

Emotion: The making of a concept

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There is no unanimous agreement on what emotions are. Ideas about emotions vary across cultures and historical periods, and within neuro-psychological studies themselves. The concept itself has been brought into question as being too broad and undefined as a category (Dixon, 2012). Such vagueness can be traced back to the 19th century when the term “emotion” began to be used by European and North American psychologists, physiologists, and philosophers to describe mental states, such as joy, anger, and fear as opposed to the notion of the passions (Dixon, 2012; Albano, 2008). The supposed difficulty in defining emotions can, however, also be revealing of the complexity and malleability of how feelings are culturally constructed.

In what follows, I shall draw on the etymology of the term “emotion” to suggest the potential of this concept as it moves across history. While my focus is on the European history of emotions, historical changes are indicative of broader cultural differences and histories that are ever more relevant in addressing past and present emotions.

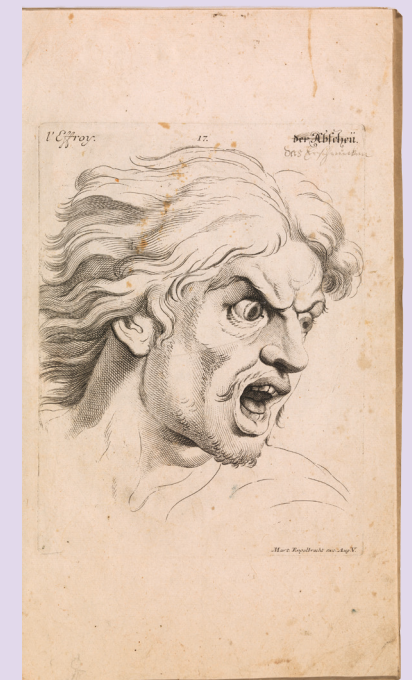
From passions to emotions

Emotion, from the Latin verb *emovere* (*ex-movere*) meaning to move, to shake or stir, firstly appeared in French – *émotion* – in the early 15th centuries referring to political protest, tumult, and social uprising (Hochner, 2016). The same meaning is not fully traceable for the related verb *esmouvoir* whose origins date to around 1080 and refers more generally to movement understood as imbalance and disorder. This sense draws on the ancient corporeal theory of the temperaments (sanguine,

melancholic, phlegmatic, and choleric) and the related four humours – blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm – whose correct balance and flow was a sign of wellbeing, while any imbalance or stagnation could be a cause of disease both in the body and the soul. Considering this broader cultural context and the common comparison of society to an ideal body politic, the emergence of the term *émotion* reflects the general turmoil of early 15th century, a time marked in France and, more generally, in Europe by epidemics, wars, and social unrest. Hence, *émotion* suggests the movement across society that is necessary to re-establish the balance of the body politic itself (Hochner, 2016). Concurrently, the term also betrays concerns about the commotion brought by social changes (Hochner, 2016). This ambiguity continues to characterize the movement implicit in the term “emotion” as it shifts from denoting social tumult to psychosomatic excitation.

Movement and agitation also pertain to an understanding of the passions – the term commonly used from antiquity to the late 18th century. The passions were conceived as faculties of the sensitive soul, together with appetites, perception, and motion, manifesting as a stirring of the soul itself within the corporeal theory of the four temperaments. The quality of the passions depended on the individual temperament and its interaction with the external environment, as they were an intermediary between the two. Hence, a posture could betray an emotional state as much as influence it, suggesting the interdependence of body, mind, and soul whereby any alterations could affect them. The passions were rooted in a moral framework, be that of Stoic philosophy or of Christianity, that encouraged the mastering of what was believed to be their ‘inordinate motion’ (Wright, 1630, 2) through reason and propriety. In the 17th century, writers as diverse as Montaigne and Thomas Hobbes regarded fear, for instance, as a draining and equivocal passion that caused subjection on the individual and society, its only benefit was the wisdom that one could gain by managing it, alluding to the restraint and self-control that was socially and morally required to overcome it. Central to the early modern writing on the passions is thus an attention to introspection as a means for self-scrutiny and a privatization of feelings.

