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Affect Theory's Alternative Genealogies: A Response to Ruth Leys

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Despite what its title, blurb and editorial endorsements might suggest, Ruth Leys' *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique* is not a genealogy of the 'turn to affect' or a critical account of the emergence of affect theory across the humanities, social sciences and life sciences. It is, rather, a post-war history of the 'science of emotion' focusing on mainstream, American, largely male, psychologists and philosophers investigating the relationship between feelings and facial expressions in human and non-human animals. In its pursuit of the latter, it is rigorous, incisive and illuminating. In its claim to the former, it is partial, dismissive and, at times, misguided - though not without critical food for thought for interdisciplinary affect and emotion studies. In what follows, I summarise Leys' important arguments and insights before offering a more detailed consideration of her critique of affect theory.

Before doing so, however, it might be useful to address my own disciplinary location and intellectual influences. As a Cultural Studies scholar, my work is informed by the genealogy of affect in continental philosophy associated with Baruch Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze and Brian Massumi, as well as more recent work on the 'cultural politics of emotion' by scholars such as Eve Sedgwick, Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant. Explicitly concerned with the nature and implications of interdisciplinary articulations of affect, my research on empathy and transnational politics integrates literature from the social sciences, humanities and life sciences.[i] I have been interested, for instance, in the multiple layers of translation involved in politicising the 'science of empathy', including the translation of neuroscientific research on mirror neurons into, on the one hand, the often neoliberal language of popular science and, on the other, into cultural theories of affect and transnational political praxis (2014:

Chapter 5). Leys' (2011, 2017) analysis of the challenges of bringing together different epistemological and ontological frameworks for the study of emotion has been invaluable to this project in its careful attention to the risks of 'mis-translation' (see also Papoulias and Callard, 2010). And yet, while Leys focuses mainly on the problems with affect theory's selective appropriation of the neurosciences, my own work is more interested in what epistemological and ethical possibilities might be opened up through affective conversations across disciplinary boundaries – and indeed, what might be gained through translating the science of empathy otherwise. It is from this perspective that I approach Leys' most recent text.

Cognition, intentionality and the emotion sciences

The Ascent of Affect offers a lucid and meticulously researched account of how, and with what theoretical, empirical and political implications, the work of the psychologist Silvan S. Tomkins came to inform the chief paradigm of the emotions sciences in the United States. In the 1960s, a 'cognitive' approach to emotion initially prevailed, with Richard S. Lazarus conducting a series of experiments that purported to indicate the primacy of cognitive 'appraisal' to emotional expression. Over the next two decades, however, Tomkins' 'non-cognitivist' perspective gained significant traction, becoming the mainstream position by the 1980s. As Leys outlines, Tomkins' 'Basic Emotions Model' posited a limited number of primary emotions that corresponded with 'signature facial expressions and specific patterns of behavioral autonomic responses' (2017: 2). Developing Tomkins' approach through laboratory research using photographs of posed facial expressions, Paul Ekman developed a 'neurocultural' theory of emotion in which 'socialization … can moderate facial movements according to cultural norms or "display rules", but under certain conditions the innate emotions might nevertheless "leak out"' (83-4). Within this highly influential work, emotions are viewed as 'pancultural behavioral-psychological responses that can be discharged in an automatic, involuntary, noncognitive fashion by unlearned triggers' (7).

From the early 1990s, the Ekman-Tomkins paradigm was subject to significant critiques, including those on the part of the psychologist James A. Russell and Ekman's former student Alan J. Fridlund. In a key 1994 piece analysing Ekman's photographic studies, for example,

Russell argued that 'the results were artefactual, depending on forced-choice response formats and other problematic methods' that fundamentally undermined his 'claims for the universality of basic emotions' (Leys, 2017: 19). While such interventions might have profoundly diminished the scientific authority of the Tomkins-Ekman approach, this has not, Leys stresses, been the case. Instead, leading scholars, such as the philosopher Paul Griffiths in *What Emotions Really Are: The Problem of Psychological Categories* (1995), continue to mobilise their research to define emotion in fundamentally non-cognitive, non-intentional terms. *The Ascent of Affect* elucidates several reasons for the continued success of the Tomkins-Ekman paradigm, including:

