

The Weight of Passion:
A Revisionist History of Political Emotion

Michael A. Neblo
Ohio State University

Abstract: In addition to their purely scientific significance, recent advances in our understanding of emotion and its role in political behavior open up real opportunities for gaining leverage on crucial issues relating to political theory. However, much of this work argues that it represents as a fairly radical break with the Western tradition's prevailing conceptualization of reason, emotion, and their relationship. With this move, such research cuts itself off from enormously promising mutual exchange: such results can deepen and refine the arguments and intuitions we inherit from the history of philosophy; and the Western tradition offers myriad ways in which empirical theories of emotion could be expanded and reconceptualized.

Key words: emotion, reason, politics, philosophy, Western tradition.

“[E]motions...considered in themselves, follow from the same necessity and ability of nature as other individual things: and therefore they acknowledge certain causes through which they are understood, and have certain properties equally worthy of our knowledge as the properties of any other thing.”

— Spinoza Ethics Part 3, Preface

“[E]motion signifies, in its own way, the whole of consciousness or, if we put ourselves on the existential level, of human reality...[Emotion] has its essence, its particular structures, its laws of appearing, and its signification. It cannot come to human reality from the outside.”

— Sartre The Emotions: Outline of a Theory

“[T]he sense of justice is continuous with the love of mankind.”

— John Rawls A Theory of Justice

I. Introduction

As this special issue will attest, there has been a recent upsurge in research about the emotions and politics, ranging from cognitive science to philosophy to the social sciences. In addition to their purely scientific significance, these advances in our understanding of emotion and its role in political behavior open up real opportunities for gaining leverage on crucial issues relating to political theory. However, many of the researchers responsible for these advances argue strongly for understanding them as a fairly radical break with the Western tradition’s prevailing conceptualization of reason, emotion, and their relationship. With this move, they cut themselves off from enormously promising mutual exchange: their results can deepen and refine the arguments and intuitions we inherit from the history of philosophy; and the Western tradition offers a myriad of ways in which empirical theories of emotion could be expanded and reconceptualized.

In section II, below, I describe the advances in our understanding of how emotion affects politics specifically, and the more general arguments offered for why the new understanding of emotion represents a break with the Western tradition. In section III, I argue that the remarkably widespread claim that the Western tradition has pervasively ignored or denigrated emotion is predominantly false. Such a reorientation of the role of emotion clears the way for reestablishing the link between empirical research and philosophical analysis of the emotions.

II. Politics and the Theory of Affective Intelligence

Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen (henceforth Marcus et. al.) have been at the forefront of adapting the new understanding of emotion specifically to the political realm. In Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment, they lay out a theory of how reason and emotion collaborate in producing political behavior, beliefs, and attitudes. As a whole the book is a remarkable success. In my view, it represents one of the most important theoretical advances in the study of political behavior over the last twenty years. Their work is based on recent discoveries in cognitive science, perhaps best represented by Antonio Damasio's well-known book Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain.

The central argument of the new approach to emotion claims, in effect, that a great deal of what we call emotion is simply unconscious information processing. To see how this plays out in terms of rationality, it might help to distinguish between rationality of process and rationality of outcomes. In normal usage, for something to be called a rational process it is generally conscious. In another sense, however, we are likely to call the outcomes of a process rational whether or not the process is conscious, just so long as the results meet certain criteria. Translating a bit, their claim amounts to saying that emotions *are* rational in this latter sense, and that they *contribute* to rationality in the former sense. This seems plausible. For example, we might say that under certain circumstances it is rational to follow one's intuitions, however we would tend not to say that the intuitions themselves are a species of reason.

For the purposes of analyzing politics, the majority of Marcus et. al.'s book focuses on two emotional sub-systems in the brain. The first, the "disposition" system, helps us both acquire and deploy habits. That is, we continually combine information about our environment and the "plans" that we use to deal with problems in the environment. We choose which plans to deploy via pattern matching heuristics. When the plans work, we feel satisfied or "enthusiastic" and when they do not, we feel "frustrated." Enthusiasm reinforces the habit and frustration weakens it. Similarly, on the front end, if we feel enthusiastic about some situation, we are more likely to rely on habit in the first place.¹

¹ There is some confusion on this point. In Marcus et. al.'s schematic model of the disposition system, enthusiasm is an output of behavior. (p. 47) However, later in the book the authors seem to suggest that enthusiasm not only causes behavior *indirectly* by reinforcing habit, but *directly* by triggering habit in a new, concrete situation (before we could have enough feedback to judge its

The second capacity, the “surveillance” system, scans the environment for novel threats. When it encounters one, it interrupts habitual thinking and behavior. Thus, it prompts us to think more carefully and make a fresh assessment of the situation and how we should handle it. The emotional poles for this system are anxiety versus calmness (or complacency). One of the most interesting features of the theory of affective intelligence is that it argues that these two systems are independent – i.e., anxiety and enthusiasm are not polar opposites. One can be both anxious and enthused about a political candidate, for instance.²

While some of this might seem like common sense, the theory explains a lot about political behavior, and describes the mechanisms underlying behavior, which in turn helps us make predictions about future or counter-factual situations in a theoretically motivated way (i.e., not *ad hoc*). For example, when enthusiasm is high and anxiety is low, party identification is the primary determinant of vote choice. Conversely, when anxiety is high and enthusiasm is either high or low, congruence on issues positions is the major factor in someone’s vote choice. When enthusiasm and anxiety are both low, the person is unlikely to vote at all. The theory also explains how and why negative campaigning is so effective, as well as why citizens actually learn more relevant information (even when the negative ads themselves are only marginally informative). By stimulating anxiety, general attention and learning is engaged, and campaigns can dislodge people from their standard partisan commitments more easily. Finally, their theory provides a plausible account of why our political system seems to work reasonably well when citizens pay only intermittent attention to politics. For most routine situations, habit is efficient and effective, but when it looks like it will not be effective, we have developed a mechanism for engaging our attention when it counts the most.

