

The Need for a Biopolitics of Scientific Discourses on Emotion and Affect

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Reading Professor Leys's work — and having heard her series of lectures on this project some years ago at the University of Toronto — has provided a rich opportunity to re-immense myself in debates within and across the humanities and sciences. Her careful and intensive work in this area — a project in which she has been deeply absorbed for many years — opens up crucial questions about the nature of emotions and what we can know about them. It has been inordinately challenging to choose where best to focus a short response. Leys's argument is best understood by supplementing this reading with her criticism of “new affect theorists” and the ensuing contested published debates in the journal *Critical Inquiry*.¹ Leys's rigorous and critical scholarship investigates how the neuroscientific repackaging of Darwin's Basic Emotions View continues to dominate our conceptualizations and theorizations of emotion in Western culture, both across the humanities and sciences as well as in popular thought. Her reasons for developing this critique reflect her hope — one shared by many since the beginning of written records of the human struggle to understand emotions — that we might develop an understanding and even a science of emotions that does not reinscribe dualisms between emotion and cognition. Clearly refusing touchy-feely, overly speculative, sloppy, or empty theorizing, Leys seeks an account that understands the processes of emotion, affect, cognition, and behavior — from whatever disciplinary perspective — as a phenomenon situated in the “whole person,” not in a Cartesian version of self, not in a self animated solely by instinct. Joining with others in this search, her work invites us to examine more carefully how and when affect theorists do or don't succumb to the binaries that serve dominant Western cultural paradigms rooted in longstanding oppositions such as emotion/reason, body/mind, and so on.

THE CHALLENGE OF ESCAPING DUALISMS AND BINARIES

Scholars of emotion, among others, are forced to consider whether — at least for those of us who are products of Western philosophy, science, and culture — the escape from binaries and dualisms, either in everyday thinking or in scholarly accounts, may be a quintessentially deferred desire, forever to remain out of reach. For some, it is not a cause for alarm to assume, *a priori*, the existence of binaries, whereas for many it is akin to a moral or epistemic failure, a cause for scholarly shame.

However, it is fair to say that few commit the act of thinking in either/or terms intentionally. Binary thinking slips into our speech and conceptualizing without our awareness; binaries speak us and shape us just as we do them — a mutual relationship of co-production.

Binary thinking is like black ice: it disguises itself, appearing deceptively like solid ground — yet, as with Lucy, Charlie Brown and the football, it fools you every

time. There you go, trusting you can move forward when suddenly, unexpectedly — whack! — you're flat on your back, fooled again, crashing onto the shoals of inevitable failure. Or, perhaps binary thinking is more like asbestos: invisible, deadly, and cancerous. The point is, for the most part we fall into binary traps through unwitting error.

Which binaries are in question here? For Leys, her primary concerns are those inherited by Darwin's psychology, or what is termed the Basic Emotions View. The opposition is between body and mind: autonomous physiological impulses, on the one hand, and the cultural conditions and social relations that define emotional meanings and expressions, on the other. The primary worry that runs through Leys's work has to do with the longstanding and widely shared desperation for an account of affect and emotion that doesn't reproduce these misleading binaries.

It is important to note that we can observe the simultaneous dominance of *both* a cognitive paradigm and a paradigm that privileges "dumb emotions." This is because the variables and factors that work together with the neurobiology of the brain and body refuse any easy, reductive, explanatory frames for seeing anything like a causal model of emotions. Instead, the pendulum continues to swing within different fields and among scholars (across the sciences and humanities) between and across accounts of emotion rooted in neurobiology to those rooted in cognitive behaviorism, to psychoanalysis, philosophy of mind, and variants within psychology, and to newer affect theorists who approach the question of "what is an emotion" and "what can we know about emotions" through quite diverse theoretical and disciplinary frameworks and conceptions. The challenge truly is to develop an account that does not slip into false and misleading distinctions.

The so-called "dumb view" of emotions is rooted in William James's early account of emotion as defined by its actual "feel," the physiological sensation, and his assertion that this feel comes *first*, prior to intention or conscious thought. Leys is concerned that some scholars and scientists reinscribe our inheritance of this concept of non-intentional emotions (emotions that in essence have no "meaning" but are simply physiological experiences triggered by the brain's perception of real or virtual phenomena).

But few, in fact, stick solely with the "autonomic" register of emotion. Even the staunchest neurobiologist will need to account for the complexity of social and cultural context, cues, norms, and learned modes of expression, just for starters.