> Its ostensibly objective approach to the affects; its solidarity with evolutionary theories of the mind; the agreement between its assumptions about the independence of the affect system and cognition and the contemporary presuppositions about the modularity and encapsulation of brain functions; [and] the congruence between its image-based approach to the emotions and neuroimaging technologies such as PET and fMRI …

Significantly, Ekman's model also appears to offer a solution to the problem of deception in everyday life by showing that 'the body cannot lie': within particular conditions 'the emotional truth of our inner states will betray itself' (2017: 128, 23). This is why Ekman 'has played an influential role in federally funded post 9/11 surveillance research designed to find ways to identify terrorists before they can act' (23). With this example Leys begins to highlight what is at stake in the emotion sciences debates and why *it matters* politically, materially and ethically which account of emotion is taken to be scientifically proven and 'correct'.

In this context, Leys situates herself decisively *against* the Tomkins-Ekman paradigm and 'non-intentional' accounts of affect more generally. Nonetheless, she does not align herself uncritically with the cognitivist theories of Lazarus and other appraisal psychologists such as Magda Arnold. While Lazarus usefully demonstrated the importance of 'appraisals, beliefs and coping styles' to physiological and emotional responses, Leys suggests, his work nonetheless presupposed 'a gap or separation between the person and the world, which it

is the function of cognition or appraisal to close, with the result that our emotional evaluations of objects are not direct and immediate but indirect and unmediated' (2017: 19, 132). Philosophically, Leys finds more palatable Phil Hutchinson's 'embodied-world-taking cognitivism', which maintains that 'perceptual experience is conceptual through and through' (13). Empirically, she advocates Fridlund's behavioural ecology and its understanding of facial movements as 'intentional behaviors' that 'evolved in order to communicate motives' in ongoing interpersonal transactions (19). Throughout *The Ascent of Affect*, Leys offers a fascinating analysis of the ongoing scientific disagreement and controversy within the emotion sciences and makes a compelling case for moving decisively beyond a 'basic emotions' approach.

In her final chapter, Leys turns her attention to what she calls the 'new affect theorists' – in particular, scholars in the humanities and social sciences, such as Sedgwick, Massumi, William Connolly, Nigel Thrift and John Protevi, who draw on evolutionary psychology and the neurosciences to inform their analyses of affect. What fundamentally links these critical theorists with many contemporary psychologists and neuroscientists, she argues, is their shared emphasis on the non-intentionality of affect and consequent devaluation of cognition, interpretation and meaning. However, in selectively mobilising the emotion sciences to support their view 'that cognition or thinking comes "too late" for reasons, beliefs, intentions and meanings to play the role in action and behavior usually accorded to them' (2017: 315), affect theorists offer questionable readings of experimental research, while failing to acknowledge the ways in which Tomkins-Ekman paradigm has been critiqued. Ultimately, Leys contends, affect studies replaces 'ideological disagreements' with 'differences in our feeling or bodies' in a way that generates 'indifference to political and ethical dispute' (2017: 315, 345) and devalues reasoned argument in socio-political life.

With these arguments, Leys echoes her previous critiques of affect theory's problematic 'appropriation' of the neurosciences (2011) to raise challenging questions concerning the perils and possibilities of interdisciplinary scholarship across the life sciences and the humanities and social sciences. The *Ascent of Affect*'s incisive unpacking of the problems with the Tomkins-Ekman paradigm, as well as the limitations of cybernetic accounts which reformulated 'mentation is strictly computational-corporeal terms' (2017: 138), should

generate pause for thought within critical theory – and particularly approaches that figure affect and cognition as following 'different logics' and pertaining 'to different orders' (Massumi, 1995: 88). Nonetheless, as I suggest below, there are also partialities and tensions in Leys' account, which are linked to her desire to assess scholars of affect via the same framework she establishes to address the emotion sciences.

Affective contexts and contestations

The Ascent of Affect is structured by a number of overarching oppositions, namely 'cognitive' vs. 'non-cognitive', 'intentional' vs 'non-intentional' and, more broadly, 'good science' vs. 'bad science'. These binaries furnish Leys' genealogy with analytical clarity and, in her reading, mirror the bipolar nature of persistent debates within the emotion sciences. The problem with this approach, however, is that it creates an imperative to locate each of the key perspectives and scholars addressed on *one or the other side* of the binaries; instead of exploring, for example, how they may exceed or transform them in generative ways. This, I want to argue, leads Leys to exaggerate key analytical claims and to frame critiques of various perspectives and fields in overly reductive terms.

