

Dr Rosa Hardt

Storytelling and the judgements we make

This is Forward Thinking, I'm Isabella Melking.

Ever wondered how we work out, and act on, what matters to us?

Here to explain is Rosa Hardt, a PhD student in Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh.

Her research explores how emotions influence our ability to make moral judgements and why storytelling is important for the judgements we make.

In her theory, we are constantly coming to grips with the world around us, through the telling and understanding of stories. For example, when we listen to the news, or gossip with our friends, we are engaged in understanding the world through storytelling.

Isabella:

So Rosa, what made you pursue a PhD in Philosophy in the first place?

Rosa:

Well I've been interested in philosophy for a while so when I was 11 and my brother was studying it I picked up his philosophy book and it was really interesting for me.

And yeah, I did a bit of it in my undergraduate degree, my main subject was neuroscience but I did some philosophy too.

And it's just what interests me – I like thinking about things and talking to people about ideas and yeah, a PhD is 3 or 4 years to explore what you want to explore with supervisors that help you along the way and you get to go to all the talks at the University.

And yeah, it's quite a nice thing to do with your life.

Isabella:

Was it quite an easy step then going from your Undergraduate degree into PhD studies?

Rosa:

So I found the step from an undergraduate to a masters quite big. Masters are very intense if you do them full time and I'd been out of education for 2 years as well so I got a bit of a shock doing a masters.

But actually like a PhD you've got more time and you've got at least one supervisor, and probably 2 or 3 who support you along the way. I found it much more relaxed process than doing a masters actually.

Isabella:

How did you come about choosing your topic for your thesis?

Rosa:

In my masters I did a course where I got these 2 readings, one which really annoyed me and one which really interested me. One of them was an article by a man called Jessie Prinz, who is a philosopher of cognitive science, saying that emotions are the only things that make up our moral judgements.

And that just sounded wrong to me. I think that emotions are really important for understanding the world but to say that emotions are the only things that make up our moral judgements was really bizarre.

And the other was a paper I read in my masters about a thing called 'mental time travel'.

Mental time travel is the ability to inhabit your past and potential futures.

So when you have a memory and you feel involved in the events in some way, that's mental time travel, or when you're fantasising about the future, that's mental time travel.

And they were trying to argue that mental time travel was really important for being an agent, so being a thing that can act for reasons.

And this really intrigued me, partly because I spend a lot of time daydreaming... [Laughs]

That's what got me started and what I've done in my PhD is develop this idea that mental time travel is a type of storytelling, it's a story that we tell about ourselves and that it's an emotional process and kind of related that back to Prinz's idea that emotions are the only constituents that make up our moral judgements.

That's been a discussion about 'why is mental time travel interesting?' and 'why shouldn't we say that emotions are the only things that make up our moral judgements?'

Isabella:

The mental time travelling, it's like visualising yourself, where you want to maybe be in the future?

Rosa:

Yeah it could be, or it could be imagining everything going wrong.

So I guess we spend a lot of time being like 'Oh, what if I've got all these things to do and maybe this will happen and maybe that will happen.'

So it's not just thinking about it in a completely abstract way. It's when you think about those things but there's a sense of yourself being involved in them. Yeah, more visual and what I would argue is very emotional as well.

Isabella:

Why do you think that stories are so important to help us make sense of the world around us?

Rosa:

First what I need to do here is to explain what I mean by understanding a story.

So for me a story involves an emotional cadence.

Isabella:

What is an emotional cadence?

Rosa:

So yeah, I've stolen this from a person called Velleman.

So a cadence is meant to kind of relate it to music. So there's certain tensions and relaxations and certain patterns. So understanding a story involves your emotions following certain patterns through time.

The other suggestion Velleman makes is that an emotional cadence helps you understand events in a visceral, embodied way. So by embodied I just mean involving your bodily reactions, so like your heartrate going up.

Isabella:

So how you physically react to events around you?

Rosa:

Yeah, exactly.

So Velleman asked a question 'what makes the difference between understanding a sequence of events in a very dry detached way and understanding those events narratively?' He thinks that from understanding things narratively we get a better sense of things in a way or a different sense of things.

Isabella:

So like understanding things in a storyline?

Rosa:

Yeah, exactly.

And his answer is when we understand stories we understand them emotionally and we understand them through our bodies. What I want to suggest is that understanding things through our bodies is a way of understanding what things mean to us without even having to reflect on it.

So that my heart races when something dangerous happens tells me without reflection that I see that thing as a physical threat or a threat of some kind. Before I even have to reflect on it, or before I even could reflect on it, my emotions tell me something.

So the idea is that stories are important for understanding the world, because when we understand things narratively we understand what things mean to us before explicit reflection.