Thus, the theory of affective intelligence is a major advance in our understanding of how citizens process politics. It is also bound up with important questions in normative democratic theory such as the problem of citizen competence, and the appropriate role (if any) for emotion in public discourse. Following

success). It may be that without anxiety tripping the surveillance system, our default is always to rely on habit. But if this is the case, then behavior should be independent of our present level of enthusiasm, which is not consistent with Marcus et. al.’s analysis of their election data.

² Marcus et. al. are on pretty good empirical and intuitive ground with this assertion. However, it is not clear how it coheres theoretically. On their account, we feel anxiety when our environment presents us with a novel situation (generally threatening). But enthusiasm is linked to either a pattern match (absent by hypothesis in this case) or feedback signaling the successful implementation of a “plan” (which in political situations cannot come for some time after an election). This point is related to the problem mentioned in footnote two above.

others in the new emotion research, Marcus et. al.'s framing of their important results implies that answers to such normative questions will have to be developed largely *de novo*, because the picture of emotion in the Western tradition is fundamentally incongruent with their view. I do not believe that they are at all correct in this claim.

In the next section I return to the broader resurgence of emotion research, and argue against the widespread notion that emotion has been pervasively ignored or denigrated in the Western tradition. I do so not primarily to set the record straight (though doing so is valuable in itself), but rather because I think that we need to develop our thinking about the role of emotion in democratic politics by engaging with our intellectual heritage. Even if the findings of modern, scientific psychology completely supercede philosophical psychology,³ there remains the problem of reformulating philosophical ethics, politics, and epistemology in the light of these findings. Since, as we shall see, many historical thinkers actually anticipated elements of the emerging scientific view, their work strikes me as a promising place to start. Furthermore, precisely because we can see (post-hoc) that many historical thinkers anticipated modern ideas, there is reason to think that a closer engagement between philosophy and the social and cognitive sciences might suggest important ideas for new lines of empirical research on the front end. But first we have to get some historical perspective on the role of emotion in Western thinking.

III. A Brief (Revisionist) History of Emotion in the Western Tradition

What's more, the renewed and intense concentration on the rational element which started in the seventeenth century had an unexpected effect. Reason began, abruptly, to separate itself from and to outdistance the other more or less recognized human characteristics – spirit, appetite, faith and emotion...This gradual encroachment on the foreground continues today. It has reached a degree of imbalance so extreme that the mythological importance of reason obscures all else and has driven the other elements into the marginal frontiers of doubtful respectability.”

– John Ralston Saul, *Voltaire's Bastards* (p. 15)

Saul, Damasio, Marcus et. al., and several others of the new emotion researchers argue for the broader significance of their work by trying to show that emotion has been ignored or denigrated throughout the

³ Which I think is unlikely on phenomenological grounds, and also because the two endeavors do not have identical scope. See my “Philosophical Psychology with Political Intent.” (Author)

history of Western thought. The West's purported naïveté about emotion has even been compared to believing in a flat earth, phrenology, and bloodletting.⁴ When I set out to write this section, my initial goal was only to show that there were significant connections to be made to the Western tradition beyond those few acknowledged in much recent emotion research – i.e., that the claim was being overstated in a somewhat unhelpful way. However, after looking into it, I have come to believe that, at least for purposes of political theory, much of the significance of such work has been inverted. Indeed, not only is the supposed denigration of the emotions vastly overstated, many Western thinkers have strikingly anticipated different components of the emerging scientific view. The real significance of the new emotions research is that it scientifically *articulates*, rather than *overthrows*, some of the main trends in the Western tradition, and thus connects philosophical thinking on the subject to a progressive empirical research agenda. (As we shall see, none of this is intended to suggest that the Western tradition has had an unproblematically positive approach to the emotions either, which would merely be the obverse mistake.)

Critics acknowledge that Hume, Smith, Burke, The Romantics, and various religious mystics are exceptions to the general trend they claim characterizes western thinking on the emotions. Therefore, I will not discuss these thinkers below. I grant that if this relatively short list captured most of the exceptions to their thesis, we could turn their indictment of the Western tradition into a conviction. However, I will show that an acquittal is in order. Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that my exercise in historical recovery is *in addition* to these already important exceptions.

Some writers stake out such an extreme view as to lapse into the use of straw men. For example, Marcus et. al. refer to the Western tradition's "primordial notion that affect is the evil seductress, constantly distracting attention, distorting perception, and tugging the individual away from calm and rational deliberation." (p. 25) Moving from politics to psychology, Carroll Izard claims that the history of Western socialization practices "de-emphasize or deny *any* important function to the emotions. In general,...[people] view the emotions as transient and troublesome states serving no really important purpose...The rational man

⁴ Marcus et. al., *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment*, p. 13.

ideology has succeeded in hiding man from his full nature.” (396)⁵ Of course Izard, Damasio, and Marcus et. al. are far from alone in this perception of the Western tradition. As we shall see below, recent books and articles representing the resurgence of academic interest in emotion are replete with similar claims.⁶ Many of them are worthy projects, but they (the social scientists especially) incur a loss of fecundity by disconnecting themselves from our intellectual heritage.

