Philosophy 6200 Problems in Contemporary Philosophy

Philosophy of the Emotions

University of Guelph

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**Topic:** Transcending the nature/nurture dichotomy in the study of emotion.

**Description**
Emotions structure most social relations. For example, we learn to feel guilty in response to certain culturally defined conditions. The nature of this unpleasant experience, and its behavioural expression, are likewise conditioned by “emotion scripts” as psychologist Keith Oatley calls them. Even when we are not experiencing a particular emotion like guilt, we are aware of conditions that would trigger it and, often, we are attempting to invoke this emotion in others. Emotions from this perspective are the culturally constructed basis for most social transactions.

On the other hand, there is long tradition that views emotions as an expression of our “animal natures.” From this perspective, emotions are constrained by biology and they operate independent of, often in opposition to, practical judgment. Protocol guilt, for example, is thought to have originated in pair-bonding primates as what Robert Frank calls a “commitment securing device.” Later, this mechanism was co-opted in social evolution to help enforce cooperation. These Darwinian approaches claim to identify the adaptive problems that emotions are genetically “programmed” to solve.

Both views are reductionistic. The first attempts to view emotion purely as a cultural phenomenon and the second as a biological one. This course will investigate attempts to transcend this nature/nurture dichotomy. The two central questions of the course are (1) How can emotions be viewed simultaneously as biological and as cultural phenomena? and (2) What, if any, are the explanatory benefits of a hybrid view?

The first section of the course will briefly review four influential historical theories of emotion (Descartes, Hume, James, and Darwin). We then move to contemporary developments and reactions to these positions. In particular, we will consider Antonio Damasio’s claim that emotions guide reason, Paul Griffiths’ claim that “higher cognitive” emotions are a distinct in kind from “affect programs”, and Jesse Prinz’s neo-Jamesian view. We will also investigate phenomenological theories of emotion, some cultural evolutionary accounts, and a little bit of recent social neuroscience.

**Assessment**
Students will write short weekly reflections (2-3 pages) on one of the readings from that week. These account for 30% of the grade. The main writing assignment will involve a collaborative review paper that we write as a group and submit to a journal at the end of semester. Each student will contribute one section to this paper (approximately 2000 words – carefully written and researched). This accounts for 40% of the grade. The final 30% is based on participation in seminar.
Part 1: Four philosophers of emotion

Jan 15 Descartes’ Passions

Excerpts from Passions of the Soul.


Jan 22 Hume’ sentimentalism


Jan 29 James’ somatic theory of emotion

Excerpt from Principles of Psychology.


Feb 5 Darwin’s evolutionary account of social emotions

Excerpt from Descent of Man (Chapters 3 & 5).


Part 2: The opposition between biological and constructionist accounts of emotion.

Feb 12 Contemporary somatic theories of emotion


Feb 26  The opposition between affect programs, cognitivism and constructivism
Excerpts from Paul Griffiths’ What Emotions Really Are.

March 5 Social constructionism


Part 3: Attempts to transcend the nature/nurture dichotomy

March 12: Cultural evolution
R. Frank: Cooperation through emotional commitment (reference TBA)


March 19: Affective Neuroscience

Griffiths (200?) Emotion is still not a natural kind.
http://www.philosophy.dept.shef.ac.uk/AHRB-Project/Papers/GriffithsPaper.pdf

Charland, L. The heat of emotion: Valence and the demarcation problem.


March 26: Phenomenology


April 2: Transactionalism


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