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Bridge and chasm: Holistic education and the ambivalent nature of emotionality

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Abstract

Bridge and chasm: Holistic education and the ambivalent nature of emotionality. – The world of emotions is ambivalent. This chapter distinguishes several levels of that ambivalence, posing a fundamental question about the extent to which the contemporary family, school and society are able to cultivate all aspects of a human being, including his or her emotions and feelings. Do we need to educate our hearts? And can anthropology be helpful in that endeavour?

Keywords: emotions, feelings, education, human being, holistic approach

Klíčová slova: emoce, pocity, výchova, lidská bytost, holistický přístup

This chapter looks at holistic education, the goal of which is to develop all aspects of the individual, including his or her emotionality. Why is contemporary society in conflict with such an objective? And what are the consequences for our educational system? In my search for answers, I must first describe the personal nature of human emotionality; the world of emotions, affect, and feelings is characterized by a fundamental ambivalence that is manifested on several mutually interconnected and yet to some extent distinguishable levels. I shall look at them one at a time.

1 The ambivalence of emotional bonds

The first level is emotional practice. When emotions come into play, people often agree and nearly as often disagree. The ambivalence of emotional bonds is clear: emotions form invisible bridges between people but nearly as often dig moats between them and open up gaping chasms. This is a trivial fact that, on its own, is not even worth mentioning. But what is less trivial and what people are not always aware of is that even negative emotions tie people to one another: such ties are not necessarily pleasant, and yet they are a kind of bond. Even if someone arouses feelings of anger or disgust within us, in a way these feelings bind them to us: we are forced to deal with them.

Some manipulative psychopaths even enjoy the negative emotions that they arouse in those around them; they draw energy from the fact that people break down because of them or become angry at them. A more moderate level of this affliction might involve calling attention to oneself through provocative speech, actions, or behaviour; psychopaths don't lose any sleep over the emotional or social price that the people around them pay for such demeanour. Manipulating people – in the family, at school, in the workplace – is such a widespread phenomenon that it merits greater attention than it currently receives. After all, manipulative actions are rarely possible without at least the partial emotional involvement of those being

manipulated. Often, it is people's emotions that – hand in hand with seemingly rational arguments – pull the victims of manipulation into a trap or force them into the temporary dependence that manipulators need to achieve their objective.

Emotions are thus fundamentally ambivalent – they come into play in the worst and the most noble situations: They may change these situations for better or for worse, or – conversely – they may neutralize them; they have the power to block as well as unblock whatever stands between people. They may lead us into dependence, or they may liberate us. It often depends on the specific situation and context in which the given emotion is embedded, experienced and perceived, expressed and analysed.

2 Emotions as a semantic domain

The second level of emotions' ambivalence results from their verbal and conceptual unfathomableness, which is expressed in several different ways:

Interlinguistically: Interlinguistic variability is immense, and the moment we leave behind the relatively comfortable shell of Indo-European languages, which form but an imperceptible fraction of humankind's linguistic diversity, we encounter the surprising inventiveness with which the world's many different languages use their own expressions to describe what we, in our cultural realm, call emotions. The semantic domain of emotions is often structured differently than we might expect, influenced as we are by our own linguistic ideas. Even the outer boundaries of this domain – meaning what is understood as emotionality and what is not – differ from one language to the next.[1]

Anthropologists have engaged in much long-term field research and written many monographic studies, each of them about a particular word, one difficult to translate into the Indo-European languages, that is used to express a certain emotion, feeling, or a more generally affective psychophysiological state that the locals have no difficulty understanding but that initially leaves outside observers amazed and later costs them much effort, sometimes lasting several years, before they fully understand this word and are able to at least roughly translate it into the standard European languages, usually not as just one word but using entire stories to help clarify its meaning.[2]

Our emotional lexicon is thus not a linguistically universal entity: its specific form differs from one language to the next not only according in which lexemes cover this field but also, and more fundamentally, in how the boundaries of this field are defined and whether a particular language even has a clearly defined place for this field. I will return later to the question of whether all this diversity nevertheless hides a universally shared core.

Culturally: Interlinguistic variability is further amplified by intercultural differences, for it is often the case that even when we at first glance use the same words for the domain of emotionality, this seeming harmony disappears if we begin to notice the concrete values with which a culture associates the given word. Even a lexical similarity can thus be mere semblance, for in actuality it is associated with different values and ideas. For instance, even

[1] See, e.g., BESNIER, Niko. Language and affect. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 1990, vol. 19, pp. 419–451.
[2] See, e.g., the essays collected in SCHWEDER, Richard A., LEVINE, Robert A. (eds.). *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

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such basic a categorization as dividing emotions into positive and negative is not culturally universal: Research has shown that some emotions considered positive in Europe may, for instance, cause depression among representatives of Asian cultures.[3]

In this sense, the experience and perception of emotions is culturally relative. In fact, there is even disagreement on whether we can divide emotions into positive and negative at all. Some authors – including those from our cultural domain, such as the philosopher Kristján Kristjánsson[4] – are convinced that no emotions can be meaningfully labelled positive or negative.

Structurally: A far from insignificant aspect of the relationship between verbal expression and emotionality is the emotional tone of words: the emotional flavour that the speakers of a particular language unconsciously associate with a certain word, usually without being aware of this flavour. The adjective *federal* has a slightly, almost imperceptibly, negative flavour in British English, while the German equivalent *föderal, föderativ* has a slightly, almost imperceptibly, positive flavour. Just as all emotions remain slightly outside the light of full awareness, most native speakers remain unaware of these subtle differences, which are a structurally fixed part of any language, unless we force them to think about them:

We are, therefore, subliminally controlled by a word's particular emotional flavour without, for the most part, reflecting on this control. This is the essence of emotional flavour. During the formerly never-ending British-German debate about whether the European Union should or should not be federal (the Germans were overwhelming for a federally organized Europe, while the British were against it), both parties spent years not realizing that they were approaching the entire issue from opposite starting points that were informed by an opposite verbal emotionality. We can even find different emotional flavours among variants of the same language: the noun *compromise* is slightly positive in British English, while it is more negative in American English.

Con-situationally: Even within the same language, one and the same semantic prototype can be updated differently depending on the context in which it is used or the specific situation that it describes. In the linguistics of discourse, the term con-situation is used to describe both situation and context. Any interpretation of verbal meaning is con-situationally conditioned. This also applies to the meanings of the expressions we use for emotional states, meaning within the semantic domain of emotionality.

If the area of emotionality is not always semantically easy to grasp and its verbal expressions are not easily transferred onto a common, universalistic denominator between different cultures, then perhaps the situation can be made clearer if we ignore the lexical-semantic networks that cover this area and instead focus on the universal psychophysical mechanism by which emotionality functions. Here, too, however, we encounter new ambivalences, as we shall see in the passage below.

[3] LEU, Janxin, WANG, Jennifer, KOO, Kelly. Are positive emotions just as "positive" across cultures? *Emotion*, 2011, vol. 11, n. 4, pp. 994–999.
[4] KRISTJÁNSSON, Kristján. On the very idea of "negative emotions". *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 2003, vol. 33, n. 4, pp. 351–364.

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3 Emotions between the physical and the mental, between the individual and society

The third level of emotionality's ambivalence rests in the fact that emotions are not *stricto sensu* a purely mental phenomenon, nor are they a purely physical expression; in addition, they are neither an exclusively individual nor an exclusively sociocultural phenomenon. As the word's etymology hints, emotions (from the Latin *e-motus*, 'moved') set something within us into motion; they relate to *motio* – motility. Nevertheless, the general agreement that exists on the question of etymology does little to help explain the nature of emotions, for there is no agreement at all on the question of what it is that is set into motion. As a result, "emotions go undefined in most current emotion research, creating chaos."[5]

