

Emotion

Emotion is, by and large, the word we use when what we feel demands explicit attention. For our purposes here, emotion serves to differentiate between sensed feeling (heat, wet, light, noise) and the feelings which accompany experience and once were gathered under the more damning title of 'the passions'.

In point of fact, the passions themselves have a special kind of history, for the philosopher Spinoza (in 17th century Netherlands) taught that the right moral action was so to understand by way of reason the inherent passivity of passion (*passio* in Latin) that it may be turned to active expression (*actio*) and thereby dominated.

Spinoza inherited a long tradition of suspicion towards the emotions, inaugurated by Plato, as entities opposed to reason, the business of which was to overcome them. At the same time as Spinoza, Descartes wrote a classical essay codifying *The Passions of the Soul*, which were, he said, wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy and sadness (strangely dispensing with terror), and since then arguments have swept back and forth over the necessity, the moral authority, the pleasures and the deceptions of the emotions.

At the end of the 18th century, the Scottish economist Adam Smith commended the 'moral sentiments' which were those 'civil affections' which taught people mutual dependence, sociability, care for others, congeniality; this marked the moment at which the feelings (in the contemporary sense) started to become predominant in moral and educational theory. The Romantic movement, of course, gave them a terrific fillip as being what made each of us distinctly individual, the point of art then becoming to express our individual feelings with absolute and self-justifying truth. For this still-powerful picture of the world, the most desirable emotional condition was that of being in love, but all kinds of competitors were ranged alongside, including in particular the emotions of awe before nature, happiness at work or in the family, serenity in old age, fulfilment altogether. In parallel with these emotional goals (pursuit of happiness being named as a human *right* by the American Founding Fathers), other emotions – rage, hatred, envy, spite, cruelty – inherited a centuries-long malediction (as well they might) such that nowadays, for most liberals (and most Westerners are liberals) cruelty is the one worst thing.

Strong and true emotion became a definition of the vivid self. But then – from, say, the beginning of the 20th century – there followed the formulation of principles and methods of intense interrogation of emotion. In part, this was propelled by the work of the Freudians, who had shown the neurotic and irrational bases of so much emotion, but it was also the product of a new kind of self-consciousness, most easily examined in the work of the major novelists from Henry James to Marcel Proust, and on, in our day, to writers like Saul Bellow or John Updike. They rehearse the patterned desperation of men and women trying not to be deceived by emotion, to discover what it is best to feel, to give true feeling room to move, and in all cases to be sincere about one's feelings.

These methods lead quickly enough to the decency, helpfulness and sometimes dire nonsense of the therapist. They mark the transformation of passion into mood. The teacher, however, cannot lapse into those interminable locutions. He or she, it may summarily be said, must try to teach in any corner of the curriculum, and by everyday example also, four straight lessons about the emotions.

The first is that a person may be wrong about their feelings – they may mistake sexual infatuation for love, for example. The second lesson is inherited from that strong belief of the great Romantics that your authentic feelings are *yours*, and give you your selfhood. The third is that feelings may change, and that horrible feelings must be contained, and by means of reflection and redescription, transmuted into something more tolerable (as, for instance, when murderous rage is gradually stilled until it becomes no more than bitter resentment). The fourth and last lesson is to understand that thought and emotion are inseparable, that feelings act on us intrinsically along with one's cognitions (i.e. thoughts), and that satisfactory understanding of human circumstances is a matter (a damnably difficult matter) of matching one's thinking to the best (largest, most generous, most sympathetic etc) feelings one can find in one's character.