For example, after positioning affect theory as fundamentally 'non-cognitive' and 'non-intentional', she portrays its proponents as wanting to 'get rid of the notion of meaning or belief or intention or interpretation *altogether*' (my italics, 2017: 345). Yet, such sweeping claims seem more indicative of anxieties within philosophical and political thought concerning a possible loss of the authority traditionally attached to 'reasoned argument', than they do of the state of the art within interdisciplinary affect and emotion studies. Rather than seeking to evacuate cognition, intentionality or meaning from analysis of affective and social life, I will argue, critical affect scholars have sought to re-think the *meaning* of key concepts such as 'feeling', 'thought' and 'agency' and to challenge critical theory to think in more relational, processual and speculative ways.

Relatedly, Leys fails to address in adequate depth the significant epistemological differences that have characterised the emotion sciences, on the one hand, and critical theory, on the other – particularly in the 1990s, a crucial decade for her analysis. If, in 1994, Fridlund was

taking on a 'highly entrenched position' in evolutionary psychology when he critiqued the Tomkins-Ekman paradigm and its non-cognitivist thrust (2017: 19), the same could clearly not be said for critical theory in the humanities and social sciences. In its poststructuralist focus on discourse, language and signification, as well as its lingering investment in psychoanalysis, critical theory in the 1990s was very much *centred on* processes of cognition, interpretation and meaning-making. Thus, while Leys portrays Sedgwick as ignorant of the state of American psychology in believing 'she was delivering news about the relevance of Tomkins' scientific ideas to contemporary debates about the emotions' (2017: 2), the point is that invoking Tomkins had *a very different meaning and impact* for Sedgwick within critical theory than it did for Fridlund or Griffiths within the emotion sciences in the mid-1990s.

In 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins' (1995), part of Sedgwick and Adam Frank's objective was to unsettle what they saw as some of the dominant epistemological habits in poststructuralist theory. After Freud, Derrida and Foucault, as well as 'feminism', they argue, it has become routine to assume: 1) that 'doing justice to difference … and the possibility of change' requires distance from 'any biological basis'; 2) that human language offers 'the most productive … models for understanding representation'; and 3) that deconstructing binaries (i.e. subject/object, self/other, active/passive) is 'an urgent and interminable task' in pursuit of social transformation (1995: 496-7). In Sedgwick and Frank's view, these 'heuristic habits' tend to reproduce structuralisms' recourse to 'symbolization through binary pairings of elements' in ways that flatten the embodied, affective and material complexity of human behaviour and socio-political life (1995: 497). Crucially, what Tomkins' work offered these scholars in the mid-1990s was not a comprehensive framework to be transplanted into the present *intact*, but rather a vision formulated at the cusp of the 'cybernetic fold' that might enable critical scholars to imagine how the transition from structuralism to post-structuralism could have happened differently (1995: 509) – how we might have arrived at (and could still create) modes of theory that are less cut off from the life sciences, less focused on exposing essentialisms and more able to connect with complexity and change *as it is unfolding*.

Similarly, in the 'The Autonomy of Affect' (1995), Massumi sought to address what he saw as the limits of post-structural theories of linguistic signification in grappling with questions of materiality, agency and transformation. He is particularly concerned with how poststructuralism's continuing reliance on structuralist frameworks superimposes a pre-set system of regularities onto social and material life that makes it difficult to account for *novelty, emergence and change*. Furthermore, in Massumi's view, critical theory's dominant constructivist assumption that 'everything, including nature, is constructed in discourse'– means that it can only engage with the non-human as a 'construct of the human'. Consequently, it is unable to allow for the possibility of 'nature as having its own dynamism' (1995: 100); modes of organisation and becoming, that is, that, cannot be captured by human systems of signification. In bringing together the philosophy of Spinoza and Deleuze with the neuroscientific research of Benjamin Libet and others, Massumi offers another possible framework for encountering material life – one that provides a more relational understanding of human agency but also, and perhaps most vitally, can account for processes of emergence and potentiality that work both above and below the level of 'the subject'.

