

## 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, Ecole Normale Supérieure

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-06019-7 — Critical Feeling  
Rolf Reber  
Frontmatter  
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## How to Use Feelings Strategically

Rolf Reber



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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[More Information](#)

## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom  
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India  
79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107060197](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107060197)

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First published 2016

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data*

Names: Reber, Rolf, author.

Title: Critical feeling : how to use feelings strategically / Rolf Reber.

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom : Cambridge University Press, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015046519 | ISBN 9781107060197 (hardback)

Subjects: LCSH: Emotions. | Critical thinking. |

BISAC: PSYCHOLOGY / Cognitive Psychology.

Classification: LCC BF531.R424 2016 | DDC 158-dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015046519>

ISBN 978-1-107-06019-7 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-62976-9 Paperback

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Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-06019-7 — Critical Feeling  
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Frontmatter  
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***To my parents: Edi and Heidi Reber***

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## PREFACE

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.

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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:

- Reber, R. 2012. "Critical feeling: The strategic use of processing fluency," in *The experience of thinking*, C. Unkelbach and R. Greifeneder (eds.). Hove, UK: Psychology Press, 169–184.
- Reber, R. 2014. "Mindfulness in education," in *Handbook of mindfulness*, A. Le, C. Ngunounen and E. Langer (eds.). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1054–1070.
- Reber, R. and Norenzayan, A. 2010. "The shared fluency theory of social cohesiveness." [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1702407](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1702407).
- Reber, R. and Slingerland, E. G. 2011. "Confucius meets cognition: New answers to old questions," *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 1: 135–145.