

# Emotion Studies: Directions in History, Science and Humanities

Theron E. Fairchild

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## Abstract

Human emotions constitute a complex interaction of biological and cultural cues. These are interpreted by an individual's mind and body, and may or may not manifest through behavior. The paper briefly reviews the study of emotion, or affect, as it has evolved through the history of the West. The focus is on an interdisciplinary overlapping of humanities, arts, sciences, and philosophy. With advances in scientific fields such as neuroscience, complemented by stronger scholarship in social, psychological, and cultural studies, the most recent *affective turn* might be the stepping off point for the emergence of a sustainable affective science. The paper touches on a selection of theories and arguments headed in that direction.

**keywords:** affect studies, affect theory, affective science, emotion history, emotion studies

## Emotion History

Since at least antiquity, in both Eastern and Western civilizations, human emotions have been a topic of discussion, influencing ideas in art, science, philosophy, human development, and socio-cultural planning. With the rise of European early modernity, the topic morphed its way alongside developments in humanism, empiricist philosophy, public literacy, and public theater (Frevert, 2014). Specifically, the 17th century adopted a synonym for emotion, in the term *affect* (Oatley, 2004), partly to differentiate affective manifestation and experience from the base emotions themselves. In the process, eminent thinkers, such as Descartes (1649/2015) and Spinoza (1677/2006), began theorizing for a modern approach to emotion/affect. These ideas remained fundamental to emotion study well into the 20th century, aiding its development while simultaneously fueling a number of scientific and philosophical biases that impeded its progress.

The current paper will use the terms *emotion* and *affect* interchangeably, except when noted. Present-day endeavors represent a historically unique period in the development of emotion studies, largely from what is termed the *affective turn* (see section below). Emerging mostly from the 1990s, the effort was partly ignited by criticism against behavioral, reductionist,

and mentalist theories, which included the long-debated mind-body dualism made famous by Descartes (Damasio, 1994). Much of the criticism itself emerged with regard to advances in areas such as neuroscience, genetics, social dynamics, and information processing, all of which provided new tools in the very recent formation of an *affective science* (see Barrett & Gross, 2013). At the same time, it must be remembered that many of the questions driving the contemporary trek also occupied the ancients and moderns alike. Similar to then, today's motivations for addressing the human complex of emotion/affect manifest from concerns over crime, war, power, belief, economy, human control, and human enrichment.

## Affect Theory

As would be expected with any topic of long lineage, there are also ages-old difficulties on how to address them. In the first line of their edited book, *The Affect Theory Reader*, Seigworth and Gregg (2010) asked, "How to begin when, after all, there is no pure or somehow originary state for affect?" (p. 1). A somewhat abstract yet analogous and telling answer resides in the title of the collection's first chapter, "An Inventory of Shimmers." The *American Heritage Dictionary* (2016) defined a shimmer as a flickering or tremulous light; a glimmer. It is something that one can never possess yet is undeniably there. It also suggests a topic that is both curious and perplexing.

The term *emotion* itself is defined by *Encyclopedia Britannica* as "a complex experience of consciousness, bodily sensations, and behavior that reflects the personal significance of a thing, an event, or a state of affairs" (Emotion, 2015). This definition is in no way fixed, as emotion remains a heterogeneous category. Rather than being concrete objects, emotions are constructs used for addressing the phenomena that they purport to represent (Griffiths, 2008). In fact, about the only common thread, among several leading theorists of emotion, is that emotions are in no way absolute, but rather are relational in some way to an individual's environment, interests, desires, values, and goals (Robinson, 2005).

