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Affect

Mark J. Lovas, University of Pardubice


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***The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique*, by Ruth Leys, University of Chicago Press, 2017, 389 pages, 022648856X, \$35.**

Mark J. Lovas, University of Pardubice and Charles University

Ruth Leys's *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique* is a history of the science of emotion since World War Two, and it is much more. The book contains a wealth of argumentation and analysis. The book argues that psychologists (and philosophers) have not given an adequate theory of intentionality. Another striking theme is how they have dealt with the problem of other minds. Wanting an epistemological foundation for our knowledge of other minds, they have responded by supposing that there are signs (a face or a smile) not in need of interpretation.

After an Introduction devoted to philosophical stage-setting, Leys proceeds to Silvan S. Tomkins's "affect theory". Chapter Two, devoted to Paul Ekman's neurocultural theory, is followed by two chapters on Richard S. Lazarus's appraisal theory. A discussion of Fridlund's behavioral ecology approach and the numerous problems with the neurocultural approach in Chapter Five lead to the question posed in Chapter Six: why has Ekman's approach continued to be so influential? Chapter Seven takes up the "emotional turn" in the humanities and social sciences. An Epilogue is devoted to a recent discussion at the Newsletter of the International Society for Research on Emotion in which current researchers representing Basic Emotion Theory (Dachner Keltner and Daniel Cordaro), exchanged views with Russell and Fridlund. There are two appendices: "Animal Signaling, the Smile, and the Handicap Principle," and "Damasio's Somatic Marker Hypothesis."

Common-sense, as well as philosophical wisdom says that emotions have intentionality: they are about something. When Romeo loves Juliette, his love is about her, and being about her is essential to the nature of that emotion. Yet, for Ekman, the object is demoted to a mere "trip wire". Once the emotion program has started running, it has a life of its own. Surely there are amorous relationships characterized by such a disconnect, and perhaps this is especially true when the lovers are as young as Shakespeare's characters, yet this sort of example, where the emotion persists independently of its object, is a questionable paradigm for our emotional life.

Ekman supposes there are a small number of basic emotions. Each is supposed to have a distinctive physiology, and a characteristic facial expression. Emotion expression is universal and automatic. To demonstrate the universality of facial expression, Ekman and Friesen chose a strategy inspired by Darwin. Displaying photographs of faces to members of both an industrial and pre-industrial society, if the two groups selected the same emotion term as naming the emotion expressed by the face, that would be evidence for a commonality that transcended cultures. But how does one decide which facial pose should be pictured in the first place? One would have to know that precisely *this* face denotes precisely *this* emotion.

Leys wants us to see the “sheer strangeness” of these images “as scientific documents” (p. 78). The photographs are torn out of any normal social context. They are portraits of individuals who have posed, following directions from the experimenters. A presupposition here is that the experimenter knows the “right face” to express a given emotion. How did the investigator manage to know that? Tomkins was convinced of the correctness of his chosen faces when experimental subjects produced the ‘correct’ label for a face—after being given a short list of possible choices. But one might well ask, as Leys does: How was it that Tomkins himself managed to know which emotion was expressed in a given face? His approach assumes that he possessed this knowledge. The experiment which “confirmed” his prior belief was not an independent test. Nor did Ekman’s research avoid this problem. (In a fascinating discussion, Leys draws on the work of Stéphanie Dupouy to show how these problems already arose in 1862 with Duchenne du Boulogne’s physiognomic research.)

The faces seem to be extreme caricatures, but Ekman has claimed that ordinarily we tone down our facial expressions on account of social conventions. If we allowed ourselves to behave naturally, our faces would look like the photographs that Ekman used in his research. No wonder that Fridlund suggested there was a bit of Rousseau’s Romanticism here: Our true wild selves would look like those posed photos if we weren’t held down by display rules.

Display rules and leakage are notions central to Ekman’s account, but Fridlund made sharp criticisms of each. The notion of a display rule allows the theory to have both a biological (universal) foundation and allow variety in expression due to culturally varied display rules. Two individuals of different cultures might feel the same thing, but one might not show it because following a display rule unique to her culture. “Leakage” happens when the automatic face of emotion occurs: the true emotion “leaks” out before the person is able to control of it.

A canonical study by Ekman and Fridlund found that Japanese students responding to the same stress-inducing film displayed different expressions than their counterparts in the USA. It was claimed that the difference was due to display rules. However, in what Leys terms a “brilliant dissection and dismantling” (p. 252), Fridlund pointed out that the Japanese students might have been simply attending to the experimenter’s assistant who sat with his back to the film, questioning them. It was on account of their politeness -- “*politesse*” -- that they smiled, not

because they suppressed their emotions. What's more, the American students might have been histrionic. In any case, in the alone condition, when the experimenter's assistant was not present, the two groups did not differ.

Leys points out that Ekman's sharpest critics (Feldmann Barrett and Russell) want to hold on to basic emotion theory's divide between a biological, non-intentional emotional nature, and the intentional. Despite all the problems with the theory and Ekman's failure to be consistent in his formulations, researchers have been unwilling abandon that dualism and follow the lines laid out in Fridlunds's behavioral ecology. This book might well change that.

Mark J. Lovas holds a Ph.D. in Ancient Philosophy from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. For twenty years he has alternated between teaching EFL/ESP and Philosophy in Central Europe. He has published in Think, Organon F and the now defunct Journal of Mundane Behavior. His novella, A Neurotic in an Exotic Land, is set in Bratislava, capital of the Slovak Republic.