Critical Feeling

How can we develop the sensitivity necessary to play music or make objects requiring craftsmanship? How can teachers make their lessons interesting? In what ways can consumers avoid undue influence? How do we acquire refined tastes or come to believe what we want to believe? Addressing these issues and providing an account of how to tackle personal and societal problems, Rolf Reber combines insights from psychology, philosophy, and education to introduce the concept of critical feeling. While many people are familiar with the concept of critical thinking, critical feeling denotes the strategic use of feelings in order to optimize an outcome. Reber discusses the theoretical and empirical foundations of critical feeling and provides an overview of applications, including well-being, skill learning, personal relationships, business, politics, school, art, morality, and religion. This original and thought-provoking study will interest a broad range of researchers, students, and practitioners.

Rolf Reber is Professor of Cognitive Psychology at the University of Oslo and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Education at the University of Bergen, Norway. With his colleagues, Reber developed and tested the processing fluency theory of aesthetic pleasure; example choice, which is a new teaching method to increase student interest at school; new accounts of mathematical intuition and of the aha-experience; a new solution to an old paradox in Confucianism; and the psycho-historical approach to research on art appreciation. He has held visiting professorships and is an award-winning teacher and author of two popular science books in German.
“Reber’s thorough and scholarly book presents refreshingly new and important insights on how feelings may be empowering.”
Ellen Langer Psychology Department, Harvard University

“How can we use our feelings as a source of information in making decisions that foster harmony between our thoughts, feelings, values, and actions? Drawing on insights from Western and Eastern philosophy, virtue education, and experimental research in psychological science, Critical Feeling takes the reader on an enriching and stimulating exploration that provides an important counterpoint to the more familiar exploration of critical thinking.”
Norbert Schwarz
University of Southern California

“This book exemplifies many important recent trends in research at the intersection of psychology, philosophy and educational theory: a renewed focus on the cognitive value of the emotions, a reappraisal of the importance of virtue ethics and self-cultivation techniques, and (perhaps most significantly) the increased conceptual sophistication and breadth we are seeing as psychologists take on board insights from philosophy, religious studies, history and other fields. An interdisciplinary tour de force.”
Edward Slingerland
Professor of Asian Studies, University of British Columbia, and Director, Cultural Evolution of Religion Research Consortium

“This highly innovative book persuasively demonstrates that feelings can be strategically trained by appropriate practices. Such ‘critical’ feelings are shown to allow individuals to enhance their sensitivity to moral or artistic values, to broaden their learning abilities, to improve their reasoning and to foster their creative thinking. This important idea is centrally relevant to academic fields such as philosophy, psychology and the social sciences, but also should be a major source of inspiration for teachers, parents and for everyone interested in personal development.”
Joëlle Proust
Institut Jean-Nicod, Fondation Pierre-Gilles de Gennes pour la Recherche, EcoleNormaleSupérieure
Critical Feeling

How to Use Feelings Strategically

Rolf Reber
To my parents: Edi and Heidi Reber
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

*Preface*  xi  

**Part I**  The basics of critical feeling  1  

**Introduction**  3  

1  Critical thinking  9  
   Critical thinking as a skill  10  
   Critical thinking in the service of values  14  
   Critical thinking and feelings  25  
   Why critical thinking is not enough  27  

2  The psychology of feelings  34  
   What is a feeling?  34  
   Emotions  36  
   Moods  38  
   Preferences  41  
   Metacognitive feelings  43  
   Bodily feedback  53  
   Other feelings  53  
   The somatic marker hypothesis  55  
   Feeling and rationality  57  

3  Critical feeling  60  
   What is critical feeling?  60  
   Interrupting feelings  64  
   Extracting information  69  
   Changing external context  77  
   Changing inner states  80  
   Critical feeling in the service of values  85  
   What critical feeling is not  90  
   Critical feeling: research and educational practice  95
## Part II Applications of critical feeling 101

### 4 Happiness through critical feeling 103
- The pursuit of happiness 105
- Eating and drinking with feeling 112
- Critical feeling and psychotherapy 115
- Managing negative feelings in everyday life 117
- Positive psychology 123

### 5 The role of sensory and bodily feedback 128
- Bodily feedback and affect 128
- Acquisition and execution of skills 131
- Desirable difficulties in skill learning 136
- Self-assessment and feelings 139
- The power of synchronous movement 141

### 6 Living together 145
- Negative feelings in social interactions 146
- Distance and feelings 150
- Can critical feeling prevent us from being cheated? 152
- Loving your spouse 155

