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978-0-521-82729-4 - From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category

Thomas Dixon

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1 Introduction: from passions and affections to emotions

The use of the word emotion in English psychology is comparatively modern. It is found in Hume, but even he speaks generally rather of passions or affections. When the word emotion did become current its application was very wide, covering all possible varieties of feeling, except those that are purely sensational in their origin.

James Mark Baldwin, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* (1905), 1, 316

How history can help us think about ‘the emotions’

Emotions are everywhere today. Increasing numbers of books and articles about the emotions are being produced; for both academic and broader audiences; by neuroscientists, psychologists and philosophers. As the author of one recent book on the science of the emotions puts it: ‘Emotion is now a hot topic.’¹ According to another, the last three decades have witnessed an explosion in emotion studies, in the fields of cognitive psychology, anthropology and literary history, which constitutes a veritable ‘revolution’.² Recent academic work in a range of fields has celebrated the body and the emotions, in a reaction against the alleged preoccupation with intellect and reason to be found in earlier studies. There is now even such a thing as ‘Emotional Intelligence’, or ‘EQ’, analogous to IQ.³ Being in touch with one’s emotions is, for many, an unquestioned good. The existence and the great value of the emotions is obvious to academics and non-academics alike. It is surprising, then, to discover that the emotions did not exist until just under two hundred years ago.

In this book I investigate the creation of ‘the emotions’ as a psychological category. By seeing how this category was conceived, and by looking at the different psychological categories it replaced during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I aim to provide readers with resources that will help them to step back from the contemporary obviousness of the existence and importance of ‘the emotions’ and to ask fundamental questions

¹ Evans (2001), xiii. ² Reddy (2001), ix–x. ³ Goleman (1995, 1996).

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about this category's meaning and value. In other words, I hope my historical account will stimulate philosophical and psychological reflection. Of particular importance to this story is the displacement, in the history of systematic psychological theorising, of more differentiated typologies (which included appetites, passions, affections and sentiments) by a single over-arching category of emotions during the nineteenth century. Perhaps these past typologies will give readers pause for thought, and encourage them to ask whether the emotions, as we think of them today in psychology and philosophy, really form a coherent category.⁴ I will suggest that a more differentiated typology would be a useful tool, and would help us to avoid making sweeping claims about all 'emotions' being good or bad things, rational or irrational, virtuous or vicious. The over-inclusivity of our modern-day category of emotions has hampered attempts to argue with any subtlety about the nature and value of the enormous range of passionate, affectionate, sentimental, felt and committed mental states and stances of which we are capable.

My argument about the historical provenance of modern theories of the emotions is revisionist, especially with respect to Robert Solomon's thesis in his influential book *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life* (1976, 1993).⁵ Solomon's thesis is, in short, that Western thinkers have been prone, right up to the late twentieth century, to take a negative view of the emotions and to think of them as inherently bodily, involuntary and irrational. Solomon blames this negative view of emotions on the influence of rationalist views (in which reason and the emotions are antagonists) that have been dominant among Western philosophers in general and certain Christian theologians in particular.

Solomon's was the first in a spate of books in recent decades that all seek, in one way or another, to rehabilitate the emotions. Philosophers including Ronald de Sousa, Michael Stocker, Dylan Evans and Peter Goldie, the brain scientist Antonio Damasio, and the psychologists Keith Oatley and Robert Lazarus have all contributed to this literature.⁶ Many of these writers also echo Solomon's thesis that from antiquity up until the late twentieth century philosophers and psychologists have generally, and misguidedly, thought of reason and the emotions as antagonists. Solomon calls this supposedly prevailing view the 'Myth of the Passions'; Damasio calls it 'Descartes' Error'. One of my aims in this book is to show

⁴ For a very helpful article summarising recent debates about the natural kind status of 'emotion', and arguing that 'emotion' is indeed a natural kind term, see Charland (2002).

⁵ Solomon (1993a).

⁶ De Sousa (1987); Stocker (1996); Evans (2001); Goldie (2000); Damasio (1994); Oatley (1992); Lazarus (1991).

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how these views on the history of ideas about passions and emotions are themselves, in certain respects, mythical and erroneous.