The passions were also central to the arts for their ability to both convey and awaken feelings through the rendering of expression and gesture. In particular, the face was regarded as



Charles Le Brun, *Expressions des passions de l'Âme*, 1732.
Illustrations, engraving.

the mirror of the soul, and the privileged site for the manifestation of feelings through its expressions. French artist Charles LeBrun pictorially systematised them in an influential series of drawings that accompanied his 1668 lectures on the subject at the French Academy. LeBrun's drawings were influenced by French philosopher René Descarte who claimed that the soul could be identified with the pineal gland at the centre of the brain (Kemp, 2000:100), and that the passions were 'modes of the soul that are dependent upon certain motions of the body' (Brown, 2006:7). Accordingly, LeBrun depicts the facial features during different emotional states, establishing a paradigm for the visual rendering of emotions (Kemp, 2000:100).

Descartes was also the first author to use the term "emotion" to intimate mental states, signalling the slow emergence of a new concept for the articulation of feelings. The physiology of humours was gradually being replaced by one that apprehended the body in mechanical and chemical terms and, although the realm of the mind was still the study of moral philosophy, the brain was itself subjected to analytical observation. Hence, emotions began to be thought of as vibrations and energetic impulses that were transmitted by the nerves and that the brain translated them into sensations and thoughts connecting them 'in chains of cause and effect modelled on Newtonian physics and subjected to analysis on the model of the new natural science of chemistry, replac[ing] the passions and affections of a classical Christian soul'. (Dixon, 2003: 144) Social practices and the beginnings of the novel were also influential in this gradual cultural re-shaping of feelings by creating the premises for a different kind of sensibility whereby 'new emotional practices took place at the same time as new ideas about emotions' (Reddy, 2001: 325) whether in the form of the salon, of epistolary exchanges or in reading the painful experiences of spouses in enforced marriages or those of servants at the mercy of their masters (Reddy, 2001: 325). Gender, social and racial biases were, however, also inscribed in the articulation of the concept of emotion. The cultural duality between masculine as rational and feminine as emotional, hence irrational, further related to the assumption that women, children, the lower classes, and non-white people were less able to control emotions and, therefore, easily subject to their excitement and fluctuations.

Implicit in the emergent notion of emotion in the 18th century is a concern with its management and how that could affect

society. Like when the term first entered the French language, it reflects the contradictory feelings of a period of great political instability as well as social and cultural changes as it was traversed by pivotal events such as the American and French Revolutions, the industrial revolution, European colonialism, the movement for the abolition of slavery, the Napoleonic wars, and a period that was itself called after an emotion: the reign of terror.

The expressions of emotion

Central to the 19th century study of emotion is the correlation between mental states and their bodily manifestations whether in terms of fleeting expressions or physiological changes. Though already a concern in the 18th century, the focus shifts from an attention to physiognomy and how expressions were composed in relation to character to the methodological observation of the functional interrelations of mind/brain and body and their developmental and behavioural articulations in the individual.

In 1806, drawing on LeBrun's catalogue of expressions and the long tradition of the reading of outer bodily manifestations as signs of inner states of mind, the anatomist and artist Charles Bell published an extensive analysis of the anatomy of facial expressions and of the emotions that they signified that he complemented with his own drawings. Bell describes the direct correlations between the "inner" changes of the mind caused by emotions and "external" bodily expressions as a corporeal language for the articulation of feelings. As he states, 'there is no emotion in the mind of man which has not its appropriate signs' for which 'specific muscles are assigned' (Bell, 1806: 85). Such an idea also resonates in the catalogue of emotional facial expressions "drawn" by French physiologist Guillaume Duchenne de Boulogne, who used electric charges and photography to fix the transient movement of emotion on the face in his treatise, *The Mechanism of Facial Expression* (1862). Duchenne represents the convergence of the classical aesthetics of expressions and its new morphological analysis. Through sequences of photographic plates that freeze the flow of expressions of different emotions, he dissects their supposed articulation by merging *mise en scene* with documentation.