Significantly, while Massumi highlights the limitations of dominant social constructivist approaches to analysis, he, like Sedgwick, does not dismiss 'the considerable deconstructive work that has been effectively carried out by poststructuralism' (1995: 88). Indeed, Massumi presents the alternative affective 'vocabulary' he offers as what critical theory might be enriched by through 'integrating'; rather than what should simply replace existing modes of analysis (1995: 187). Contrary to Leys' accusations, Massumi's point here is not that attention to signification or meaning is irrelevant when it comes to analysis of human behaviour, the workings of visual media, or the manufacturing of political consent, but rather that accounts of these phenomena 'are *incomplete* if they operate *only* on the semantic or semiotic level' (my italics, 187). What is important to emphasise genealogically, then, is that, in the mid-1990s, Sedgwick and Massumi each turn to the life sciences - among other resources which were 'not the usual ones for cultural theory' (Massumi, 1995: 88) - to challenge an emphasis on linguistic signification *at a time that it was dominant in* social and cultural theory. Instead of rejecting discursive and constructivist forms of analysis, they sought to highlight the limitations associated with assuming that these are the *only* (or

always the most suitable) frameworks for exploring social and political life.

There are also, however, salient differences between Sedgwick and Massumi that deserve genealogical attention. In thinking through Tomkins' 'Theory of Basic Emotions', Sedgwick and Frank are concerned primarily with affect as it pertains to intersubjective relations. They thus refer to 'affects' (plural) and highlight the 'qualitative differences among affects', such as, for example, the difference 'being, say, amused, being disgusted, being ashamed, and being enraged' (1995: 514). For Massumi, and others working in the Spinoza-Deleuze tradition, however, 'affect' (more often in the singular) is precisely that which 'escapes confinement' in human bodies, subjectivities and relations (1995: 96). It refers to 'an entire, vital and modulating field of myriad becomings across the human and nonhuman' (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010: 6). While Leys understands the Tomkins-Ekman and Spinoza-Deleuze paradigms as linked by their insistence on the 'non-intentionality' of affect, her focus on whether theories of affect are 'cognitive/intentional' *or* 'non-cognitive/non-intentional' misses how, for many critical thinkers, affect is precisely that which *radically exceeds* 'the human' – and therefore *it may not make sense* to assess such theories using psychological terms referring to human-centred terms and processes.

However, while Massumi (1995, 2002) famously figured affect as 'unmediated', 'autonomous' and 'pre-cognitive', many other leading scholars in the field theorise affect, cognition and mediation as inherently interlinked. For example, in *The Affect Theory Reader*, Melissa Gregg and Greg Seigworth argue that 'affect and cognition are never fully separable – if for no other reason than thought itself is a body, embodied' (2010: 2-3) and in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed calls attention to the problems within the long history of attempting to separate sensation and cognition as if 'they could be "experienced" as distinct realms of human "experience"' (2004: 6). More recently, in *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions*, Ben Anderson argues that 'affective life is always-already mediated' and insists that 'we must pay attention to how representations function affectively and how affective life is imbued with representations' (2014: 13-14). Indeed, while *The Ascent of Affect* portrays affect theory as fundamentally 'non-intentional' in orientation, the mainstream approach in the field is arguably much closer to Leys' own position than she acknowledges. Unlike Leys, and many in the emotion sciences, however,

critical scholars of affect have tended to focus less on the imperative to determine conclusively what emotion *is* and more on exploring what affect, emotion and feeling *do*.

A dedicated genealogy of interdisciplinary theories of affect would involve unpacking these kinds of philosophical *differences* - addressing not only what distinguishes the Tomkins-Ekman and Spinoza-Deleuze routes, but also the significance of a range of other intellectual sources for critical scholars of affect and emotion – including, but not limited to, Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, William James, John Dewey, W.E.B. Du Bois, Susanne Langer, A. N. Whitehead, Sigmund Freud, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Edmund Hursserl, Melanie Klein, Erving Goffman, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Frantz Fanon, Raymond Williams, Luce Irigaray, Audre Lorde and Sylvia Wynter. In this vein, it worth noting that, although this was not her project, Leys would have told a very different story about 'ascent of affect' as a concept, approach and field had she focused on a different (or more diverse) collection of figures – and particularly feminist, queer and decoloninal thinkers – many of whom approach the life sciences differently to Massumi, Thrift, Connolly and other affect theorists who Leys treats as representative of the field. Lisa Blackman (2012), for example, in a genealogical analysis that brings together social psychology, physiology, psychoanalysis, sociology and media theory, complicates associations of affect with non-intentionality and an overly mechanical view of automatism, offering an account of sensation and cognition as imbricated 'all the way down'.