And so today we have a vibrant tradition of research that is based on the scientific conviction that emotions must be understood as primarily physical responses that are transformed into feelings in the mind, while emotions and feelings are essentially of a biological nature: the classical example of this thinking is Damasio.[6] Similarly, there also exists a theory that, in the spirit of Bourdieu, understands emotions as a kind of social practice, and so it is studied from a sociocentric perspective. According to this view, emotions – like all social practices – have their own history, meaning that they can be studied historically, for such is their nature.[7]

As we can see, emotions move not only people, but also entire areas of human knowledge and congnitive processes. I do not have the slightest ambition to adjudicate the conflict between those who view emotions as a biological fact and those who study them differently. Humankind is apparently not any poorer if contemporary studies of emotions continue along several concurrent lines of thought and according to various paradigms, as long as each of them can tell us something essential about emotions that we would not have known otherwise. This is all the more true if these paradigms manage to engage in dialogue with one another – which does occur, however rarely. There is little point in damning this or that school of thought for not bearing fruit: what might seem like a dead end today may prove to be the right path tomorrow. The history of knowledge, ideas, and thought offers an abundance of proof.

Emotions are thus imbued with the ability to deepen the chasm between various modes of cognition, each of which attempts to appropriate emotions' elusive nature in its own way; at the same time, however, emotions encourage attempts at bridging these chasms by taking a holistic view wherever there is interest in it. For purposes of this essay, I understand emotions as something that has both a physical as well as a mental side and that therefore makes sense to study from all partial as well as holistic angles as long as there exists a willingness among these viewpoints to engage in dialogue and understanding and none of them has the tendency to proudly stick out above the others and declare itself the only true form of knowledge. Such epistemological hubris generally does not help the acquisition of knowledge.

[5] SCHEFF, Thomas. "What are emotions? A physical theory." *Review of General Psychology*, 2015, vol. 19, n. 4, p. 458.
[6] DAMASIO, Antonio R. Emotion in the perspective of an integrated nervous system. *Brain Research Reviews*, 1998, vol., 26, n. 2–3, pp. 83–86.
[7] SCHEER, Monique. Are emotions a kind of practice (and is that what makes them have a history)? A Bourdieuian approach to understanding emotion. *History and Theory*, 2012, vol. 51, n. 2, pp. 193–220.

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One could counter: Is it not physicality, meaning the physical aspect of emotionality, that is capable of bridging any linguistic, cultural, or cognitive relativism associated, one way or another, with human mental activity and that translates scattered viewpoints into the longed-for common denominator of the kind of knowledge that will be undoubtedly universal in the same way as those aspects of our physicality that we share with all people? Is not this approach precisely what will liberate us from at least some of the ambivalences associated with emotionality that we were talking about before? One such attempt took place in the field of psychology. Let us look at how it turned out.

4 Emotions between essentialism and constructionism

The fourth level is paradigmatic. It brings together both ontological as well as epistemological and methodological elements. There is not enough room here for a complete discussion of this level, but its dynamics and contradictory tension can be illustrated by looking at an example from the history of studying emotions that has been chosen to at least reflect other paradigmatic conflicts about emotions, although I will not delve into these in detail.

The question as to whether there exist several basic emotions that are universal to all cultures and that are experienced by all members of *Homo sapiens* is one that engaged the psychologist Paul Ekman.[8] According to his original works, there are at least six basic emotions (happiness, sorrow, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust) that are neurologically and physically rooted in human physiology and whose physiognomic expressions (facial expressions) are universally understood by all cultures.

In order to confirm his hypothesis, Ekman tested the ability to identify faces from photographs and to assign each facial expression a relevant emotional category even among members of New Guinea's Fore tribe, who had no knowledge of film and who had remained untouched by Western values, images, and imagination (see Ekman, Friesen).[9] He found that the ability to assign each particular emotional category to the corresponding photograph is inherent to all people regardless of cultural differences. In his experiment, he used the same number of verbal categories as there were photographs, each of which showed a face expressing some emotion.

For many years, his theory was considered proof that we experience and perceive basic emotions independently from culture, society, and history, for they are a universal part of the human race's psychophysiological equipment and as such are rooted in corporeality, which is the same for all members of our species. The view of emotions thus became essentialistic (our emotions are by their essence physical responses) and deterministic (their physical side is defining for people). Ekman's position seemed quite unshakable – at least in this area, universalism ruled and the relativists' objections were irrelevant.

