Being and Time" (in Calhoun and Solomon)

Higgins, Kathleen and Robert Solomon, eds., The Philosophy of (Erotic) Love (Kansas). A collection of several dozen classic writings on love.

Hume, David, A Treatise of Human Nature, edited by Selby-Bigge (Oxford).

James, William, What is an Emotion? (Dover).

Levy, Robert, The Tahitians (Chicago)

Lyons, David, Emotion (Cambridge)

Neu, Jerome, Emotion, Thought and Therapy (University of California Press), "Jealous Thoughts" in Amelie Rorty, ed. Explaining Emotions

Nietzsche, Friedrich, On the Genealogy of Morals (Random House), on resentment.

Plato, Symposium, the seminal work on erotic love. (Hackett).



Rorty, Amelie, Explaining Emotions (University of California Press). A good collection of contemporary essays.

Ryle, Gilbert, The Concept of Mind (Barnes and Noble). Classic behaviorism.

Sartre, Jean-Paul, The Emotions: Sketch of a Theory (Philosophical Library).

Schachter, S. and J. Singer "Cognitive, Social and Physiological Determinants of Emotional State" (in Calhoun and Solomon). The classic contemporary psychological study.

Solomon, Robert, The Passions (Hackett) My own views spelled out.

Solomon, Robert, About Love (Rowman and Littlefield) (ditto)

Tavris, Carol, Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion (Simon and Schuster)

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