### 7 Critical feeling in business and politics 163
- Using feelings in product marketing 165
- Overcoming pluralistic ignorance 171
- Emotions in politics 173

### 8 Critical feelings at school 180
- Feelings related to knowledge and performance 181
- Emotions in the classroom 184
- Making things interesting 186
- Cultivating intuition and insight 191

### 9 Music, art, and literature 199
- Play it again, Sam: how to become a music lover 200
- Pigeons as connoisseurs? The learning of artistic styles 202
- The psycho-historical framework 205
- The alienation effect: connecting Brecht to cognition 209
- The role of emotions in art and literature 211
# Table of contents

## 10 Religion and morality
- Re-enchantment through rituals 219
- The acquisition of moral habits 228

## Notes

## References

## Index
After walking my younger kids to school, I mounted the Vancouver SkyTrain at Sapperton Station on the morning of Monday December 14, 2009. As always, I took my current reading out of my backpack – on that day the book *Effortless Action* by Edward Slingerland (2003a), which analyzes the metaphorical nature of Confucian thought. I began thinking about what I read; my mind was wandering when all of a sudden an insight struck me: What Confucius wrote some 2500 years ago is critical feeling. Much has been written about critical thinking, but to my knowledge not one scholar has ever written a comprehensive work about how feelings can be used to improve personal or societal outcomes. The deficiencies of critical thinking have also been extensively covered, and recent decades have seen an increasing number of works on the rationality of emotions. Despite these insights, we lack an overview of strategies that realize the potential of feelings to improve outcomes. Feelings go beyond emotions and encompass moods, preferences, metacognitive experiences, and bodily states, as will be defined in due course. This book introduces the concept of critical feeling and provides an overview of applications in various areas, from personal well-being and skill learning to the acquisition of artistic tastes and religious creeds.

Writing such a book is often a solitary affair but at the same time impossible without a host of colleagues and friends who take time to collaborate, discuss, criticize, and encourage. Within the five years since my decisive aha-experience, I have had the privilege of working with and discussing ideas with many people, some of whom I would like to mention by name. At the University of Bergen and later at the University of Oslo, I met wonderful colleagues and students who gave input from various perspectives relevant to the project; among these people were Michael Stausberg (who provided input on parts of Chapter 10), Morten Brun, Kevin Cahill, Per Olav Folgerø, Marina Hirnstein, Lasse Hodne, Sigve Høgheim, Kenneth Hugdahl, Christoph Kirfel, Geir Overskeid, Francisco Pons, Ole Martin Skilleås, Karsten Specht, and Matthias Stadler. Some of my research relevant to critical feeling has been made possible by grants from the Research Council of Norway (#166252 and #212299) as well as by a fellowship from the Leiv Eirikssons mobility program.
I had the privilege to work with many fabulous scholars and students on projects that were all relevant to critical feeling. Among them are Nicolas Bullot, Sascha Topolinski, Edward Slingerland, Teresa Garcia-Marques, Rita da Silva, Christian Unkelbach, Rainer Greifeneder, and Ara Norenzayan. Ara was also the host of a one-year sabbatical visit at the University of British Columbia. Judith Harackiewicz (University of Wisconsin), Ellen Langer (Harvard University), Daphna Oyserman, and Norbert Schwarz (both University of Southern California) hosted shorter research visits and generously spent time discussing issues that all were relevant to critical feeling. Jan Landwehr (who provided input on parts of Chapter 7), Julia Annas, Martin Fortier, Joëlle Proust, Iain Robertson, Klaus Scherer, Stephen Stich, Lawrence Ward, Wendy Wood, and many others spent their time discussing aspects of critical feeling. Audiences at the University of Southern California, the Metacognitive Diversity Conference at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, and the University of Oslo provided me with invaluable feedback on the book’s plan and the concept of critical feeling. My wife, Hélène, improved the book by encouraging me to clarify issues or to illustrate statements with better examples. She also helped with the references and the index. I am grateful that my daughter Viviane read the book and provided feedback, mainly on English language but also on content. She told me this was the first time she had been able to do something meaningful with her education. Shouldn’t we give every student such opportunities? Hetty Marx, Carrie Parkinson, and many others on the editorial team of Cambridge University Press shepherded the book with great care and benevolence.

Finally, I thank Hélène and my children – David, Viviane, Eric, and Anne-Sophie – who were a source of loving support and encouragement.

The book contains adapted excerpts from the following sources:


