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## Book Review: The History of Emotions: An Introduction

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## Book Review:

### **The History of Emotions: An Introduction**

*The History of Emotions: An Introduction*, Jan Plamper, (Translated by Keith Tribe), Oxford University Press, 2015, 352 pages, 978-0199668335, \$37.83.

Mark Lovas, University of Pardubice

The History of Emotions is a work of great erudition. It surveys a great deal of research from anthropology, brain science, history, philosophy, psychology, and sociology. There is a valuable critique of hasty borrowings from neuroscience, and a lengthy critique of Paul Ekman's research. This book is a translation from the German original and contains numerous references to research in German (as well as some in French) and suggestions about specific places where historical research needs to be done. Although the reviewer cannot claim to possess the erudition of this book's author, where he was familiar with the literature being reviewed, the summaries were perceptive and clear. Where the reviewer had no prior acquaintance with the literature surveyed, the summaries were often mysterious.

Early and late into the book, Plamper alludes to his own research into military fear. Two of the most lively and engaging pages occur when, near the end of the book, he discusses his own methodology when dealing with a text containing a logical gap. The description of a battle suddenly loses coherence. The researcher discovers what was unsaid, but essential for understanding: the soldiers were frightened and fled.

In this example, fear is primarily viewed as an interfering factor. Consider an alternative analysis: The soldiers' flight was not evidence of an interference from outside the domain of Reason (or Authority). Individual soldiers reassessed the situation. They had a new judgment or a new perception of the overall situation. The battle began with soldiers saying to themselves, "Best just to follow orders." However, as the battle proceeded, each individual soldier now said to himself, "No, it's not best just to follow orders." This potential for reanalysis brings to light the deepest flaw of this work: Plamper does not attempt to set out a basic theory or view about basis of emotion.

The author does set out (on p. 39) a list of basic questions about the nature of emotion, but then begs off attempting to answer them. Even there, his formulations are not always clear. I choose two questions as illustrative. First, what are "the emotional components of judgment or evaluation?" This formulation is unclear. It would be clearer if the author explained the term "component." As it stands, Plamper might have in mind that emotion distorts judgment or that it aids judgment. Recent work in "analytic" philosophy has often aimed to show that the emotions

provide essential insights, and Aristotle thought having the right sorts of emotions was key to living well. It's not clear where exactly Plamper stands on the question. Plamper also adds a separate question: whether a historical individual's social role influenced their self-interpretation. This is a fascinating question, but distinct from the question whether or to what extent emotion influences judgment.

Plamper's last question urges researchers to consider how emotion connects to morality. He goes on to write a complex sentence laden with presuppositions: "If historical actors give ethical reasons for their actions, expressing in this way the interconnection between feeling and morality, this lends their emotions a meaning distinct from that in societies where emotion and morality are treated as unrelated" (p. 39). Why should giving an "ethical reason" mean there is a connection between feeling and morality? Which societies are those in which morality and emotion are unrelated? Presumably the author has in mind his earlier discussion of Maori warriors, but he does not pay the reader the courtesy of saying as much. Among the Maori, fear is connected to supernatural forces, and that may absolve actors of agency; but, even there, the emotions and actions they lead to have consequences for the happiness of individuals—and, that, too, is one notion of morality.

The most ambitious goal of the book is to lay to rest a dispute between two strands of thinking about emotion—the Social Constructivists of Chapter Two (also described as "Relativists") and the Universalists of Chapter Three. In her research about Pashtun women in Pakistan, Benedicte Grima found their reaction to marriage is a public display of sadness. Moreover, when a family member or friend suffers misfortune, sadness is expressed only in private. What conclusion does Plamper draw on the basis of this research? "As in Chapter Three we once again see that studies like that of Grima overturn the idea that emotions are universal" (p. 251).

Even Paul Ekman, an arch universalist, won't simply topple over when hearing of this study. As Plamper himself knows, a universalist can concede there is cultural variation in the expression of emotion. So, there is no overturning to be found in this example. In the language of appraisals, one might say that among these Pashtun women, events which would warrant an appraisal of happiness for North American or European women, warrant an appraisal of sadness. Not the emotion itself, but the appraisal varies. When Plamper goes on to give a fuller explanation, we learn that the Pashtun women are not actually appraising the very same event as North Americans or Europeans. For the Pashtun women, marriage means being dominated and oppressed by female relatives. If marriage had that consequence everywhere, then Europeans and North Americans would most likely be saddened by the prospect as well.