Only recently have there appeared studies that question this paradigm at its very foundations. The ground-breaking work in this area was done by the Canadian neuroscientist

[8] EKMAN, Paul. Basic emotions. In DALGLEISH, Tim, POWER, Mick J. (eds.). *Handbook of Cognition and Emotion*. Hoboken: Wiley, 1999, pp. 45–60.
[9] EKMAN, Paul, FRIESEN, Wallace V. Constants across cultures in the face and emotion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1971, vol. 17, n. 2, pp. 124–129.

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Lisa Feldman Barret, who summarized her research in the book *How Emotions Are Made*.[10] Barret's extensive surveys found that facial expressions are not universal, and her use of neuroimaging caused her to reach the conclusion that the human brain possesses no clearly defined centres for certain emotions. According to Barret, emotions are a complex construct, shaped in part by our memories and prior experiences, as well as by social relations and the momentary situational context. They are far less deterministic that they appeared in Ekman's view. And they are decidedly not essentialist: We have far greater freedom in shaping and controlling emotions, because to a certain extent we participate in their formation. Where psychology had previously been dominated by the essentialist paradigm, today an opposite, constructionist viewpoint is increasingly asserting itself.

In other words: Not even by scanning nerve impulses or studying the physical foundation of emotionality can we arrive at a universal formula that might capture all emotions. The conflict between the universalists and the relativists remains unresolved, but if we were to place any significance on where the volatile and ever-changing scientific developments are currently headed, it would seem that the constructionist view is increasingly asserting itself over essentialism and biological determinism. For now, the attempt at finding a universal key to the world of emotions in the physical side of our emotionality does not look successful – at least not successful enough to convince the majority of researchers that it is the only possible approach.

I don't think it is necessary to argue for one or the other side of the conflict: We shall let it evolve naturally. From a certain remove, we can see one important circumstance, and that is that the current state of scientific knowledge reveals other ambivalences associated with emotions: People fail to agree not only on the conceptual frameworks, but also on the basic epistemological standpoint with which emotions should be approached if we are to learn anything meaningful from them. This multiplicity of approaches is found not only in the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, but also in the large number of contradictory approaches that characterize various forms of therapy, spirituality, religion, philosophy, and other forms of cognition and ways of coming to terms with the world.

As we can see, the world of emotions is the subject of interest among essentialists and constructionists, universalists and relativists, determinists and indeterminists, and staunch followers of both the biocentric and sociocentric viewpoint. In addition, all these divisions are meaningfully addressed by the supporters of methodological individualism as well as followers of methodological collectivism: emotions do not belong only to me, nor do they belong only to society. In the broader sense of the word, even this diversity is part of the changing (one might almost say, vibrant) ambivalence that is an integral part of the world of emotionality and that relates, directly and indirectly, to our humanity, meaning the ancient question of what makes us human. Man is movement – often also because he is emotion.

5 Emotions and humanity

The fifth level relates to emotionality and rationality as integral components of human beings that define the fullness of our humanity. Ever since the Enlightenment, Europeans have experienced the hegemony of reason, which endures in changed form to this day and which,

[10] BARRETT, Lisa Feldman. *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

through colonialism and globalization, has spread to nearly the entire planet. Modernity and rationality are closely related, for modernity defined itself in opposition to earlier epochs by casting off their irrational prejudices and placing Newtonian-Galilean science on the pedestal of knowledge. Soon, however, some thinkers realized that such a narrowly understood rationality may be a prejudice of its own kind – one that is all the more intractable because it has yielded unquestioned fruits in the areas of scientific discovery and technological inventions that facilitate practical aspects of our lives and that are thus enthusiastically welcomed.