The historical story I tell here turns Solomon's view on its head. I argue that it was in fact the recent departure from traditional views about the passions (not the influence of those views) that led to the creation of a category of 'emotions' that was conceived in opposition to reason, intellect and will. The category of emotions, conceived as a set of morally disengaged, bodily, non-cognitive and involuntary feelings, is a recent invention. Prior to the creation of the emotions as an over-arching category, more subtlety had been possible on these questions. The 'affections', and the 'moral sentiments', for example, could be understood as both rational and voluntary movements of the soul, while still being subjectively warm and lively psychological states. It is not the case that prior to the 1970s no one had realised that thinking, willing and feeling were (and should be) intertwined in one way or another. Almost everybody had realised this. Too many contemporary writers still appeal, nonetheless, to the idea (in order to create a rhetorical counterpoint for their own account of the value and/or rationality of the emotions) that either a particular individual, or school of thought, or period, or even the entire history of philosophy has been characterised by the view that the emotions (or feelings or passions) are entirely insidious and are to be subjected at all times to almighty reason. Anything more than the briefest of glances at the history of thought establishes that this is a thoroughly untenable idea, even when applied to Stoic or Christian philosophers (those most often accused of passion- or emotion-hatred).⁷

Solomon is quite right to draw attention to the difficult existential and moral questions that arise from thinking of passions or emotions as alien powers that act against our rational will. If our emotions are not our own, then how can we identify with them as expressions of our true selves? And how could we be held morally responsible for actions resulting from them?⁸ Solomon's historical account of where this view of emotions as involuntary forces came from, however, is off-target. One of the main problems with his thesis (and with some of the other recent books arguing along similar lines), as will emerge below, is that it does not clearly differentiate between 'passions' and 'emotions', nor does it acknowledge that theorists of the passions often also employed the concepts of 'affections' and 'sentiments' to refer to more cognitive and refined feelings. Solomon's history of ideas about passions and emotions is somewhat distorted as a result. He is by no means the only writer to have overlooked

⁷ On Stoic and early Christian attitudes to passions, will and reason, see Sorabji (2000).

⁸ On the moral dimensions of these problems, see also Oakley (1992).

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these distinctions, but is representative of a recent school of thought that emphasises the cognitive and rational aspects of emotions, of which he was one of the earliest and most influential exponents.

The basic historical puzzle

It is an immensely striking fact of the history of English-language psychological thought that during the period between *c.*1800 and *c.*1850 a wholesale change in established vocabulary occurred such that those engaged in theoretical discussions about phenomena including hope, fear, love, hate, joy, sorrow, anger and the like no longer primarily discussed the passions or affections of the soul, nor the sentiments, but almost invariably referred to ‘the emotions’. This transition is as striking as if established conceptual terms such as ‘reason’ or ‘memory’ or ‘imagination’ or ‘will’ had been quite suddenly replaced by a wholly new category.

The puzzling historical question, then, at the heart of this book (a question that, equally puzzlingly, has rarely been posed before, let alone answered) is: when and why did English-language psychological writers stop using ‘passions’, ‘affections’ and ‘sentiments’ as their primary categories and start referring instead to the ‘emotions’?

The secularisation of psychology

One important element of my answer to this central historical question is that it was the secularisation of psychology that gave rise to the creation and adoption of the new category of ‘emotions’ and influenced the way it was originally and has subsequently been conceived. Since this is an important part of my argument, it may be worth making some comments here to explain and defend my focus on religious and theological dimensions of the history of psychology in this book.

The first consideration is a *prima facie* observation about the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts in question. At first glance, the shift from the language of passions and affections to the language of emotions seems to provide strong evidence of the way that religious and psychological ideas have been connected in the past. To speak of ‘passions and affections of the soul’ was to embed one’s thought in a network of more distinctively Christian concepts and categories. In contrast, the category of ‘emotions’ was alien to traditional Christian thought and was part of a newer and more secular network of words and ideas. No one (to my knowledge) ever wrote books called *The Psychology of the Passions* or *The Emotions of the Soul*. ‘Emotions’, unlike ‘affections’, ‘passions’, ‘desires’ and ‘lusts’ did not appear in any English translation of

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the Bible. These simple observations highlight an important fact about the way that these terms derived their meanings from networks of related concepts. The words 'passions' and 'affections' belonged to a network of words such as 'of the soul', 'conscience', 'fall', 'sin', 'grace', 'Spirit', 'Satan', 'will', 'lower appetite', 'self-love' and so on. The word 'emotions' was, from the outset, part of a different network of terms such as 'psychology', 'law', 'observation', 'evolution', 'organism', 'brain', 'nerves', 'expression', 'behaviour' and 'viscera'.