For Leys, Paul Ekman's work and the inherited Darwinian account is improved by the new ethology;² she credits Richard Dawkins and his work *The Selfish Gene* for having robustly injected much-needed complexity into questions of emotion signaling, what counts as deception, and our understanding of the evolutionary purposes of deception as well as honesty.³ But it is psychologist Alan Fridlund's 1994 book that, according to Leys, saves contemporary scholars from the Basic Emotions View.⁴ Courageously, apparently, Fridlund takes on the Basic Emotions View and outlines, in contrast, the Behavioral Ecology View. From my reading, Leys sees Fridlund as a brave hero who challenges Ekman's claims about connections between facial expressions and the internal state of feeling:

One person, however, made a decisive break with Ekman ... psychologist, Alan Fridlund, a former student of Ekman's who, in the light of the new ethology, now radically revised his standpoint. It was Fridlund who in the early 1990s figured out the fundamental stakes of what he came to call the "Behavioral Ecology or Communications View" of faces and who, in a deeply researched book published in 1994, laid out the new terms in which he thought the emotions should now be theorized. Fridlund's basic insight was precisely that, in the light of the new ethology, facial displays could not be considered to be simple readouts of underlying "basic emotions" because they are instead intentional communicative signals that aid in the negotiation of social encounters.

Fridlund, drawing on Dawkins's contributions, thus provides a more complex account than Ekman by insisting that *intentional communicative signals* must figure in the account. Leys summarizes the major implication of this theoretically seismic shift in psychological science:

emotional displays should not be regarded as readouts of internal states but rather as intentional movements serving various social motives. This meant not only that such displays are responsive to proximate elicitors but are sensitive also to other persons who are present, one's aim toward them, and the nature and context of the interaction.

Facial expressions are distinguished, according to Fridlund's radical intervention, between those that are "reflex-like" and innate, and those that are learned (such as politeness). Though many scholars will still worry about the presumption that an internal state can veritably be identified as authentic through a facial expression, or any other measure, one can see that for those corseted by the rigid and reductive legacies of psychological accounts of emotion, the interjection of a social component at least adds to the discourse the possibility of beginning to consider the complexity of emotional signaling and facial expressions.

For those of us not wedded to a hope that cognitive or any other psychological science will resolve the dilemma in terms of developing a non-binaristic account of affect and emotion, Fridlund's "findings" represent what will read to many as a rather less than novel solution, lacking in climax. Perhaps for some of those in the scientific communities Leys is concerned to address, sociocultural construction is a radical introduction; yet for those of us who have been studying emotions and affect for the last two decades, what is presented by Leys as a heroic "finding" incurs a different response, such as: *Of course*, the social and cultural infuse emotional experience, expression, and behavior. Of course, affect and thought often occur simultaneously and ensemble. Only in our analytic mind is it conceivable to isolate a singular affect or singular thought as though such might exist literally in a vacuum-sealed container. Descartes's experiment in isolating himself in order to strip himself down solely to experience of the cogito perhaps today strikes many as an act of supreme denial — not an experiment that would likely be widely reproduced at this moment in history, thanks in no small part to major advances in the theorizing of emotion and affect.⁵

The primary challenge delineated by Leys is as follows:

The continued success of Ekman's paradigm cries out for explanation. Of course, it is not surprising that Ekman continues to vigorously defend — sometimes in disconcertingly slippery ways — the correctness of his position. Nor is it mysterious why so many scientists, trained in Ekman's experimental techniques and theoretical assumptions, should likewise stick with his research program, even if important critiques have to be ignored and cracks in

the edifice must be papered over. Ekman's methodologies and presuppositions fit so well with the reigning paradigms in evolutionary psychology and with modern imaging technologies, such as Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging, that they are hard to give up.

WHY ATTACHMENT TO BASIC EMOTIONS VIEW?

These concerns touch on Leys's central question: what explains the attachment to the Basic Emotions View?

There are two obvious reasons: First, it is fair to say that human beings like "foundations," something to hold onto in this crazy, mixed-up world. It is no accident that "foundationalism" continues to drive many scholarly paradigms, not only in the sciences. Second, positivism remains alive and compelling, a means of establishing foundations for some.

Leys also speculates on scientists' attachment to a notion of altruism and social cooperation: "They therefore propose that the evolution of reliable emotional signals helps answer the basic political question of how it is that unrelated human beings can come to trust and hence cooperate with each other in civic life."