One such thinker is Franz Boas, who today is considered a founding father of cultural anthropology. Boas may at first glance strike us as a paradoxical figure. He is a typical nineteenth-century scientific rationalist, someone who introduced scientific systematicity and methodology into the study of other cultures, someone whose holistic approach went against the era's ruling evolutionist (and often racist) paradigm. As a Jew forced out of Germany by the antisemitism of that country's academic community, he understood the need to approach non-European cultures without prejudice, meaning without any preconceived notions of the superiority of European thinking.

His research was guided by a rationalism that was not in contradiction with the Enlightenment conviction that reason should be free of prejudice. In a certain sense, he brought the rationalist legacy of the Enlightenment to its logical conclusion. Enlightenment thinkers sought to break free from all superstitions and from unreasonable (meaning impossible to defend by reason) convictions of the past, especially those from the Christian Middle Ages. Boas expanded the Enlightenment break free from past prejudices (i.e., to break free from them in time) to include efforts at breaking free from these prejudices in space, meaning in relation to cultures not influenced by Europe. These, too, should be studied in the spirit of unbiased science and pure reason. All this makes Boas a rationalist *par excellence*.

At the same time, however, especially in his lectures throughout Europe, he spoke of the need for education and upbringing, which he called by the German word *Herzensbildung* – a concept for which other languages do not have a single word, but which means educating/cultivating the heart. Boas called on people to cultivate their heart so that it would be capable of seeing the humanity of other people, regardless of what culture they belonged to. It is this consciously cultivated emotionality that can help us to correct the one-sided view of the world that reason often arrives at if left to its own devices.

For even the most enlightened man of reason is not free of the prejudices, stereotypes, and preconceptions that he has absorbed from his surroundings – not even if he believes that he is critically fighting against them with his mind and reason. The Boasian paradox can be formulated as follows: Let us consistently use our reason, but we should not forget to constantly accompany it with feeling and with the humble understanding that no rational construction within us may suffocate our sense of kinship with all of humanity, which our hearts can find in every person.

If anthropology is a different kind of science, then it is because it must never deny the universality of humanity, which is found in each and every one of us. But as is so often the case, anthropologists have not always followed this rule. And the other sciences definitely not. But this would take us outside the scope of our reflections on emotions. Generally, it is

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true that any science that approaches man impersonally as a Galilean object risks the danger that it will – even unwillingly – pave the way for new genocides, concentration camps, and other forms of industrial slaughter.

This raises one final question: How to educate people in such a way that they will not be dominated by that impersonal rationality that is so easily abused for instrumental objectives that deny humanity?

6 Emotions in education and upbringing: A holistic approach to the individual

We can surely debate whether we are today witnessing the slow end of the rule of Enlightenment reason, but the fact remains that the most prestigious positions in society are overwhelmingly those that are capable of defending themselves through rational argumentation and that present as their most fundamental attribute rationality in practice. Within this arrangement, society views emotionality as something that is second-rate and inferior, if not downright suspicious in its fundamental ambivalence, impermanence, elusiveness, and potential volatility. All this indirectly increases the temptation among those who rise up the social ladder to forget that part of their own emotionality that is capable of co-experiencing, in the Boasian sense, the humanity of every person, of not being apathetic towards their joy or suffering.

I believe that we today need an education that will teach us to see others' humanity – in part because of the growing polarization in society as manifested by how we separate ourselves into camps that ever more fanatically defend their truth and refuse to even for a moment see the world from a different angle – regardless of whether this sense of belonging to "us" is culturally or historically influenced or perhaps the result of our level of education or professional affiliation.

In the end, we are all human, and a person's fullness includes the ability to find truth through reason and feeling, head and heart. Not only *ratio*, but also feeling, intuition, and imagination are cognitive faculties that we all need in order to be fully human. We often hear people complain how little attention contemporary education pays to cultivating reason and critical thinking. At the same time, however, a far worse issue is our failure to cultivate emotionality; there is nearly no training and exercise for intuition. Society is obsessed with measuring IQ, but is it equally interested in EQ or emotional intelligence?