Returning to the 1995 essays by Sedgwick and Massumi on which Leys anchors her critique (and particularly her accusations of 'bad science'), it is important to acknowledge that neither scholar presents the scientific work they cite as 'evidence' to support the 'truth' or 'accuracy' of their claims. Massumi refers to neuroscientific experiments he discusses as 'stories' – which he uses alongside other kinds of 'stories' to develop a new vocabulary of affect to inform cultural studies. In turn, Sedgwick and Frank acknowledge Tomkins' 'highly suspect scientism' and emphasise that '[y]ou don't have to be long out of theory kindergarten to make mincemeat of … a psychology that depends on the separate existence of eight (only sometimes it's nine) distinct affects hardwired into the human biological system' (1995: 497). Yet, in highlighting how easy it would be for a critical theorist - or indeed a contemporary 'scientific reader' - to demolish Tomkins' framework, part of their

aim is to illustrate how automatic, and thus potentially stultifying, particular epistemological habits of 'critique' have become – to the point where it is no longer possible to entertain what might be generative about a given perspective once the red flag of biological essentialism has been raised (1995: 507). What is at stake in both pieces, then, is not a positivist claim to truth, but rather a speculative attempt to *open up* existing modes of critical theory by thinking, writing, and affecting differently.

To be clear, my intention here, as I have argued elsewhere (Pedwell, 2014: Chapter 5), is not to suggest that 'anything goes' or to advocate a boundless relativism with respect to critical theory's mobilisation of the life sciences. It is, however, to refrain from shutting down or regulating too quickly or rigidly the imaginative, critical and political possibilities of diverse engagements affect in the midst of the multiple relationalities inter-linking the assemblages we call 'science' and 'culture'. It is also to explore how the meaning of scientific 'accuracy' itself remains open to contextual contestation and may be continually redefined through interdisciplinary interventions. From this perspective, judging the value of critical engagements with affect on the basis of whether they are 'right'/'wrong', 'accurate'/'inaccurate', or whether they constitute 'a mistake' (Leys, 2017: 25), is not the most generous *or generative* intellectual approach. As I have suggested, it imposes a positivist framework onto critical theory which misses the explicitly imaginative and speculative nature of many of these interventions - that is, their vital efforts to draw 'creatively on different forms of knowledge to ask *what if* one conceived of the world in this way' as a 'heuristic for innovation' (italics mine, Gibbs, 2010: 189, 203).

At the same time, however, it would seem that many of the questions concerning consciousness, agency, relationality and more-than-human entanglements which affect theorists have been exploring for decades, are now, in important ways, no longer speculative. For instance, as Patricia Clough et al discuss, with 'adaptive algorithmic architectures' coming to play a greater role in the parsing of big data, new technologies are 'no longer slowed by the process or practice of translating back to human consciousness' (2014: 148). Significantly, such algorithmic environments are also providing resources for 'the inanimate to become sentient' (Sledge, 2013 cited in Clough et al, 2014: 146). These techno-social developments do not signal the irrelevance or withering away of human

cognition or interpretation. But they do point to the need for 'fundamental rethinking of the human and of human experience' in relation to 'networks of media technologies that operate predominately, if not almost entirely, outside the scope of human modes of awareness' (Hansen, 2015: 2, 5).

Against this background – and indeed her own account of the persistent scientific debates and uncertainties concerning cognition and intention in biological life - Leys' concluding recourse to, and defence of, 'intentionality', 'rationality' and 'reason' (as if these terms were uncontested and unchanging) is curious. Rather than doubling down on the rightful place of 'reasoned argument' in socio-political life, is our task as critical scholars not to understand the complexity of the above terms and how their meanings and status may be evolving via transformations in our psychological, sociological, political, economic, technological and environmental relations, capacities and ecologies?

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[i] See Pedwell, 2012a, b, 2013, 2014.