To be sure, there are innumerable passages that might lead one to believe that any given thinker in question endorses such a flat-footed condemnation of emotion. My purpose is not to engage in dueling quotations, but rather to complicate matters in a fruitful way. As we will see below, not a single major thinker in the Western tradition⁷ has such a consistent and categorically negative view of the emotions, and most incorporate arguments that are quite explicitly to the contrary.⁸

Perhaps because such a negative view of the Western tradition on emotion is so common, the new emotion researchers offer very little concrete evidence that it really is heavily skewed against the emotions. Sometimes they merely mention thinkers in the Western tradition (e.g., Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics) who are assumed to be pathologically rationalistic. This is a peculiar move in that they claim that hyper-rationalism has suffused our culture, but then rely on an intuitive appeal that presumes the contrary. If we are swimming in the ocean of bias created by the Western tradition, why should such thinkers’ rationalism seem obviously problematic to us?

⁵ Emphasis mine. I substituted [people] for “psychologists and non-psychologists alike” for clarity. Since the disjunction implies everybody, the substitution is fair and clear. If we narrowed Izard’s claim to psychologists in the early 1970’s there would be some truth in it. Behaviorism did dismiss the emotions. However Izard is claiming that the “rational man ideology” has dominated the Western tradition.

⁶ In addition to Marcus et. al. (2000), see Blackburn (2002), Calhoun (2001), LeDoux (1996), Stocker (1996), Abelson (1996), Damasio (1994), Vetlesen (1994), Lazarus & Lazarus (1994), Green (1992), Lutz (1988), and Schott (1988) for a sample of such views over time and across disciplines. I choose Marcus et. al.’s treatment to react against not because it is especially problematic, but rather because I am enthused about the potential of the rest of their book.

⁷ Space prevents me from establishing firmly that this claim is not hyperbole. However briefly, though, I provide evidence for Plato, Aristotle, The Stoics, Augustine, Aquinas, Spinoza, Locke, Hume, Smith, Burke, Pascal, The Federalist, Voltaire, Kant, Fichte, Shelling, Hegel, The Romantics, Nietzsche, Peirce, James, Dewey, Freud, Sartre, Rawls, and Habermas. In addition, I have identified evidence that I could not incorporate here on Hobbes, Arendt, Heidegger, Scheler, Descartes, Wollstonecraft, Montaigne, Mill, The Epicureans, Rousseau, Darwin and Toqueville. I investigated several other thinkers and was simply unable to find a discussion of the emotions, which might sustain the accusation that they ignore the emotions, but does not contradict that claim that no major thinker has the unconditionally negative view attributed to the Western tradition.

⁸ A truly thorough discussion of all of these great thinkers’ views on the emotions would quite literally fill volumes. However, since I am only trying to establish something akin to a “not all” claim, brief discussions of each thinker can suffice, thus allowing me to cover a large swath of the Western tradition.

A second source of evidence is peculiar as well. For example, Marcus et. al. identify several “oppositions” and “pathologies” that they claim run through Western thinking and reveal its denigration of emotion. They then identify common practices that exemplify attitudes associated with such oppositions and pathologies. Examples include mitigation in the law for crimes of passion, cooling-off periods, “sleeping on it,” and discounting *ad hominem* arguments as typically invalid.⁹ But surely such practices need only imply that certain *strong* emotions can, in *some* cases and under *some* circumstances, lead to impulsive crimes, rising interpersonal tension, clouded judgment, or inappropriate personal attacks (respectively). One need not be a hyper-rationalist to believe that such connections obtain, and that such cultural practices are generally useful in mitigating against them. Recall that the theory of affective intelligence deals specifically with *moderate* emotions:¹⁰ anxiety, not panic; enthusiasm, not fanaticism. Thus, there is nothing whatsoever in the theory to contradict our culture’s general concern over *strong* and *negative* emotions *directly* driving behavior. To the extent that it is even helpful or sensible to speak of *the* Western tradition’s negative attitude toward the emotions, it has to be with these major qualifications. This point is worth emphasizing, because it becomes a recurring theme below.

The only extended passage from the Western tradition that Marcus et. al. explicitly analyze¹¹ does not function quite as they intend. They quote Madison writing: “So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities that where no substantial occasion presents itself the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts.” (p. 16) The claim here is that the Federalist exhibited a general distrust of emotion in public life, and wanted to neutralize them via institutional means. However, by using “passions” and qualifying it with “unfriendly” Madison suggests that he does not mean to indict *all* emotion, but rather only those that are both strong and

⁹ It is not clear what Marcus et. al. intended with this last example, so there may be different interpretations. The passage reads as follows: “A visceral approach, as the stereotype would have it, appeals to the heart rather than the head, to hot buttons (heat again), to vague symbols. The term *ad hominem* captures this presumption.” (p. 19)

¹⁰ Marcus et. al. AI&PJ p. 95

¹¹ They also discuss a passage from Hobbes, but that is in the context of what I take to be praise for Hobbes as a partial exception to their claim.

hostile.¹² Indeed, in other passages he makes it clear that emotions play an importantly positive role in public life: “One nation is to another what one individual is to another; with this melancholy distinction perhaps, that the former, with fewer of the benevolent emotions than the latter, are under fewer restraints also from taking undue advantage from the indiscretions of each other.” (Federalist No. 62)¹³ Nonetheless, the first passage does suggest that Madison thought that strong and hostile emotions were fairly common. Marcus et. al. appear to take this latter belief itself to be evidence of the anti-emotion bias in the Western tradition — one of their “oppositions” and “pathologies.”¹⁴

Their suspicion of Madison on this point gets explicitly articulated later on. They see his approach as emblematic of a common mistake among most Western thinkers. For example, in their section on “The Displacement Pathology” Marcus et. al. claim that “It is a common theme in the literature, the subtle equation of emotional input with extreme or overpowering emotional input...One’s blood boils; one is in the heat of passion, one blows one’s top.” It is not at all clear to me that Madison engages in such conflation. In fact, I can think of no contemporary or historical political thinker who equates the kind of moderate anxiety that directs attention and triggers reasoned inquiry (their paradigm case) with extreme or overpowering emotion. The simpler, more charitable, and more logical interpretation is that when a thinker claims to be dealing with emotions that are both extreme and negative, they mean emotions that are extreme and negative, rather than engaging in a wholesale assault on the emotions.

As a test case, let us consider the Stoic theory of the emotions. This should be just about the easiest case for the new emotion researchers to sustain given that the Stoics are poster-children for the anti-emotion complaint against the Western tradition. Indeed, their name has come to be a synonym for “unemotional.” Of course, there is more than a dollop of truth in such accusations against the Stoics. One particularly chilling

¹² In general, many of the authors in the Western tradition designate particularly strong emotional states as “passions,” and so separate themselves from the milder emotions that Marcus et. al. discuss. Earlier in the passage Madison uses “passions” without qualification, but there he cannot mean emotions per se because many such emotions would have only the remotest political relevance. In addition, he praises emotion elsewhere as the second quote above documents.

¹³ There is some dispute as to whether Madison or Hamilton was the primary author of No. 62 or whether it was a full collaboration. However it seems certain that, at the very least, Madison had a strong hand in it, and endorsed its content.

¹⁴ “Pathologies” is a bit confusing in Marcus et. al.’s usage because they are claiming that the Western tradition believes that emotion exhibits such pathologies, which in turn Marcus et. al. think is a pathological element in the Western tradition.

example comes when Cicero approvingly quotes Anaxagoras's sole response to learning of his son's death: "I was aware that I had begotten a mortal." (Tusculan Disputations 3.30) Nonetheless, important aspects of the Stoic theory of the emotions are widely misunderstood. Consider the following passage from Diogenes Laertius:¹⁵

"[T]here are three good feelings: joy, watchfulness, wishing...Just as certain passions fall under the primary ones, so too with the primary good feelings. Under wishing: kindness, generosity, warmth, affection. Under watchfulness: respect, cleanliness. Under joy: delight, sociability, cheerfulness."
(SVF 3.431, p. 412)

This passage strongly suggests that the Stoics did not advocate extirpating all that we would normally categorize today under the term emotion.¹⁶ They distinguished between *pathē* (passion) and *eupatheia* (good or healthy feelings).¹⁷ In fact, the Stoic theory of the emotions shares with many other conceptions a concern with *strong* emotions affecting action *directly*, rather than emotion (as we use it today) in all of its forms. None of this is to deny that they were concerned to control a much broader range of emotions than most other thinkers. Chrysippus, perhaps the most influential of the Stoics, writes: "This also explains the expression 'the excess of impulse,' since people overstep the proper and natural proportion of their impulses." (On Passions, p. 414)¹⁸ Again, this way of putting the matter suggests that such impulses *do* have a proper and natural place in human life. On the Stoic categorization, passions just are those intense feelings and impulses that are out of proportion.¹⁹ Marcus et. al. claim to identify a theme of "conflation of emotion and extreme

¹⁵ My discussion of the ancients is indebted to Annas (1993), Stocker (1996), Sherman (1997), Nussbaum (2001), and Long and Sedley (1987).

¹⁶ To be sure, the Stoics conceived of these positive emotions in somewhat rationalistic terms. However, it is not clear that they would be completely incompatible with a version of Marcus et. al.'s theory of affective intelligence. Since virtue is very much a matter of developing the right habits, "joy" could be interpreted as a variation on well-founded enthusiasm. Similarly, watchfulness has connotations of concern over falling into shame or dishonor. Thus, it might be compatible with a kind of well-founded anxiety over a certain range of objects.

¹⁷ There is some scholarly debate as to whether the Stoic theory of the emotions coheres, but it is nonetheless clear that they intended to endorse a certain range of emotions under *eupatheia*.

¹⁸ Many Hellenistic texts are reconstructed from quotations or discussion in later writers. This passage is from Galen's *On Hippocrates's and Plato's Doctrines* compiled and edited in The Hellenistic Philosophers Volume One: Translations of the Principle Sources with Philosophical Commentary (Long and Sedley eds.).

¹⁹ Though, by modern standards, they probably have a rather expansive notion of what constitutes being out of proportion. There is some terminological disagreement in this literature. Nussbaum (1994) uses emotion and passion interchangeably, employing other

emotion,” and thus conclude that “[i]t is important...to make sure that our language and our analytic approach allow us to distinguish the phenomenon from its possible level of intensity.” (p. 20) However, a closer inspection of the textual record reveals that many authors *were* careful with their terms. Instead, it is our own anachronistic reading that leads to some of the misunderstandings.

It is not obviously wrong, then, that we should wish to avoid the *passions* completely. This point becomes doubly clear when we consider the surprising fact that the Stoics believed that emotions were not merely brute, irrational forces, but rather cognitive judgments. More specifically, they believed that emotions reflected value judgments about the importance, to the person experiencing the emotion, of people and things that are not under his or her immediate control.²⁰ Thus, by rendering ourselves imperturbable to emotion we avoid the anguish and frustration of being subject to a capricious fate.

This argument is interesting because, under sufficiently trying external circumstances, it may be “adaptive” to retreat into the Stoic’s exclusive concern with maintaining internal virtue. If we have very little control over external goods, then it might make sense to avoid making our conception of a good life dependent upon them. To some extent then, our disagreement with the Stoic theory of the emotions may not hinge entirely on their analysis of the emotions per se, but rather on an antecedent empirical judgment about the relative locus of control in our lives (i.e., external or internal). If this is so, then it is not quite accurate to say that the Stoic view rests on a blanket hostility to emotion. Rather, their concern to control the emotions so tightly might have been a somewhat contingent matter that is a plausible consequence of very different beliefs (and experiences) about how the world works. On this view, some of the divergence between Stoic and modern intuitions about emotion is caused by our vastly different experience of vulnerability to disease, enslavement, famine, capricious state action, weather, war, and many other forces. If we cannot master Machiavelli’s *Fortuna*, we can at least repudiate her importance to our moral integrity.

Just as the new emotions researchers fail to distinguish different categories of emotion in canonical texts, so to, they mischaracterize the understanding of control most prevalent in the Western tradition. In a

means to make the distinctions drawn here. However, Long and Sedley think that the distinction is useful in our contemporary ordinary language usage. (p. 420)

²⁰ Nussbaum (2001)

section on “Enduring Oppositions” between reason and emotion, Marcus et. al. assert: “A central idea throughout is opposition – the raging emotions misdirecting, distracting, and misleading the mind that if only left alone could more properly make sound decisions. Not surprisingly, Western society developed ideals that emphasize...training to overpower the distractions of emotion.” (p. 16) If we take Athenian philosophy and subsequent Christian thought as the two main sources of the Western tradition’s purportedly excessive rationalism, then this claim is simply not an accurate description. For example, in a sarcastic response to a different view of the emotions, Augustine writes:

"If these emotions and affections, arising as they do from the love of what is good and from holy charity, are to be called vices, then let us allow these emotions which are truly vices to pass under the name of virtues...Wherefore even the Lord Himself, when He condescended to lead a human life...exercised these emotions where He judged they should be exercised. For as there was in Him a true human body and a true human soul, so was there also true human emotion." (The City of God, Book XIV: 453-454)

In a similar, if less elegant passage, St. Thomas Aquinas argues that as long as we are “not *immediately* moved in accordance with the irascible and concupiscible²¹ appetites but wait for the command of will,” there is no problem with emotions driving our behavior – it is only that *intense* emotions should not typically do so *directly*. The idea is neither for reason to ignore nor “overpower” the emotions, but rather to cooperate with them. Indeed, without guidance from the irascible and concupiscible emotions the command of the will would often lack an object. Again, the problem is not with emotions per se, but with a reasonable worry over *acting rashly on strong passions*. (Summa Theologica: Ia.81.3c) Nothing in the new emotion research indicates that such a worry is misplaced.

Aristotle goes even further, arguing that the proper functioning of the emotions is *constitutive* of virtue, and thus is essential for living a good life:

²¹ Emphasis mine. Note: concupiscible are the emotional impulses associated with seeking that which helps us and avoiding that which harms us (e.g., erotic longing or hate), and the irascible is the emotional impulse to remove or avoid obstacles to satisfying the concupiscible (e.g., jealous anger or fear).

I am referring to moral virtue: for it is in emotions and actions that excess, deficiency, and the median are found. Thus we can experience fear, confidence, desire, anger, [and] pity...either too much or too little, and in the right time, toward the right objects, toward the right people, for the right reason, and in the right manner — that is the median and the best course, the course that is a mark of virtue. (Nicomachean Ethics Book 2: 1106b)

A healthy emotional life is so tightly bound up with a happy life that, far from overcoming our emotions, we must cultivate them. In a sense, the goal is almost the opposite of reason overpowering the emotions — on the contrary, we must strive to make *reason* superfluous at the moment of action by nurturing our emotions in such a way as to make right action flow from them directly. Such a pattern of emotional responsiveness is the stuff of happiness, interpreted as living a life from virtuous character. Aristotle's long and detailed analysis of the emotions in the Rhetoric provides much of the background understanding necessary to accomplishing this task.

Even so, Aristotle's, Augustine's, and Aquinas's approaches to emotion may not completely satisfy our modern views on the emotions. However, they manifestly do not rely on a "presumed zero-sum relationship between affect and reason." (p. 19) In fact these theories anticipate some of the insights from the theory of affective intelligence, namely that emotion sometimes precedes and prompts explicit consideration by reason, and so they jointly determine action.

Later on Marcus et. al. specifically claim that the Western tradition cannot countenance such a mutual causality thesis: "[Another] element is the passivity of the individual in response to emotional stimuli. We don't consider emotional stimuli, we are in their grip...It is a one-way causal linkage between passion and reason." This last statement cannot be right even on Marcus et. al.'s own terms. In fact, it is not even clear which direction they intend the causal arrow to be pointing. On their reading the Western tradition emphasizes reason's control over the emotions, so in that sense the cause goes $R \rightarrow E$. However, the Western tradition is also supposed to believe in the "Displacement Pathology" which says that emotion has a negative causal impact on reason, suggesting that it goes $E \rightarrow R$. The only coherent claim is that the Western tradition argues that ideally, the causal arrow *should* be one-way, namely $R \rightarrow E$.

