

Emotion and Value

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The prodigal son and the elder brother's anger

'Now the elder brother was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he [the elder brother] became **angry** and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" (Luke 15).

Why was the elder brother angry?

Levels of explanation

- Level 1: Causal explanation of his anger
 - In *purely* causal terms
- Level 2: The brother trying to justify why he is angry
 - In terms of reasons that are supposed to justify his emotion from his own perspective
- Level 3: Is his anger really justified from an external perspective?
 - In terms of reasons that show whether or not the brother's emotion was really justified

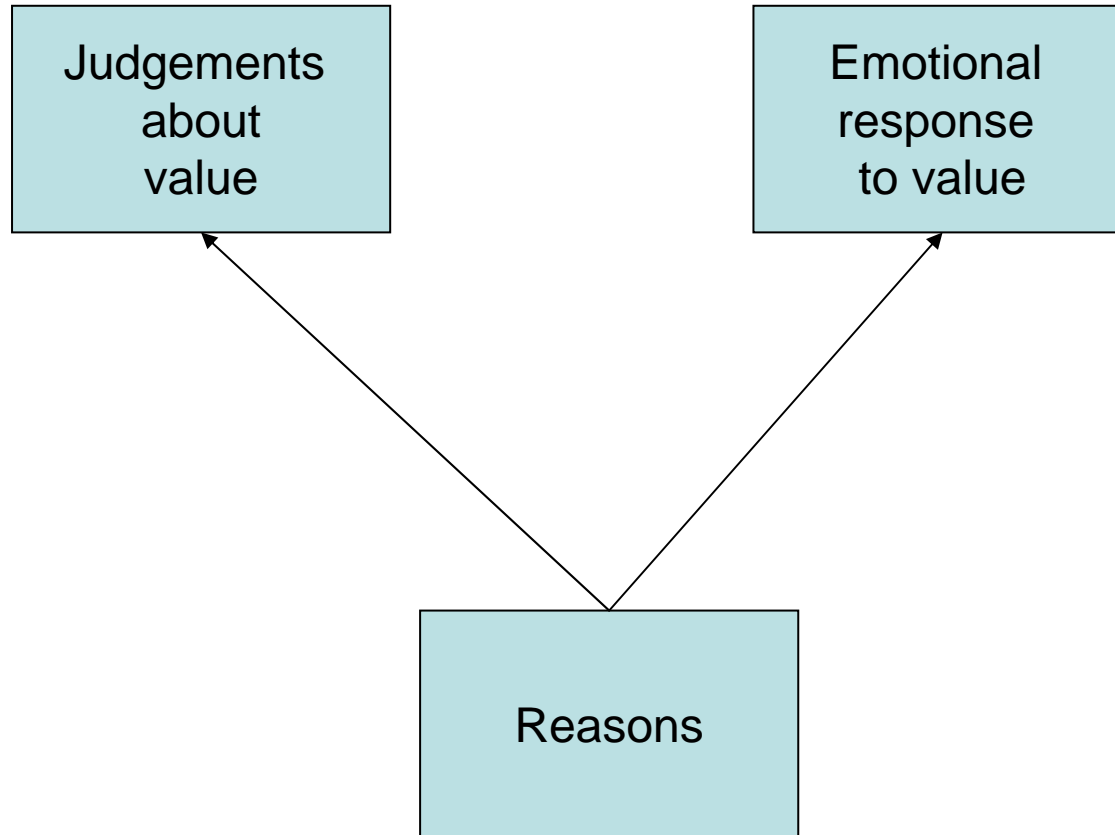
Level 1: Causal Explanation

- This kind of explanation is usually appropriate for purely instinctual behaviour or for bodily changes:
 - Why someone jumped in surprise
 - Why someone was trembling or sweating
- But *purely* causal Level 1 explanations are not sufficient for those emotions which can also be justified in terms of reasons
- And the brother's anger is of this kind
- So how might the brother try to justify his anger?
 - By appeal to value—to an injustice