A final reason for the attachment to the Basic Emotions View that Leys does not address has to do with Ekman's cultural and political investments within the imbricated practices of science, psychology, military, government, and corporate interests in mapping the human brain and behavior. For example, Ekman's work is being used to develop various kinds of programs for training military and national security officers and airport screeners to interrogate individuals through close examination of facial expressions. The aim is to identify people who might be lying and therefore may be terrorists. These programs include the development of an "interrogation robot." Frustrated with the poor science of lie detection technology, airport security officials will use this mode of interrogation by a robot for the first screening; suspect passengers identified by their facial traits are then further interrogated by trained police.⁶ Ekman's "facial action coding system" is used by organizations like the U.S. Transportation Security Administration (TSA) for a surveillance program called SPOT — though TSA officials are unsure whether "the SPOT program has ever resulted in the arrest of anyone who is a terrorist, or who was planning to engage in terrorist-related activity."⁷ In a closely related system called FAST that was designed to augment SPOT, technologies are used to try and assess "malintent" — not just what appears on the face but "suspicious vital signs," which would then prompt further questioning. Ekman's work also inspired a recent ongoing FOX television crime-solving series called *Lie to Me*.⁸

In 1996, while developing my dissertation into book form,⁹ the concept of EQ, or "emotional quotient," essentially went viral as a meme with the publication of Daniel Goleman's popular science/self-help book *Emotional Intelligence*.¹⁰ Goleman, who has worked and written with Ekman, developed an increasingly patented approach to emotions¹¹ based on both the Basic Emotions View and presumptions about the infallibility of cognitive behavioral science, packaged in what at the time appeared to be a "radical" shift away from the overvaluation of cognition to a new appreciation of emotion. Goleman's approach, however, represents a very particular view of emotion, one that is in line with Leys's focus on Ekman. I was as disturbed

then by the implications of EQ as I am now, and the related sciences have evolved dramatically during the fifteen years since the publication of *Emotional Intelligence*. One of my concerns is how this popularized formulation forms the foundation for “character education” without taking into account anything but the most benign analyses of difference or power.¹²

One of the reasons for attachment to a Basic Views of Emotion paradigm, Leys speculates, is scientists’ reaction to a degree of cynicism that has crept arguably across the disciplines — cynicism about the possibility of truth claims, but also a cynicism about the nature of human nature: do we have any altruistic instincts whatsoever? Is there any reason to expect social cooperation on the part of hard-wired human beings?¹³

Moving beyond her question of the scientists’ attachment, Leys continues: “More puzzling, perhaps, is why certain scholars in the humanities and social sciences who are swept up in today’s general turn to affect should likewise be attracted to Ekman’s ideas.” She accuses “new affect theorists” of romanticizing the “autonomy of affect” and thereby continuing to legitimize a binaristic model of emotion.

In the remainder of this essay, I hope to clarify what these “new affect theorists” are contributing to the field, and how each of these contemporary thinkers draws on one or more philosophers from the past. Though not clearly specified, the “new affect theorists” who disappoint Leys most certainly include Brian Massumi, Nigel Thrift, and Eve Sedgwick. Other contemporary thinkers who have contributed significant theoretical approaches to studies of emotion and affect include Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Sianne Ngai, Nigel Thrift, as well as numerous philosophers — Sandra Bartky, Marilyn Frye, Alison Jaggar, Sue Campbell, and Barbara Stengel, among others. Missing from Leys’s work is attention to the work of feminist theorists of emotion from philosophy, sociology, or history who address the issues of troubling binaries throughout their work on emotions and affect.

One of the most cited theorists is Brian Massumi, who draws centrally on Spinoza as well as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in his theorizing of emotion and affect. Deleuze and Guattari are not my own first choice for this task, in part because of the rampantly superficial and often poorly understood adoption of such concepts of “rhizomes,” “lines of flight,” “nomads,” and “becomings.” But those who draw on Deleuze, like Massumi, are often also in conversation with such thinkers as Spinoza, Henri Bergson, Manuel DeLanda, John Protevi, Gilbert Simondon — in short, a host of Continental philosophers whose work, I believe, not only makes stringent efforts to transcend binaries but is committed to understanding how nature and culture work together in creating our affective ecology. Each of these thinkers contributes to better understandings of complexity theory and notions of emergence, and recognizes the inseparability of nature and culture, individual and social, human and nonhuman, human and environment or world.