However, imputing this idea to the Western tradition generally is simply incorrect. Even Immanuel Kant, perhaps the purest icon of Western rationalism, had a more differentiated view. In a passage distinguishing “sensitivity” from “sentimentality” (the latter being a kind of passive sympathy), he writes: “Sensitivity is virile; for a man who wants to spare his wife or children trouble or pain must have enough fine feeling to judge their sensibilities not by his own strength but by their weakness, and his delicacy of feeling is essential to his generosity.” (Anthropology from a Pragmatic Viewpoint, pp. 235-236)²² Here “fine feeling” is a necessary precondition influencing both rational judgment and the formation of the will to act on that judgment. The arrow is going from E → R. Nor is this an isolated case of Kant allowing for a bit of familial affection, for he wants emotion to influence our sensibility and will with respect to more general issues of welfare:

“We have an indirect duty to cultivate the sympathetic natural feelings in us and to use them as so many means to participating from moral principles and from the feeling appropriate to these principles. Thus it is a duty not to avoid places where the poor, who lack the most necessary things, are to be found; instead, it is a duty to seek them out. It is a duty not to shun sickrooms or prisons and so on in order to avoid the pain of pity, which one may not be able to resist. For this feeling, though painful, nevertheless is one of the impulses placed in us by nature for effecting what the representation of duty might not accomplish by itself.” (Metaphysics of Morals Part II: The Doctrine of Virtue p. 112)

Now this might not seem like the Kant that we have come to know and love (or hate). After all, he also stated that “affect as such deserves censure.” (Conflict of the Faculties: §7:86) It is certainly understandable that Kant has been represented as the archenemy of emotion. His ethics is rightly known for its rigorism, but it is also known for the maxim that “ought implies can.” If we interpret the quote above to mean that all emotion is bad in itself, who would escape whipping?

Everything hinges on Kant’s qualification “as such.” While it is tempting to read “as such” as emphasizing a universal scope for censure, what Kant really means is that affect as *an independent and direct cause of moral action* is problematic. While we might not want to endorse even this stipulation, it is not absurd on its face. For Kant, maxims are the proper ground of normative action, and emotions can influence

²² Quoted in Sherman (1997).

maxim formation just so long as the connection can be reflexively endorsed by reason.²³ Furthermore, none of this should be interpreted as Kant merely *tolerating* a duly subordinated affective component to morality:

“All these predispositions in the human being are not only (negatively) good (they do not resist the moral law) but they are also predispositions *to the good* (they demand compliance with it). They are *original*, for they belong to the possibility of human nature.” (Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason p. 76)

Kant, the arch-rationalist, has a much more complicated and ambiguous view of emotions, human nature and their relationship to reason than a stereotype allows for.²⁴ Thus, even vague summary judgments about the Western tradition’s unflattering picture of the emotions are misleading and counterproductive.

Now let us briefly consider the remaining “pathologies” that Marcus et. al. allege characterize the Western tradition’s attitude toward emotion. The “Distraction Pathology” can be summarized as “[t]he presumption...that emotional symbols distract the mind from weighing relevant evidence and draw attention to irrelevant matters.” Certainly Pascal argued exactly the opposite when he wrote:

“We know truth, not only by reason, but also by the heart, and it is in this latter way that we know first principles...And it is on this knowledge of the heart and instinct that reason must support itself and base all that it has to say.” (Pensées, §282)²⁵

This passage should not be interpreted as a kind of vague, proto-romantic mysticism. Rather, it is a recognition of how human reason is embedded in a larger process of forming knowledge. Later, Nietzsche would extend Pascal’s idea to its limit: “Thoughts are the shadows of our feelings – always darker, emptier, and simpler.” (The Gay Science §179) While we may not fully agree with Nietzsche’s sentiment, he does capture the idea that vital and informative aspects of our lived experience get lost when they are translated into

²³ Though I formulate things somewhat differently, this discussion is indebted to LaVaque-Manty (2000).

²⁴ It should be noted that Kant was less sanguine about the emotions in many of his earlier and better known writings. The point here is not to argue that Kant had a uniformly positive view of the emotions that is completely compatible with the emerging modern understanding. That would simply replicate the inverse mistake from those who paint Kant as uniformly hostile to the emotions. Rather, I want to dismiss both stereotypes so that we can assess how Kant’s thinking can both inform and be informed by the theory of affective intelligence.

a linguistic medium.²⁶ There are many more, albeit less emphatic, versions of the same idea throughout the Western tradition. Even those who do not positively endorse the emotions as an equal source of knowledge would only claim that intense emotions, such as panic, are likely to distract the mind from weighing relevant evidence.

Marcus et. al. make an analogous mistake in their discussion of the “Intransigence Pathology” which consists in the claim that “[a]n emotionally charged stimulus is presumed to lead to such extremity of belief that the person is unwilling to compromise or to adjust their belief in the light of new information.” However for John Dewey (and the other pragmatists as well) this depiction reverses their actual position – an emotionally charged stimulus is a necessary precursor to forming any real belief at all:

“A person must feel the qualities of acts as one feels with the hands the qualities of roughness and smoothness in objects, *before* he has an inducement to deliberate or material with which to deliberate...This fact explains the element of truth in the theories which insist that in their root and essence moral judgments are emotional rather than intellectual.” (Ethics, p. 269)

Dewey’s point is similar to the new emotion research’s most important finding: without emotional experiences, reason does not even become engaged, and frequently lacks an object on which to operate. Once again, the critics of the Western tradition can only sustain their claim if they are referring to extreme emotions, and in that case, it is not clear that the Western tradition is misguided.

The Self-Absorption Pathology “equates emotionality with desperation” and self-interest. This accusation against Western thinking strikes me as particularly misguided. In fact, I would argue that the dominant view in the Western tradition is the exact reverse – i.e., that sociotropic behavior is almost completely dependant on sympathy, love, empathy, solidarity, pity and a whole host of other emotions. Contrary to John Ralston Saul, even the frequently cynical Voltaire writes:

²⁵ Author’s translation. The standard Trotter/Eliot translation departs vastly from a literal rendering and ends up mistakenly inverting the reason/emotion relationship. The original reads: “Et c'est sur ces connaissances du coeur et de l'instinct qu'il faut que la raison s'appuie et qu'elle y fonde tout son discours.”