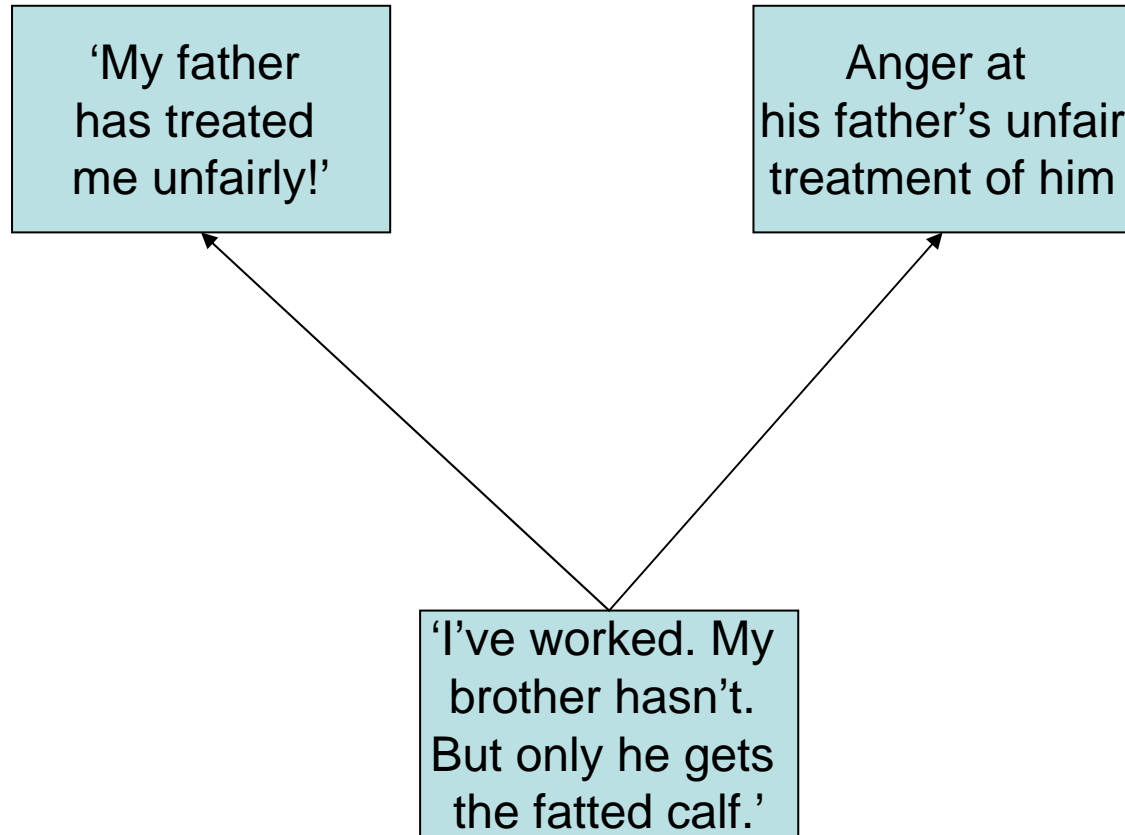
Level 2: The elder brother's attempt to justify his anger

- Who was the elder brother angry with?
 - His father (and his brother too)
- Why was he angry with his father?
 - He thought that his anger was reasonable or justified
 - He thought his anger justified because he thought his treatment by his father unjust or unfair
 - He thought his anger justified, and his treatment unfair, because he thought that his father had given undue preference to his younger brother, who didn't deserve it
- Note: justifying an emotion is not the same as justifying an action out of an emotion

Emotion and value: The structure of justification



The elder brother's attempt to justify his anger



Level 3: But is the elder brother's anger *really* justified?

- The elder brother's anger is natural and very human
 - We too might be angry in these circumstances
- And *he* thinks it is justified
- But is his anger *really* justified?
- The parable suggests that his anger isn't really justified:
 - 'Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'" (Luke 15)
 - Thus there is supposed to be no injustice or unfairness

But we might disagree with this

- There is a permanent possibility of disagreement about value
 - Whether moral, prudential, or aesthetic
- And thus there is a permanent possibility of disagreement about whether or not an emotion is justified