As mentioned, the term affect was first employed in an effort to distinguish between what emotions were and how they manifested in experience. Specifically, in the most influential early-modern Western text on the subject, *The Passions of the Soul* (1649/2015), Descartes made two key arguments: (i) the mind should be understood separately from the body; and (ii) the emotions or passions are perceptions that belong to the body. Consequently, in order to free the mind for optimal functioning, an individual must overcome the poisoning effect of such bodily passions, which in turn requires one's cultivation of virtue and control over habit. The divisions and prescriptions based on this view, in principle and practice, were pursued into 19th and 20th century schools of mind and behavior. In particular, the school of radical behaviorism shifted the focus entirely away from emotions as something internal, stressing only their affective externalizations and how to control them. This became the reigning dogma in the United States, and conveniently served the purpose of behavioral modification, in everything from personal therapy to education and human management (Mills, 1998). The model was eventually superseded by the cognitive trek, a more formalist return to ancient and early modern ideas, regarding emotions as primarily perceptions and

cognitive judgments.

In general, emotions are addressed in nearly every major cultural framework, philosophy, and ideology throughout world history. To varying degrees, each of these also imposes certain boundaries, regarding which affective behaviors are beneficial and allowable, and which must be managed or even suppressed (cf., Tuske, 2011 for emotions in classical Indian thought; Gade, 2008 for emotions in Islam; Weyher, 2012 for emotions as addressed by Karl Marx).

In the history of Western analytical traditions, a core division, in how to address emotion, dates back to at least Plato and Aristotle. On the one hand, Plato concluded that emotions were merely animal behaviors that could not be trusted (Knuuttila, 2004), placing him firmly in the camp of prescriptive suppression. Although Plato's writings were lost to Europe throughout much of its Middle Ages, his views on affect were reintroduced to the modern era as the enlightened position. The rational essence of such views has remained central to a number of agendas up to the present, including that of 20th century radical behaviorism, and is arguably at the core of modern medical and biological models for psychopathology and mental illness (see Horwitz, 2013; Maddux & Winstead, 2012). Aristotle, by comparison, intended to understand the emotions for the roles that they played. In what could be considered a kind of applied emotionality, the philosopher constructed a number of these ideas in *Poetics* (Douglas, 2014), a work still cited for the term *catharsis*, Aristotle's classic treatment of affective purging through artistic expression. Though the split between Platonic prescription and Aristotelian application is not a true dichotomy, since both Plato and Aristotle relied on cognitive models for thought and behavior (Robinson, 2005), it has nonetheless played into the dichotomizing of Western affective thinking to the present.

Consequently, with a historical mixture of curiosity and contempt for the emotions in science and analytical thought, the subject has largely fallen into the hands of what eventually became known as the humanities. The trouble here concerns consistency, with definitions for emotions ranging from sublime and ineffable to being nothing more than pure feelings. As Robinson (2005) rightly pointed out, an individual can experience emotions that are neither sublime nor ineffable, such as anger, and can certainly experience a feeling that carries no emotion, such as basic hunger. Emotions can also manifest without an accompanying behavior, such as secret love. Put succinctly, emotion is not behavior. Behavior is behavior. Emotions are not feelings. Feelings are feelings.

As the current essay has touched on, historical research on emotions and emotional evolution (e.g., Frevert, 2014; Oatley, 2004) has added considerably to the topic's understanding. It also contributes to the argument that emotions themselves are too complex to submit to reductionist explanations common in both positivist and deconstructionist thought. Even in the analyses of areas rich with emotional exploration, such as literature, poetry, music, film, painting, and other areas that might qualify under the term *art*, an urge remains to discuss and define emotional and aesthetic content in terms of reasoned and reductive constructions. Armstrong (1998, 2000) forcefully argued that excessive analytic and anti-aesthetic discourses, common throughout the latter half

of the 20th century, not only missed the points concerning art and emotion, but they were invariably anti-feminine and destructive. Overall, both the historical and pro-aesthetic arguments raise two important points. First, engaging and expressing emotion through a medium like art is separate from experiencing and discussing emotion in art. Second, discussing emotion requires new, dynamic ways of interpreting emotion, which must escape the biases and limitations of ordinary language.