²⁶ This is on the presumption that thinking is accomplished through language. Of course, other aspects of experience are revealed, clarified or enriched by being put into propositional form.

“Even though that which in one region is called virtue, is precisely that which in another is called vice...it seems to me, nevertheless, certain that there are natural laws with respect to which human beings in all parts of the world must agree...[God] endowed man with certain inalienable *feelings*; and *these* are the eternal bonds, and the *first laws of human society*.” (Treatise on Metaphysics, p. 65)²⁷

Voltaire, echoing many writers in the Western tradition, is arguing that certain trans-cultural emotions are precisely what help us to become social beings capable of thinking beyond our own narrow self-interest. There are exceptions, of course. Situations like panic or intense jealousy, probably do tend to trigger self-regarding desperation. However, it is not clear that traditional admonitions against panic or jealousy are misguided.

To summarize then, the new emotions researchers’ case against the Western tradition rests on an egregious and pervasive equivocation between the moderate emotions, about which they have interesting evidence, and intense passions, understood as a subset of emotions that are extreme, and which experience (both emotional and rational) tells us will probably not conduce to the good of the individual or society in many situations.²⁸

A fairer and more thorough assessment of the textual record reveals that far from *contradicting* the Theory of Affective Intelligence, an astonishing number of major thinkers in the Western tradition actually *anticipate* key aspects of the theory. For example, Aristotle’s taxonomy of the emotions broke them into three distinct modes: faculties (capacities for experiencing emotions), habits (dispositions acquired through repeated experience), and passions (the actual experiences). This corresponds surprisingly well with the modern version that the new emotions research deploys. The faculties correspond to the two emotional subsystems, the habits correspond to the patterns that the systems try to recognize or implement (i.e., traits), and the passions themselves (i.e., states).

²⁷ Emphasis mine.

²⁸ Some claim that the Western tradition itself exhibits a strong tendency to conflate emotion and strong emotion. However, as per my earlier discussion, I aware of no systematic evidence to this effect, and most of the thinkers that I discuss demonstrably do no such thing.

Plato identified a more specific aspect of one of the primary emotion-reason connections that the new emotions research identifies, namely that moderate anxiety helps to motivate rational learning processes. In his discussion of who should become guardians Plato notes:

“[T]he steadfast and stable temperaments, whom one could rather trust in use, and who in war are not easily moved and aroused to fear, are apt to act in the same way when confronted with studies. They are not easily aroused, learn with difficulty, as if benumbed, and are filled with sleep and yawning when an intellectual task is set them.” (Republic, Book VI: 503c-d)

Translating into our new terms, Plato’s claim is that if one’s surveillance system typically has a particularly high threshold for activation, the person might make a good soldier or paramedic, but not a good general or doctor, much less a graduate student in philosophy. Though the cognitive science thesis is cast at the level of variation in states of anxious arousal, rather than variation in dispositions to such states, I would argue that Plato identified a corollary of the thesis about 2500 years ago. More recently, Locke formulated a more direct version of the same claim: “Uneasiness is the great motive that works on the Mind to put it upon Action.” (Essay Concerning Human Understanding, 2.23.29) Clearly thinkers in the Western tradition were aware of anxiety’s function in this context long before it was confirmed by cognitive science.

Peirce anticipated an even more complex neuro-scientific finding, namely the interaction of the dual emotional sub-systems. That is, when the pattern matching function of the disposition system yields a negative, the surveillance system kicks in:

“The emotions, as a little observation will show, arise when our attention is strongly drawn to complex and inconceivable circumstances. Fear arises when we cannot predict our fate...[I]n the place of that intellectual hypothetic inference which I seek, the feeling of *anxiety* arises...Thus an emotion is always a simple predicate substituted by an operation of the mind for a highly complicated predicate.” (“Some Consequences of Four Incapacities,” 72-73)

Peirce’s description serves as an insightful analysis of the phenomenology corresponding to cognitive science’s third-person, scientific description of the disposition and surveillance systems. In a similar vein, William James anticipates the modern claim that certain emotions are the “engine” of reason. He points out that the project of philosophy consists in:

“attain[ing] a conception of the frame of things which shall on the whole be more rational...But supposing this rational conception attained, how is the philosopher to recognize it for what it is, and not let it slip through ignorance? The only answer can be that he will recognize its rationality as he recognizes everything else, by certain subjective marks with which it affects him...What, then, are the marks? A strong feeling of ease, peace, and rest is one of them. The transition from a state of puzzle and perplexity to rational comprehension is full of lively relief and pleasure...It is only when the distress is upon us that we can be said to strive.” (“The Sentiment of Rationality” p.3)

This sounds an awful lot like the claim that anxiety leads us to consider something explicitly, and that after doing so, we rely on whatever we have thus attained as a settled disposition or habit. James calls this theory of the emotional underpinnings of reason, “the sentiment of rationality” — though he might have called it affective intelligence.