In my book *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*, published in 1999 and reflecting more than a decade of work (similar to Leys’s scholarship in the book from

which her essay is drawn), I challenged conceptions of emotion as solely individual, natural, private, or biological and thus immune to social and cultural analyses. In my opening chapter, I suggest situating emotion within “economies of mind” or “economies of attention.” Within such a framework, the notions of genealogy of emotion (closely related to Raymond Williams’s concept of “structures of feeling”) allow us to trace subjugated knowledges and how “lived relations of power manifest in terms of emotions and structures of feeling.”¹⁴ In this context I wrote, “Economies of mind describes an analysis of the infinitesimal (emotions) which in turn reveals the more dispersed and ‘global’ effects of power that these discourses of emotion serve.... Emotions are a medium, a space in which difference and ethics are communicated, negotiated and shaped.”¹⁵

Within economies of mind, I defined inscribed habits of emotional (in)attention. In part as an alternative to notions of the “unconscious,” these “‘inscribed habits of attention’ describe the selectivity of our attention. For example, how do we choose/learn which emotions in ourselves and others to notice and attend to? I am particularly interested in how these inscribed habits of inattention are embedded in discourses.”¹⁶

How might we explain these “inaccessible” parts of our psyche as a result of socially determined “inscribed habits of inattention”? It may be that in the civilizing process, and in obtaining language, we came to “repress” many of our feelings. However, I would argue that we can interrogate such a phenomenon as repression through close examination of specific historical and cultural rules as they are applied to different classes and persons. In the course of my book *Feeling Power*, a central question I pose is: How do culturally patterned inscribed habits of inattention account for these silences? I introduce the idea of genealogies of emotion within the economies of mind as a means of asking us to develop and cultivate a renewed mindful awareness of our emotional and affective experience. Too often these are reactive, the product of habit; to demand genealogies of emotion from ourselves or others will require accounts of both self and society, nature and culture, and histories of the present to account for the felt and embodied moment of now.

The notion of inscribed habits of inattention invites much more detailed work on how John Dewey’s consideration of emotion, learning, growth, and habit work together, and resonates with Sara Ahmed’s 2004 book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.¹⁷ Here I turn to the recent work of Barbara Stengel, who analyzes these dilemmas:

Dewey’s original musings on emotion were prompted in part by the widely held view that “feelings, dwelling antecedently in the soul, were supposed to be the causes of acts,” and in part by William James’s highly controversial contention that awareness of bodily states just *was* the emotion. Like James, Dewey did not accept a cognitivist view of emotion, but felt that James ran too far in the other direction, reducing emotion to a bodily function and maintaining a divide between body and mind, feeling and thought. Dewey takes a predictably pragmatist view, insisting that we look to *external changes* to understand an act’s quality.

Remember that for Dewey, human behavior is largely habit-based — until previously useful habits fail in specific lived circumstances, kicking intelligent thinking into gear.

Below we see that for Dewey, habits are not merely practices that issue from resolved thought; rather, habits *are* the resolution of idea, disposition or act, and affect. Habits hold affect in relation to act and idea. And perceptible concepts are a kind of habit.¹⁸

Ahmed describes emotions as kinds of movements, deriving this meaning from the Latin *emovere*, to move or to move out. She states “Of course, emotions are not only about movement, they are also about attachments, or about what connects us to this or that.”¹⁹ As Stengel summarizes,

Sara Ahmed suggests that emotions are key in defining body boundaries because they help to shape how we relate to each other, creating a cycle of affective actions and reactions. Ahmed’s relational model removes the distinction between the psychological and social, individual and collective nature for emotions, arguing that “emotions are not ‘in’ either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects.”²⁰

In conclusion, the reasons for developing accounts of affect and emotion that defy the black ice of binaries are not simply to try and satisfy that perennial itch of how might we know what *we* feel, much less how we might know *other* minds — questions that have plagued humans from time immemorial.

Leys’s careful scholarship invites philosophers of education — as exemplified here by Stengel’s work — to create bridges between theories of emotion and affect, the burgeoning area of neuroscience, and educational practices concerned with freedom of thought.

Leys wonders why there continues to be attachment to the Darwinian Basic Emotions View — an arguably “dangerous” view, which posits some number of emotions as universal and neurobiologically experienced prior to conscious awareness. Yet some reasons for attachment to the Basic Emotions View are more worrisome than others. Leys’s account does not address the sociopolitical, military, and national governmental security applications of Ekman’s work on facial expressions. The applications of Ekman’s facial recognition patterns for training airport security officers to identify “suspected terrorists” represents a disturbing use of this so-called “scientific knowledge.” Historians of science would do well to contribute as public intellectuals and help to challenge the increasingly wedded interests of scientific enterprise with corporate and government research into such phenomena as emotion.

Neuroscience — funded by corporate, military, Hollywood, and government entities — is committed to developing a science that will ensure no one can hide lying eyes or disguised smiles. The stakes of neuroscience are high. While I am curious and interested in the ongoing questions surrounding philosophy of mind, how science and the humanities may converse, and the most adequate and compelling theorization and account of emotion, despite these fascinating directions, I suggest that we take a page from Professor Leys and carefully track how science and philosophy are working together to microscopically map the human body, its capacities and limits, and its plasticity and vulnerabilities, all of which return us to a different order of question, regarding the ethics and potential violation of privacies posed by neuromarketing science.