Plamper looks to William M. Reddy to dissolve the conflict between Universalists and Relativists. Reddy's overarching purpose was to let anthropologists provide insights about other cultures, while making it possible at the same time to evaluate a culture—thereby violating the anthropologist's relativism. Grima wanted to say that Muslim culture oppressed women. A consistent relativism would have prevented her from saying that. Reddy wants to restore the possibility of a "normative" point of view and allow Grima to criticize another culture.

Plamper explains Reddy's proposal (he calls it an "argument"): "by describing a condition of the world using emotion we also seek to influence this condition; thus, we are adopting an evaluative stance" (p. 234). He provides an example: "I am sad." It is, he tells us, partially a description of a condition (of how I feel), but also "the intensification of one among several emotions and so a diminution or overwriting of other emotions." One chooses to say that it is this emotion, not another which one feels. There seems to be the suggestion that one might (with equal justification or right) have chosen to describe one's emotion differently. Other emotions are "overwritten." What is the metaphysics here?

We seem to have the clearest rejection of any objectivism about emotions. If my choice of language is so decisive, then there is no fact of the matter about how I really feel. It appears that no one knows what he or she really feels because there is no such thing as what we really feel, what our real emotions are. Are our choices about how to describe our emotions totally unconstrained?

Later we are told that we are constrained by the danger of "overheating" or by contradiction. There is as well the danger that our society limits our choices so that we suffer from a too narrow realm of choices, leading to "emotional suffering." Plamper correctly observes that there is a problem here with "truth and objectivity" (p. 262). Indeed, there is such a problem, and it would have been worth spelling it out in more detail. The sort of constraints Reddy places upon emotion and emotion language are not of the right sort. What would an alternative view look like? Suppose emotions are adequate insofar as they are an adequate response to another person or aspect of the world, and so not a matter of choice. The value of a particular emotion depends upon whether it fits an independent reality. It may be possible to reasonably react to one person or situation with different emotions, but the ultimate success of an emotional reaction is determined by how it is with the person or situation in the world to which one responds emotionally. There are many discussions of the rationality of emotion (See, e.g., de Sousa and Scarantino 2018, Section Ten.) but this is a topic which Plamper avoids.

How, in any case, does Reddy's proposal help Grima? We are told that emotion language has both a descriptive and a normative aspect. Universalists focus upon one aspect of emotion language, while relativists focus upon a different aspect. So far, so good, but how does this save Grima from contradiction? Is the idea that she can choose which aspect to emphasize, so a normative stance is allowed her? But, then, when should we choose a normative stance and when a descriptive stance? Or, are we supposed to have learned that evaluation is unavoidable, and therefore Grima is innocent? However, in that case, what is there to say of the universalists? Are they simply blind to the normative side of emotional language? So much is unclear here!

There is much to take exception within this sprawling work; however, the core difficulty is the author's unwillingness to tie himself down on the nature of emotion. It is widely recognized in the contemporary (Plamper would say "analytic") philosophical literature that emotions are complex entities. The philosopher Aaron Ben Ze'ev (Ben Ze'ev 2017) suggests the four basic components of emotion are "cognition, evaluation, motivation, and feeling." This complexity (de Sousa and Sarantino 2018 speak of "mult-dimensional heterogeneity.") means generalizations about emotions will not be straightforward. Plamper confesses to feeling a need for the category of

“emotion” as a “meta-category”, thereby allowing himself as a historian to make generalizations (p. 38). However, those very generalizations will be suspect if they involve treating emotion as a lump, rather than a complex entity. Indeed, in the analysis of Grima’s work, discussed above, it is precisely on account of treating emotion as a lump that Plamper was able to leap to the conclusion that the objectivist about emotion had been defeated.

This version of the history of emotion is built on shaky foundations. Additionally, as we have seen in our discussion of the account of Reddy’s work, summaries are offered which fail to provide clarification. Having a view about the nature of emotion need not be an obstacle to scholarly objectivity; it can provide a structure by which to organize a summary, recognize weak and strong points in a theory, elaborate and clarify points where an original formulation was unclear.

The History of Emotions may provide an accurate summary of much of what has been written on the subject of emotion; however, insofar as the author fails to adequately respect the complexity of the emotions, the book itself cannot be counted a history of the complex psychological phenomenon which is emotion.

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