The theory of affective intelligence claims that affect can carry meaning that is prior to and perhaps not immediately accessible to reason. Of course Freud is an obvious precursor to this idea. More striking though, is the deeper understanding of the affective roots of rationality developed by the post-Kantians (i.e., Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel):

“It was such yet-to-be-determined feelings that, according to the idealists, lie at the origins of one’s interpretive and evaluative construals of the world, one’s “positings” in which, with the help of the public resources of language, an intelligible epistemic and practical relation to the world could be forged. But such a system must in some way be supported by a more basic layer of our embodied and enminded being in the world...Reason must navigate on a sea of biological and other natural forces that do not belong to it, but without which it could go nowhere. Affect is our most immediate awareness of the fact that we sail on such a sea.” (Redding, The Logic of Affect p. 158)

The idealists did not have the resources of modern cognitive science. Nonetheless, their analytical framework is a striking anticipation of the modern scientific conceptualization of the reason-emotion-body connection.

With such rich philosophical precedent it is not merely a mistake to characterize the theory of affective intelligence as a break with the Western tradition rather than an articulation.²⁹ Much more important is the lost

²⁹ One might object that even if academic philosophers have been more subtle in their thinking about emotion than Marcus et. al. allow for, anti-emotion ideology is nonetheless pervasive in the broader culture of the West, and thus such views are commonly held among non-academics. However, this is not primarily how Marcus et. al. seem to be using the term “Western tradition,” and in any event they do not present much evidence to sustain this more ambitious claim. Similarly, one might object that I have construed Marcus et. al.’s

opportunity for mutual edification. Thus it is worth pausing to describe, in their own terms, an alternative to the new emotions researchers' view of the Western tradition. Certainly they are correct in identifying a recurring theme of concern about emotion. But rather than emotion per se, the Western tradition is critical of something like inappropriately situated fight-or-flight emotions. Fight-or-flight is obviously necessary for our survival. It bypasses reason so that we can act immediately either to confront or remove ourselves from danger. Nonetheless, sometimes certain intense emotions mimic a social analogue to fight-or-flight.³⁰ In these cases, our immediate survival is not typically in jeopardy, and thus bypassing conscious consideration of such emotions may not be adaptive.

New emotion researchers would probably reply that the Western tradition has an inappropriately expansive notion of when emotional responses fall under this description. But here they are faced with a dilemma. If someone wishes to assess whether a particular emotional response is or is not appropriate or adaptive, he or she would have to make at least an implicit appeal to reason again. For example, this problem seems to be overlooked in Marcus et. al.'s analysis:

“When the political environment demands real consideration, anxiety spurs the needed reassessment; when the political environment is relatively benign, emotional calm permits the reliance on voters' effective habits, their standing decisions guided by enthusiasm. Indeed we might well argue that the conventional, normative call for voters to give uniform consideration to each and every issue, each and every candidate for public office, and each and every campaign is naïve and perhaps counterproductive.” (pp. 124-125)

Beyond the fact that no major thinker makes such a “conventional, normative call,”³¹ there is a major logical gap in the argument. Marcus et. al. have *not* shown that citizens step up when the political environment demands it in any normatively relevant way, but rather that people pay attention when they *perceive* that

use of “the Western tradition” too narrowly — i.e., that philosophy is not the only, or even primary, realm in which anti-emotion bias manifests itself. Indeed, one of their primary targets is contemporary instrumentalist economics and its alleged agent of hegemony, rational choice theory. But this theory is of recent vintage, and hardly qualifies as the core of the Western tradition. Indeed, the Western tradition provides ample resources to counter overly aggressive versions of rational choice theory (much of it coming from the supposed pre-cursors to the theory — e.g., Smith in Book V of The Wealth of Nations and The Theory of Moral Sentiments).

³⁰ I am not claiming that these involve the same brain mechanisms

³¹ It is possible that someone has wistfully wished that it were possible without prohibitive costs, but I aware of no one who actually advocates what it would take to achieve the idea.

something in the environment *threatens them*. Thus, the surveillance system can fail from two distinct perspectives: first, from the perspective of instrumental rationality, there is no guarantee that the system is even approximately allocating attention in an optimal way; and second, it is a contingent matter as to whether the instrumental goals that a given citizen adopts have any moral standing beyond self-interest, especially since those goals are deployed unconsciously. It is more than possible that people's surveillance system will be engaged, say, by a candidate with a colorful sexual history while remaining dormant for some other candidate who manages to couch a radical proposal in soothing language. Our neurological systems were evolved to assess threat from noises in the jungle, not the vastly more complex (and recent) phenomena of modern democratic politics. There is little reason to think that they would be well adapted to the task. All of this is only to say that if we want to make strong normative claims about the efficiency or adequacy of any given emotional response, we will have to have recourse to reason again. So far from divorcing emotion from reason, rapprochement with the Western tradition clears the way for extending the new emotion research into unexplored territory.³²

IV. Conclusion

The Western tradition's denigration of emotions *per se* has been overstated, and such denigration has unfortunate consequences for both science and political theory. So far from eschewing all emotion as the bane of reason, most Western thinkers embraced it as a necessary and worthy facet of human existence. Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen's contributions in *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment*, as well as the contributions of the other new emotions researchers, are of enormous importance, especially in their analysis of emotion's role in voting behavior. However, paradoxically, they limit the relevance and fecundity of their findings by portraying their work as a radical break from the Western tradition. Reconnecting with the resources of the Western philosophical tradition regarding the emotions and their role in politics,

³² For a discussion of the role of emotions in deliberative democratic theory, see Neblo (2003) and Neblo (2007a, b); for a discussion of the link between emotion and motives in political judgment see Neblo (2004) and Neblo (2007c), and specifically as it relates to racial and ethnic politics see Neblo (2009a, b) and Neblo et. al. (2012).

contemporary political psychologists will find themselves engaging incredibly rich theoretical frameworks, ripe for translation into the idiom and operational rigors of modern science.

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