## Affective Turn

With the particular depths of emotion left much in the hands of the humanist, it is the humanist who has traditionally made considerable effort to record and interpret the depths of affective phenomena. Frevert (2014) reiterated this point in a comprehensive historical study, one incorporating the latest archival research on high periods of artistic emotion in the West.

“... Emotions are by no means a new or original topic of either popular or scholarly reflection. Philosophers, literary specialists, and art historians have in recent years shown how theories of the emotions left their mark on ancient rhetoric, on the theatre of early modernity, and on modern literature. ... Today’s experimental, cognitive and neurosciences lack depth by comparison” (p. 2).

At the same time, as Keen noted in *Empathy and the Novel* (2007), the resurrection of emotional discourse, at least in critical conversations on literature and narrative, have come from cognitive and neuroscientific literary studies (e.g., Armstrong, 2013; Bernaerts, De Geest, Herman, & Vervaeck, 2013). Accordingly, as steadily implied in the current paper, the humanistic and scientific approaches may not be as competing and divisive as commonly depicted, but rather complementary and merely incomplete.

Eastern thought has seen similar trends regarding mind and emotion. For instance, in classical Indian philosophy and Buddhist thought, a fundamental idea resides in an emotion-cognition binding, which is influenced by the socio-cultural environment (Tuske, 2011). In world literatures, too, including those from India and China, Hogan (2003) discovered universally recurring emotional themes at the core of the narratives. In this and subsequent work, Hogan’s (2011) conclusion was that narrative genres themselves, beyond their form as literary constructions, are organized at the depth of linguistically affective themes. The implication, backed by considerable research, is that narrative and emotion are together a fundamental characteristic of human psychology (see László, 2008; Mar, 2004; Oatley, 2011; Sanford & Emmott, 2012).

Whether the recent affective turn truly represents a new effort or is merely the renaming of an ancient topic, it nevertheless represents an influential shift. Defined as the turn to emotion studies, and even to an affective science, hints of a turn began with the development of psychology itself, as voiced by two of its most-eminent early commentators, William James (1892/2012) and Sigmund Freud (1926/2013). The focus was particularly

taken up by the existentialists, including the eminent therapist Rollo May (1975/1994), who wrote extensively on the relationship between meaning, emotion, and creativity. In what became known as scientific psychology, Wilhelm Wundt described affect as a fundamental characteristic of the human mind (Barrett & Gross, 2013).

Though the position took time to root, emotion study has since become a central feature with regard to phenomena labeled mental or psychological. In the 1990s, with breakthroughs in neuroscience and data handling, the study of affect attracted several important pioneers who would help define the debate with their respective work, names that included Antonio Damasio (1994), Joseph LeDoux (1998), and Jaak Panksepp (1998). Eventually, in the year 2012, a formal, international move toward affective science began, with the formation of the Society for Affective Science (see SAS, 2016).

### Affective Purpose

After generations of the emotions being treated in numerous ways, including as little more than curious phenomena, why was there the specific shift to an interdisciplinary academic discourse? In addition to the ancient and modern concerns mentioned thus far, the moral philosopher and legal scholar, Martha Nussbaum, framed the current motivation in two contemporary arguments. The first was *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (2001), which essentially refuted the Platonic and Cartesian stances that emotions were destructive to correct thinking. Citing the growing literature from affect studies, Nussbaum stressed that emotions tend to positively inform and drive intelligent behavior, whereas thinking left alone can devolve into detachment from humanity, environment, and even reality. In other words, emotions ground thought. Additionally, despite popular belief, it is not necessarily the emotions themselves, but thoughts of the ungrounded, poorly grounded, or otherwise disaffected type, which are more capable of manifesting into social injustices, sociopathic behaviors, and all manner of atrocities.