While anti-religious and merely non-religious psychologists were not the only ones to use the word 'emotions', they did so sooner and integrated the category into their psychologies more readily than did their Christian contemporaries. Influential figures in secular science and psychology in the mid-nineteenth century, such as Charles Darwin, Alexander Bain and Herbert Spencer, were among these early 'emotions' theorists (see chapter 5). Christian writers, especially in more conservative environments such as Oxford and Cambridge (and some American colleges) continued to use the terms 'will', 'passions', 'affections' and 'sentiments' much more than the term 'emotions' (see chapter 6). There was, then, a correlation between the adoption of the new 'emotions' discourse on the one hand, and lack of traditional Christian belief on the other. There was also a correlation, later in the century, when the transition to 'emotions' talk had become a *fait accompli*, between Christian faith and the adoption of cognitive and anti-reductionist theories of emotions.

These *prima facie* correlations provide the primary reason for taking an interest in religious and theological dimensions of psychology in my historical account of the creation of the category of 'emotions'. It is important to add at the outset, however, that, prior to the emergence of the category of 'emotions', the language of 'passions' and 'affections' was used by both religious and non-religious writers on human mental life, and both terms had a variety of different meanings. 'Passions' for example could be used to refer in a vague way to a broad range of impulses and feelings, or to refer to a smaller set of particularly troubling disturbances of the mind, such as anger and sexual desire. Secular moralists and literary writers, as well as more explicitly theological and religious writers on the faculties of the soul, used the terms 'passions' and 'affections'. So there is no simple identification to be made, for example, between theorists who spoke of 'passions' and 'affections' and Christian thinkers. Nevertheless, the distinction between passions and affections, and the categories themselves, did derive historically from theological psychologies and were well suited to a Christian understanding of the human person in which a free and active will was a particularly important

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faculty. The will was central to the story of the fall of Adam and Eve, and to Christian concepts of moral responsibility, sin and salvation. Additionally, after the emergence of the category of ‘emotions’, and an alternative psychological vocabulary, use of the language of ‘soul’, ‘will’, ‘passions’ and ‘affections’ served, where it had not before, as a mark of allegiance to older ways of thinking about human mental life. It is then a difficult task to distinguish between writings that should be interpreted simply as examples of ‘traditional’ or ‘old-fashioned’ thought about mental life, and those that should be described as distinctively ‘religious’ or ‘Christian’. This is where it will be important to look for evidence external to the psychological theories themselves of the religious or anti-religious commitments of the authors under consideration.

**Methodological questions: some problems
with presentism**

In addition to evidence of important links between particular areas of religious and psychological language in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there are some more general methodological considerations relevant to the decision to think about theological and religious dimensions of the history of psychology. I will examine these briefly here before returning to provide an overview of my answer to the historical puzzle of how ‘the emotions’ came to be created.

Presentism and the omission of a theological dimension

The reasons it is worthwhile trying to understand the theological dimensions of the history of psychology are both historical and psychological. First, historically, understanding these dimensions throws light on where secular psychology came from – what it was building upon and what it was reacting against. Secondly, such an enterprise can help stimulate contemporary psychological theorising. Christian and theistic psychologies of the past (as well as secular ones) provide interesting alternative voices that can give a different angle on contemporary psychological debates about, for instance, theories of emotions. Trying to understand psychological models that are based on metaphysical assumptions that are quite different from those of contemporary academic psychologies helps to bring home the fact that there are many different possible ways of understanding and carving up human mental life. A history that looks especially at religious and theological assumptions in past psychologies might, perhaps even more than a history of secular psychological thought, be able to provide a healthy antidote to the tendency to swallow too uncritically

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the assumptions, theories and terminologies of contemporary academic psychology.