In what directions might philosophers of education take up and pursue the implications of Leys's work? Building on the respected work of Antonio Damasio, scholar Nigel Thrift urges, "We require a microbiopolitics of the subliminal, much of which takes place in the half-second delay ... one which understands the kind of biological-cum-cultural gymnastics that takes place in this realm."²¹ The half-second delay refers to studies that show this gap between action and cognition. According to such accounts, we are in essence, always a half-second behind, "late for consciousness."

Potentially, then, investigating the microbiopolitics of the subliminal productively begins with an exploration of "minding the gap."²² Minding the gap alerts us to the infinite challenge of theorizing and understanding the relationship of humans and emotions, acknowledging that which escapes our consciousness, remains ineffable, subliminal, and "leaks" from its assigned and presumed "boundaried" containers — real or imagined.

1. For the exchange in *Critical Inquiry*, see Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Spring 2011): 434–472; William E. Connolly, "The Complexity of Intention," and Ruth Leys, "Affect and Intention: A Reply to William E. Connolly," both in *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Summer 2011): 791–805; and Adam Frank and Elizabeth A. Wilson, "Like-Minded," Charles Altieri, "Affect, Intentionality, and Cognition: A Response to Ruth Leys," and Ruth Leys, "Facts and Moods: Reply to My Critics," all in *Critical Inquiry* 38 (Summer 2012): 870–891.

2. Paul Ekman, *Telling Lies: Clues to Deceit in the Marketplace, Politics, and Marriage* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

3. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

4. Alan J. Fridlund, *Human Facial Expression: An Evolutionary View* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1994).

5. Again, the reader is left to wonder about the intended audience of this essay: for philosophers of education acquainted with epistemological and ontological debates surrounding the role of nature and culture, Fridlund's work reads as a bit less radical or intellectually revolutionary than Leys's positioning of it would suggest.

6. Adam Higginbotham, "Deception Is Futile When Big Brother's Lie Detector Turns Its Eyes on You," *Wired Magazine*, January 17, 2013; <http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2013/01/ff-lie-detector>.

7. Sharon Weinberger, "Airport Security: Intent to Deceive?," *Nature* 465 (May 26, 2010): 412–415; <http://www.nature.com/news/2010/100526/full/465412a.html>.

8. Given the intensification of attention to brain and neuroscience and its implications and the corresponding popular fascination with such matters, one might wonder how the breadth and depth of Leys's grasp of these issues might productively be used with a view toward a public intellectualism, toward inciting more public discussion and understanding of science around some of the troubling aspects of this science of emotions. However, her work does not tend to investigate the political or socio-ethical aspects of scientific knowledge.

9. Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

10. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995).

11. Goleman is involved with several business ventures associated with the profitable marketing of emotional "intelligence" (see, for example, <http://www.slideshare.net/LearningTree/managing-emotional-intelligence>; and <http://www.ic.gc.ca/app/ccc/srch/nvgt.do?lang=eng&prtl=1&sbPrtl=&estblmntNo=123456128180&profile=cmpltPrfl&profileId=1961&app=sold>). In addition, the website for the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations, which is codirected by Goleman, lists partnerships with the government (the U.S. Department of Defense) and with corporations (ranging

from American Express to Johnson and Johnson). The site also makes available a number of tests of “emotional intelligence”; see http://www.eiconsortium.org/about_us.htm.

12. See Boler, *Feeling Power*; Boler, “Taming the Labile Other: Disciplined Emotions in Popular and Academic Discourses,” in *Philosophy of Education 1997*, ed. Susan Laird (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1998); and Megan Boler, “Emotional Quotient: The Taming of the Alien,” *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 21, no. 2 (1999): 4; <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/discourse/vol21/iss2/4>.

13. See, for example, Megan Boler, ed., *Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times* (Boston: MIT Press, 2008); and Megan Boler and Selena Nemorin, “Dissent, Truthiness, and Skepticism in the Global Media Landscape: Twenty-First Century Propaganda in Times of War,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, eds. Jonathan Auerback and Russ Castronovo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

14. Boler, *Feeling Power*, 20.

15. Ibid., 21.

16. Ibid., 16.

17. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

18. Barbara Stengel, “Schooled to Fear: Case Studies of Educative Feeling and Miseducative Emotion” (Kneller lecture delivered at the annual meeting of the American Educational Studies Association, Pittsburgh, PA, November 6, 2009).

19. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 11.

20. Stengel, “Schooled to Fear.”

21. Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 192.

22. See Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); see also Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Avon Books, 1994).