In the second of her critical assessments, entitled *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010), Nussbaum stressed that the bedrock of a healthy and peaceful civilization lies not with wealth, which is inherently divisive, but with the types of ethical, empathic, and communicative lessons that the humanities offer. Support for Nussbaum comes from the study and implementation of creativity (e.g., Cohen, 2011; Reiter-Palmon, 2011; Taylor, 2011), in which humans are recognized as not merely reasoning analysts, but as adaptive, imaginative, and creative problem solvers motivated by emotional and environmental interests. An older yet related argument resonates from Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872/1995). In this work of dramatic theory, Nietzsche borrowed from classical Athenian tragedy, to argue that art transcended the pessimism and nihilism of a fundamentally meaningless existence. In the modern world's heightened sense of human suffering and other cruelties, Nietzsche suggested that a new and acute form of insight had emerged, in the form of "*tragic perception*, which, in order even to be endured, requires art as protection and remedy" (p. 55).

From the study of creative endeavors throughout history, it is clear that artists, musicians,

and writers have instinctively understood such insight, in which conveying emotion has served as a kind of metric for creative and communicative success. In modern developmental terms, Habermas and Diel (2010) showed how insight-knowledge transfers well through the narrative format, one also effective at eliciting emotions. Likewise, Kidd and Castano (2013) presented evidence that reading literary fiction can improve empathy and Theory of Mind in children, a point that Lodge (2002) also made about adults. Like Nietzsche before them, several contemporary scholars (e.g., Keen, 2007; Pizarro, Detweiler-Bedell, & Bloom, 2006) indicated that reading in general can alter, and even craft, an individual's moral and cultural outlook, sometimes dramatically.

Despite the evidence pointing to art as a valuable tool for affective development, the contemporary industrial, institutional world continues to segregate arts from sciences, and emotion from knowledge. Consequently, in debates about the value of emotion and the arts, it remains difficult to build a much-needed art-science bridge that considers emotion. More recently, this is beginning to change within a variety of fields, including in something as seemingly abstract as artificial intelligence (e.g., Scheutz, 2014), which must address the growing need for machines to interact more naturalistically with humans. More generally, in a biological and anthropological perspective, Röttger-Rössler and Markowitsch (2009) concluded that emotions should be understood “as highly complex bio-cultural interaction systems” (para. 3), ones that ultimately develop over time. Complex interactivity is certainly nothing new, neither to the artist nor the scientist. Hallmarks of both artistic and scientific achievement are replete with such individual qualities as *openness* (Feist, 1998), which also serve the development of creativity, knowledge, and moral imagination (Narvaez & Mrkva, 2014).

Regarding Nietzsche (1872/1995) again, on art as protection and remedy, the integration of emotion and art should be apparent, an integration that is ultimately inseparable from a larger complex of emotion, culture, art, science, intelligence, and consciousness. A number of contributions have addressed this from interdisciplinary platforms, including Robinson (2005), who reiterated the primacy of emotions in literature and the arts. The same can be said about narrative specifically, particularly from Hogan's work on human narrative universals (2003) and narrative affect (2011). Relatedly, Kövecses (2002) produced influential work on the relationship between metaphor and human emotion.

## Emotion Study

Beyond the question of why it is important to study human emotions, there is perhaps the more challenging question of how to study them. In their introduction to affect theory, Seigworth and Gregg (2010) identified no less than eight major streams of overlapping emotion investigation, including those from philosophy, phenomenology, anthropology, psychology, and neuroscience. Along the path, of what they referred to as “infinitely multiple iterations of affect and theories of affect” (p. 4), the authors stressed what Massumi (2002) had already emphasized previously, that the topic would seem less fractured and overwhelming if inquiry began “with movement rather than stasis, with process always

underway rather than position taken” (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 4).

Accordingly, in a perspective also applicable to the topic of intelligence, several scholars (e.g., Griffiths, 2008) have articulated that emotions themselves should not be treated, or reified, as tangible objects. When compared to the neurophysiological processes, as when neurons fire or serotonin releases, emotive behavior must also be understood as linguistic constructs used to articulate the physical and mental phenomena being experienced. This is not intended to reduce emotions to mere interpretations of language. On the contrary, in the growing wake of scientific psychology, the point is to stress that human affect is a complex system, one that does more than merely manifest emotive behavior from biological mechanisms (see Röttger-Rössler & Markowitsch, 2009).