Histories of philosophy and, especially, of psychology, often display a lack of familiarity with or a lack of interest in these dimensions. So, in the case of histories of theories of passions and emotions, the views of Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, Spinoza, Darwin, James and Wundt on passions and emotions are relatively well-known and have received considerable and repeated attention, to the extent that they have begun to make up a rather one-dimensional and stale canon of historical theorists of passions and emotions.⁹ The views of psychological thinkers with religious concerns, such as Augustine and Aquinas, Jonathan Edwards and Joseph Butler, Thomas Reid and Thomas Brown, Thomas Chalmers and William Lyall, James McCosh and George T. Ladd, are much more rarely mentioned.¹⁰

The omission of a theological dimension from the history of psychology sometimes seems to have been the result of the adoption of ‘presentist’ methodological assumptions. It is sometimes assumed, for example, that writing a history of psychology involves finding ‘precursors’ of contemporary psychological thinkers and thoughts. The result, when the contemporary field is largely autonomous and secular, is a rather distortedly secular history, in which past thinkers are of interest only insofar as they ‘foreshadow’ the ‘scientific’ psychology of the last century or so. This is the approach taken by Gardiner *et al.* in their general history of past theories of passions, affections, feelings and emotions. These theories are interpreted as a gradual approach towards a satisfactory twentieth-century ‘scientific psychological theory’.¹¹ George Mandler provides an explicit statement of this sort of methodology in a chapter on ‘The Psychology of Emotion: Past and Present’ in his 1984 cognitive psychology book on emotions and stress:

I approach the history of emotion as a movement toward its current state . . . I have culled the important milestones of the past hundred years with that goal in mind. I look backward to see what has brought us to the current state of the art . . . In reviewing these trends, I will stress cumulative influences, believing that the history of science is a history of cumulative insights and cumulative knowledge.¹²

It may sometimes be defensible to approach history in this way, but there are certainly some important objections to doing so. First, such an approach trades on the implicit assumption that the truth of current theory

⁹ For more on this, see ch. 8, Conclusions.

¹⁰ Susan James is again an exception, at least in the cases of Augustine and Aquinas. James (1997), chs. 1, 3 and 5.

¹¹ Gardiner *et al.* (1970), 386. ¹² Mandler (1984), 15.

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brought us here – it is tacitly teleological. Secondly, in looking only to very similar precursors, it a priori excludes all sorts of influences that do not resemble present-day psychology of emotion and so produces a radically internalist and problematically narrow and naïve account. A particularly stark example of such an exclusion of theology from psychology's authentic past is to be found in Brett's *History of Psychology* (1921) in his treatment of Spencer: 'Spencer produced a change in the attitude toward psychology; he made clearer the sense in which psychology is a *natural* science. The movement aroused great opposition from the advocates of the supernatural quality of the soul, but this was a passing phase that belongs only to the history of culture.'¹³ The idea that religion and theology, but not psychology, are parts of 'culture' and the assumption that religiously motivated views about mental life and the soul were not part of a psychological enterprise are both views that are rejected in the present work.

More recent historians of psychology have displayed some similar tendencies. William Woodward, in his 1982 introduction to *The Problematic Science: Psychology in Nineteenth-Century Thought*, mentions several important vehicles for psychological thought in the nineteenth century, including Kantian philosophy, psychobiology, psychophysics, child psychology and social psychology, but does not mention theology. Graham Richards in his equivalent summary of nineteenth-century intellectual enterprises that contributed to psychological thought, in his 1992 study, *Mental Machinery: The Origins and Consequences of Psychological Ideas*, lists philosophers, scientists, psychiatrists, physicians, economists, criminologists and educationalists, but, again, not theologians.¹⁴ It is of interest to debate which of theology, philosophy, medicine, psychiatry or biological science had more influence and in what areas of psychological thought in the nineteenth century; but to omit theology from the picture altogether – especially while including, for example, economics and criminology – is misleading. During the nineteenth century, theologians, preachers and Christian philosophers were amongst the most widely read and influential figures contributing to thought about the soul and mind.

I am certainly not alone amongst recent historians of psychology in seeing a need to broaden the canon of the history of psychology. This broadening has started to happen to some extent, most notably through the efforts of authors seeking to include literary figures in psychology's past.¹⁵ Rick Rylance's book, *Victorian Psychology and British*

¹³ Brett (1921), III, 215.

¹⁴ Woodward, 'Introduction' to Woodward and Ash (eds.) (1982); Richards (1992), ch. 8.

¹⁵ E.g. Shuttleworth (1996); Reed (1997), Preface; Rylance (2000); Wood (2001).