More often than not, a successful intellectual is someone who has a well-developed rationality but a somewhat atrophied emotionality. And although such people tend to be successful in what they do and what has made them famous, if we get to know them more closely we are often astonished by their lack of consideration, their egocentrism, their intolerance towards other viewpoints, and their narrowmindedness – in short, by their lack of wisdom.

Human cognition walks on (at least) two legs – reason and emotion. Only if both work together naturally and in harmony can we get anywhere. But more than a few contemporary rational thinkers resemble athletes who hope to win a race by doggedly strengthening the muscles in one leg while ignoring the other. Even if the leg of rationality has been perfectly developed and trained, you can't get far on just one leg – not even if society is enthusiastically

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applauding your one-sidedness. You can make it relatively far in the sense of social advancement, career, reputation, and fame. But you won't cover much ground as a person.

This would probably not matter much if we were only speaking of individuals. But this necessary balance between emotions and reason affects all of society, as Mary Wollstonecraft already showed in the late eighteenth century.[11] Wollstonecraft offered a convincing description of how society had been distorted by the antagonism between rationality and emotionality, which resulted in the long-standing rule of reason and the suppression of feelings: such a society destroys both men and women. And much of her description is still valid today.

My reflections on this subject began with an observation regarding the behaviour of manipulative psychopaths, and so they will end there as well. There exist several different descriptions of psychopathy as a personality disorder. According to one view, a psychopath is someone in whom the various elements of personality such as reason, feeling, will, and intuition did not develop equally, meaning that one is significantly stronger or weaker than the others; this profound imbalance is the foundation for psychopaths' dysfunctional relationship to themselves and their surroundings. Manipulative psychopaths are often astute individuals with a strong will to social advancement.

They possess a far less differentiated and developed emotionality, because it is systematically forced to submit to an instrumental reason that sees other people primarily as tools for achieving one's objectives. This is the prototype for an individual who can make it far in any society that unilaterally favours rationality over emotionality – all the more so because most people in the psychopath's surroundings erroneously interpret his or her lack of feelings as courage. Indeed, at first glance such people truly do strike us as intrepid.

In this regard, it is important that education and upbringing not exaggerate vertical respect for people who have "made it". For at a closer glance, seen in the fullness of their humanity, they are often not individuals who could or should be a model for others – regardless of their performance in some area of life. There is no question that Tolstoy produced a great literary oeuvre and a remarkable philosophy of not opposing evil through violence; but he also kicked his pregnant wife. Vertical respect should be a fundamental and natural part of education and upbringing, but this does not mean a profanely degraded form that seeks to impose a nearly sacred deference for people only because they have made a name for themselves somewhere.

It is a good thing to be inspired by their performance and their positive qualities, but we should not let ourselves be so enraptured that we seek to emulate their entire personality. Even the cultivation of respect should be guided above all by a holistic approach and not by a kind of performance-based particularism that, fascinated by a person's outstanding individuality, closes its eyes to the tragedy of the whole, which it often fails to see because it simply doesn't feel it. And we don't feel things in areas where our education and upbringing never forced us to learn differentiated feeling. This is especially true of the family, of course, but unfortunately we often forget how much it is also applicable for the school environment.

[11] WOLESTONECRAFT, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995 [1792].

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Conclusion

I have tried in this essay to point out several layers of ambivalence of human emotionality: to identify in how many different ways we can say that emotions dig a chasm between us while also being capable of spanning this chasm via a bridge of mutuality. Although emotions are fundamentally ambivalent, in constant motion, and more often than not difficult to grasp, we should not be afraid of them; and we should definitely not abuse them for base objectives. In this sense, I suggest not succumbing to the spirit of the times, which in our civilizational domain overvalues rational qualities and abilities at the expense of emotional ones.

Our objective should be the fullness of humanity – in the family, at school, and in society. Through its view of other cultures, anthropology can help by showing other ways of experiencing the world than the one that dominates our world. This can lead to a critical reflection on whether our society might be one-sided in some things and why it is in conflict with the integral humanity that should be one of the goals of education. We require not only critical thinking, but also critical feeling: the kind that, in harmony with the etymology of the Greek word *kritikē*, is capable of subtle differentiation.

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