At the same time, it is paramount to consider the biological aspects of emotion. Humans are biological organisms, and emotions are intimately bound to the human body. Two of the most popular and comprehensive neuroscientific expressions of this perspective come from LeDoux (1998, 2002) and Damasio (1994, 2010). Both addressed emotion, consciousness, and the feeling of self, as interdependently emergent and embodied phenomena. In this regard, it might be helpful to think of human emotions as operating on two key levels: the basic or primary-process emotions (i.e., instinctual and animal), and the higher-order or cortical emotions (i.e., large-brained mammalian and human).

In the exhaustive work *Archaeology of Mind*, Panksepp and Biven (2012) submitted a succinct neuroevolutionary account of the core emotional systems at work in humans and their mammalian relatives (see Johnson, 2010; Rumbaugh & Washburn, 2003, regarding mental and emotional life in nonhuman mammals). In decades worth of laboratory studies, Panksepp (1998) identified seven primary mammalian emotions, including fear, grief, and joy/playfulness. The researcher also discovered that mammals could become addicted to the same substances as humans, such as cocaine, and affectively respond to those addictions in similar ways. At this fundamental level, Panksepp’s research clearly suggested that affective consciousness, or the basic capacity to feel or experience feeling, is *anoetic* (i.e., bound to the momentary present) and thus independent of language. Phrased differently, the primary-process emotions are unreflective brain states, which are consciously felt without the individual organism necessarily understanding what those feelings represent.

Consequently, because the basic emotions take shape in the shared, primary-process brain regions across species, the belief that humans are unique from other species, merely due to the ability to feel or emote, is simply inaccurate. The difference between humans and other mammals with large cortices, such as primates (Boly et al., 2013) and cetaceans (Berta, Sumich, & Kovacs, 2015; Herman, 2012), concerns the more recently developed decision-making cerebral cortex, which constructs sense out of the primary emotional physiology (Panksepp & Biven, 2012). This top-level *autonoetic* process (i.e., ability to reflect beyond the momentary present) depends on numerous variables in the healthy individual, including memories, modes of learning, beliefs, motivations, and language.

As mentioned, the process also takes its cues from culture, and from the plasticity of the brain to adapt to such culture and environments. This idea is not new, as it relates to the

early dialectical-cultural psychology of Lev Vygotsky (Robbins, 2003). However, the likes of Vygotsky took several decades to reach the West, particularly the United States, a country where the normalization, pathologization, and medicalization of behavior was set atop an analogy of the individual as a hardwired organism. In such a limited, physical view of humanity, culture was relegated to social studies and the humanities. Even here, the social sciences partly emerged as an instrument of the Cold War (Solovey & Cravens, 2012), and culture became somewhat of a dataset to be studied for institution and nation building. Post-Cold War scholarship represents both a continuation of this trend and a new direction. It was this period when the affective turn got its start, when more attention was given to the social aspects of emotion, through such mediums as social neuroscience (Rule, Freeman, & Ambady, 2013) and cross-cultural studies (e.g., Chentsova-Dutton, Ryder, & Tsai, 2014; Kitayama & Markus, 1994).

## Affect Interpretation

Within emotion studies themselves there is something of a distinction-relation paradox, between emotion perceiving and emotion experiencing. The notion is at least as old as William James (1892/2012), who observed that neither visual information nor intellectual ability alone were sufficient to produce or interpret an emotion. As Ekman (2007) noted, when people see a face, how they interpret the expression on that face is an approximation, hence the perception of the emotion behind that face is also an approximation.