Bell's theory also influenced Charles Darwin's evolutionary and biological theory of emotions. In *The Expression of Emotions*

in *Man and Animals* (1872), Darwin examines the morphological analogy of physical manifestations - such as the widening of eyes or the showing of the teeth - in relation to supposed emotional states across species and from infancy to adulthood, positioning the white man at the apex of a supposed evolutionary and civilizing process. This is also the first scientific treatise to use photographs, including some of Duchenne's plates, alongside engravings. Darwin recognised the efficacy of this new medium of photography in creating an illusion of documentary accuracy that could support his scientific theory (Podger, 1998: 144-158). This, however, was achieved through photographic manipulation and posing because of the requirements of long exposure that made the capturing of the fleeting movements of expression hard to achieve. Collectively, the illustrations match the written narrative of hierarchical progression from animal to human and from infancy to adulthood (Podger, 1998: 157). Darwin's treatise, like most of the evolutionary writing on emotions of the time, endorsed the biases and inequalities about sex, age, race, and ethnicity of late Victorian society.

In the 1960s, the American psychologists Silvan Tomkins and subsequently Paul Ekman drew on Darwin's thesis of emotions as innate and universal states to support a biological, hard-wired model. Ekman, specifically, focuses on the study of involuntary micro-movements on which the universality of the expressions of basic emotions (fear, joy, anger etc.) could be asserted beyond cultural specificities and differences. Photography is central to his endeavour in the form of contrived and exaggerated still pictures that allegedly hold an essentialist "truth" about the expression of emotions and its meaning or what the "posed" expression is supposed to represent (Leys, 2010), thus endorsing a taxonomy of emotions that still betrays concerns about the normativity of emotional processes and the kind of "stirring" that they could provoke.

From the late 19th century onwards, bodily modifications that occur while emoting, such as the increase of heartbeat or trembling, were also studied and at the basis of the 'peripheral theory of emotions' developed by physiologist, psychologist, and philosopher William James. In a seminal 1884 article, James argued that emotions were not the cause of bodily changes but on the contrary their result (Rimé, 2016). Emotion was an awareness of the corporeal modifications in the nervous system, visceral organs and musculature that

occurred in the presence of danger or other circumstances (Rimé, 2016). James's theory has influenced a range of studies in the late 20th century among which are those of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio. More generally, the physiological, neurological, and neuroscientific studies of emotions have drawn attention to the complexity of their occurrence in mapping brain areas of activation and of concurrent systems within the body (nervous, hormonal etc.), suggesting a psychosomatic integration that overrides distinctions between mind and body, internal sensations and processes and external expressions. The use of animals in experiments has also brought into question how emoting in other-than-humans can be conceptualised, problematising the use of overarching categories for emotional states, including those of AI.

The 20th century study of emotion has also focused on its cognitive theorization. Accordingly, emotion relates to changes within internal and/or external environments leading to the appraisal of a situation or revaluation of goals (Rimé, 2016). They are states of mind directed towards objects in one's internal and/or external worlds, involving cognitions, beliefs, and judgements towards them. Remembering can play a role in the recollection of past feelings and their re-emergence in the present. Social theories of emotion further point to the importance of unconsciously acquired behaviours as enactments of socially constructed states (Rimé, 2016). Emotions are here considered within one's life experience and the meanings and narratives one unravels about them, as well as being inscribed within cultural frameworks and social groups that draw attention to their importance in how individuals relate and interact. 'Neuroscience and cultural psychology emphasise the plasticity and environmental adaptability of the body and mind' (Barclay 2021: 457): embodied experiences, like emotions, are not only the product of biology but also of 'cultural environments', themselves 'culturally distinctive' and active 'in shaping social conditions and relationships' (Barclay, 2021: 457). Emotion thus emerges as central to individual and shared life as a form of knowing and experiencing, as 'a dimension of cognition and decision-making, and something to be embraced, rather than avoided' (Barclay, 2021: 456): a way of "moving" through, hence feeling, change.

Emovere

Situated at the boundaries of biology and culture, of human and other-than-human, of subjectivity and intersubjectivity,

emotion exposes their mutuality and interconnection, moving and ricocheting in-between and across supposedly distinct spheres. As the coming into being of the concept itself suggests, emotion disturbs fixed taxonomies, exposing the limits of comprehensive definitions and challenging the biases that mar social and cultural assumptions. A multifaceted rather than univocal notion, emotion thus unravels and threads distinct conceptions of the body, frameworks of meaning and social forms of articulation across epochs and cultures. True to its etymology, emotion “moves” and “stirs” making felt the often-contradictory affective currencies that underpin it at any given time.

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