

The Ineffable as Radical

Laura Silva

University of Geneva

Abstract Ronald de Sousa is one of the few analytic philosophers to have explored the ineffability of emotion. Ineffability arises, for de Sousa, from attempts to translate experience, which involves non-conceptual content, into language, which involves conceptual content. As de Sousa himself rightly notes, such a characterization construes all perceptual experience as ineffable and does not explain what might set emotional ineffability apart. I build on de Sousa's insights regarding what makes emotional ineffability distinctive by highlighting that in the case of emotion the content in question is, crucially, evaluative. Evaluative content has normativity that makes the ineffability of emotion both particularly salient as well as particularly relevant, as the way in which an object is valuable is felt to be merited despite the experience's ineffability. After proposing an improved working definition of emotional ineffability, I move to the question of how language and emotional experience interact, and whether these interactions can be evaluated in any systematic way. While de Sousa is pessimistic regarding the prospects of such an evaluation, I argue that if we move beyond an individual level of analysis it is possible to characterize cases where the ineffability of emotion leaves members of particular social groups vulnerable to a range of epistemic and affective injustices. I argue that we can similarly characterize cases where the ineffability of emotion holds radical potential to challenge and transform unjust social arrangements. I end by proposing that the representational content of emotion involves what I call 'modal complexity' and that this makes emotions particularly well-suited to play such radical roles.