To illustrate, imagine the photograph of someone's contorted face. What exactly is that person feeling or expressing? Is it anguish or triumph? What gender is the person, and what about ethnicity? Where is the person, and what is he or she wearing? Is there any relevant background information, such as action or the presence of other people? The point here concerns multiple cues, in that not all instances of an emotion, perceived or experienced, appear alike. The structural information from the image, from the facial expression itself, and from other parts of the visual source, might not be sufficient for an accurate emotion perception (Barrett, Mesquita, & Gendron, 2011).

Likewise, the actual emotion experience of the individual does not always involve the same neurophysiological characteristics. As with the multiple inputs needed to perceive the emotion, multiple inputs also guide the state of the person having the emotion. For the complete emotional experience of a given moment, physiological changes will interact with the individual's perception and evaluation skills, to generate the individual's state in that moment. More simply, an emotion is a kind of self-informing event: a person's situation influences his or her emotional state, which in turn influences the person's situation, and so on. James (1892/2012) expressed this partly through the example of seeing a bear and sensing fear. In James's day, the common belief about fear was that encountering a bear would cause fear, which in turn would generate the reaction to run. However, James believed that seeing the bear triggered an instinctual response to run, which in turn was interpreted by the individual as experiencing fear.

In current studies of affect, the consensus is that both of these views have merit, with



the understanding that fear is not a simple cause-and-effect mechanism (LeDoux, 1998). Humans possess primal instinctive fears, as well as learned behavioral fears, which end up informing one another and depend on the relative situation (see Röttger-Rössler & Markowitsch, 2009). In the case of the bear, what kind of bear is it, what is the person's experience or knowledge of bears, and what are the circumstances of the encounter?

The point leads to the role of language on the manifestation of an emotional state, including the state of fear (see Klemfuss, Prinzmetal, & Ivry, 2012; Niemeier & Dirven, 1997, for discussion and review). In this linguistic sense, emotion perception is categorical, as when grouping emotional events, objects, or experiences into terms such as *happy* or *sad*. At the same time, these very same labels also serve as conceptual knowledge, which, in turn, informs a person's ability to make the categorical groupings in the first place. In this way, such language groupings function to shape or constrain the range of emotions in a given experience, including the experience of encountering a bear. The same applies to the case of the photograph, when encoding emotion visually and linguistically from an image (Barrett et al., 2007; Gendron et al., 2012).

As one final example, of affect interpretation and response based on a complex of multiple inputs, consider the way a sight-impaired person reacts to situations and to the emotions of other people. Specifically, blind people in Western cultures typically smile when their picture is taken. In the case of someone with complete lifelong blindness, neither a photograph nor a smile is something that the individual has ever visually witnessed. Yet, through cues of language, the behavior of others, and the feeling associated with a genuine smile, the same person can imagine and intuitively understand what a photograph is and how to respond in the presence of a camera. In psychological terms, the conscious or unconscious decision to smile must be informed by the multiple cues, including feelings, before the reaction occurs.

The smiling phenomenon draws attention to a broader discussion, on the differences between what is biologically natural and what is culturally normative. Every human being with a healthy neurological system experiences joy and has the ability to smile. At the same time, different cultures will encode individual members of the culture with cognitive and affective controls regarding when smiling is behaviorally appropriate. For example, Americans are typically expected to smile or somehow outwardly emote throughout the course of the day, even in professional situations, lest they be considered unfriendly or even socially inept. In comparison, Japanese are typically discouraged from smiling or outwardly emoting in formal settings, lest they be considered rude or socially inept.

## Conclusion

The current paper presented an overview on some of the ways human affect has been approached historically, and how it is being considered and understood today. Emotion as a topic of inquiry is at least as old as antiquity, and its exploration runs through the sciences and humanities. Some fundamental historical debates, along with continuing disagreements over definition and approach, still drive much of the inquiry, and the cross-

cultural research and implications have only just begun. In the meantime, findings in neuroscience, conclusions from comparative animal studies, and a richer investigation of environmental sources such as culture, are helping to generate a more accurately complex and comprehensive picture of what emotions are and how they both hinder and benefit human development.

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