We understand what they mean to us in a bodily way but the other thing to say here is that we understand it in a bodily way but it's possible for us to reflect on stories.

Isabella:

So we might have a physical response to them, like be scared, heartrates go up, but there's also the reflection after the story?

Rosa:

So you could if you wanted to, you might feel scared at the time without thinking 'I'm scared' but if I asked you about it later you could say well, I was scared because that car was rushing at me.

So you could talk about it later.

And if these stories are about more abstract events, so why the world is the way it is, like what is the cause of current unrest, for example.

You might understand that narratively but you can also say it, and then you might change it. And partly because you can say it you might be able to change it. So you might change the stories that you use to understand unrest in the world.

So they are important for us to make sense of the world partly because they are malleable, they are things we can change.

Isabella:

Could you help us understand the concept of moral agency which is something that you mention in your research?

Rosa:

Yeah, so agency and moral agency are quite a huge topic in philosophy.

We are trying to understand what the difference is between a creature that can act and an automaton where things just kind of happen.

If you're an agent you can do stuff. One difference is there is a goal directedness, or [the] theological aspect of an agent is directed towards the world.

Isabella:

So you make conscious choices towards your goals?

Rosa:

Well, there might be discussion about in what way you have to be directed towards the world – whether the goal has to be conscious or whether there can be some preconscious way of doing that. [Laughs]

If you think about a mechanical event you think ‘things just happen, one thing follows another.’

But we want to understand how it is that creatures act because we think that people do act, we think there’s something importantly different about people and creatures that resemble people, like a microphone or something.

We don’t think that a microphone is an agent, and we probably don’t think that a worm is an agent. Do we think a monkey is an agent? Like it gets a bit trickier.

One way of understanding why some things are agents and other things aren’t is that an agent can act for reasons.

Isabella:

Okay so it’s a little bit about self-awareness?

Rosa:

Well, then you have to spell out what you mean by self-awareness.

Yeah, there might be some philosophers that think it doesn’t involve self-awareness and there will be people that think that not only does it involve self-awareness but it involves awareness that you’re aware.

In regards to my theory, one thing I think is interesting about the way that I understand understanding stories is that it does involve self-awareness but a kind of implicit self-awareness. So emotions are self-awareness before you even reflect because they tell you something about how you are understanding the world in a bodily way.

This is the debate about agency, moral agency and moral judgements. How much of it is emotional, or how much do we need to use rationality to explain agency or something different.

In my PhD I steal some of the stuff from a philosopher called Charles Taylor who talks about morality in terms of strong evaluations which are fundamental ways of understanding the world but also that these are importantly qualitative.

If something is moral there's this sense of qualitatively higher and lower worth.

Some people might think that what matters most is that we're scientific, and rigorous and objective about things and that's like a qualitative sense of what matters.

Different individuals might have different things that are the things they think are of qualitatively higher worth.

A moral agent is a creature that can understand and tell stories, and it's through understanding and telling stories that we have reasons for actions and that we have a qualitative sense of what's higher and lower worth.

Isabella:

Okay so it's kind of like acting with reference to what matters more or less to us.

Rosa:

Yeah exactly, that's a good way of explaining it.

Isabella:

That's very interesting, I'm just a bit interested to hear a bit about 'sentimentalism' that you are influenced by.

You're saying that when you heard the arguments of sentimentalism, very focused on emotion, you were like "ah, no! I want to prove that there's more involved!"

Can you tell me a bit about, first of all defining what 'sentimentalism' is and why your thesis differs from that and why you kind of challenge that?

Rosa:

So sentimentalism is the idea that emotions are what constitute our moral judgements, so our judgements about what's good and bad.

What I think is problematic about this is when it's the idea that it's only emotions that constitute our moral judgements.

Sentimentalism is traditionally contrasted to rationalism, that it's our rationality that enables us to form judgements about what is good and bad.

And what I'm trying to do is challenge that dichotomy in the first place.

For me understanding stories is an emotional act but it's also rational in the sense that we can talk about them, reflect on them and change them.

I differ from sentimentalism, I don't just stress emotions. It's not because I think emotions aren't important – I think emotions are very important, I just don't think they're contrary to our rationality, in fact I think they constitute our rationality.

Isabella:

Basically it's more complex than just emotions?

Rosa:

It's more complex than just emotions but also it's more complex than emotions versus rationality. Emotions are how we can be rational in the first.

Isabella:

Yeah, so you need to combine them together!

Rosa:

Exactly.

Isabella:

Thank you very much, Rosa, it's been lovely talking with you here today.

Rosa:

Thank you.

Isabella:

Hopefully hear more about your research soon!

Rosa:

Thank you.