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Culture 1850–1880, is one of the works responsible for this shift, and is also one of the only histories of psychology to have properly recognised *theological* discourse as a form of psychological discourse. Rylance divides nineteenth-century British psychological discourse into four categories – the discourse of the soul, the discourse of philosophy, the discourse of physiology and the discourse of medicine. Each of these discourses persisted throughout the century (albeit in various forms and with varying measures of success), as both Rylance’s work and the present study aim to show. Edward Reed has also argued for the importance of the religious dimensions of psychological thought in the nineteenth century. However, he is rather over-stating the case when he claims that ‘psychology succeeded in becoming a science in large part because of its defense of a theological conception of human nature typically associated with liberal Protestant theology’.¹⁶ (I will return to Reed’s claims in the context of my own conclusions, in chapter 8.)

Paying attention, then, to some of the theological variables at work, the psychological systems that form the subject of this book are sometimes categorised as ‘Christian’, and sometimes as ‘secular’, depending on the authorities, methods, concepts and categories adopted in analysing human mental life. There are many texts, however, which are predicated on theistic belief and purport to privilege God (often the Christian God), but which fail to qualify as ‘theological’ or ‘Christian’ psychologies since there is little or no use of traditional Christian authorities, methods, concepts or categories. These texts are variously described as ‘unchristian’, or ‘atheological’, or as examples of merely metaphysical theism. ‘Unchristian’ and ‘atheological’ are terms, like ‘amoral’, which I intend to indicate the absence of something rather than its inversion or denial.¹⁷ Generally, when I say that a text is Christian, I will mean that the arguments and teachings of the text are ‘full-bloodedly’ Christian – that they are embedded in the language and teachings of the Christian tradition. ‘Metaphysical theism’, in contrast, is a term I use to refer to certain beliefs that include the existence of a God who is perhaps conceived of as ‘Deity’, ‘Architect’, ‘Author’, ‘Mind’, or as ‘the All’, but who is not described using the language and symbols of Christianity (or any other religious tradition). Texts produced by some moralists, mental scientists and design theologians in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries fall into this ‘halfway house’ category between Christian psychology and thoroughly secular psychology (including works by the moralist Joseph Butler, the Edinburgh moral

¹⁶ Reed (1997), 7.

¹⁷ For a fuller and broader definition and use of the terms ‘atheology’ and ‘atheological’, see Dixon (1999). I am not using the term in the same way as the theologian Mark C. Taylor, who has written about ‘a/theology’; Taylor (1984).

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philosopher Thomas Brown and the neurologist and natural theologian Sir Charles Bell). The works of several authors considered in chapter 6 also fall into this category of ‘metaphysical theism’, including those by the philosophical psychologist J. D. Morell, the Scottish-Canadian minister and philosopher William Lyall, and Noah Porter, the President of Yale. Christology, Trinitarian theology and the doctrines of sin, the fall and grace are among the omissions of such thin theisms. In the way I use these terms, then, a Christian author can produce a thinly theistic text (or indeed a thoroughly secular one). In calling a psychological text thinly theistic, unchristian, or atheological, I do not preclude the possibility that the author was a committed Christian (as, in fact, was the case with Butler, Bell, Lyall and Porter).

Presentism and the meanings of ‘psychology’ and ‘science’

In his recent study, *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions* (1999), Jon Elster includes a chapter on ‘Emotions before Psychology’, which opens with two sentences that illustrate very well the sort of presentist assumptions about psychology and science that I am seeking to challenge: ‘The psychological analysis of the emotions is little more than a hundred years old. Darwin’s *Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals* (1872) and William James’ “What is an Emotion” (1884) are the first studies of the emotions using scientific methodology.’¹⁸ These claims are arguable, but – according to the definitions of psychology and science preferred here – are mistaken. Elster, like Mandler, David Rapaport and others, considers the psychology of emotions to go back only to the late nineteenth century.¹⁹ In fact, the psychological analysis of emotions goes back nearer two hundred than one hundred years (to the lectures delivered in Edinburgh by Thomas Brown between 1810 and 1820). And the psychological analysis of passions goes back millennia (as Elster’s own exposition of Aristotle’s views implicitly acknowledges). The claim that the psychological analysis of emotions is only one hundred years old depends on defining ‘psychology’ in a narrow sense as professional academic, scientific psychology. The definition preferred here is that psychology is the systematic study of (primarily human) mental life. Brown’s analysis of emotions only fails to be psychological if psychology is required to refer to nerves, brains, viscera, behaviour and other outward and physically measurable events.

¹⁸ Elster (1999), 48; the actual title of Darwin’s work was *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*.

¹⁹ Rapaport (1971) takes Darwin and James to be the authors of ‘early theories’ of emotions (22–3).