

“ . . . but we were feeling happy . . . ”

**Can the paradoxes of human emotion be best explained by art
or by experimental psychology?**

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Emotions: A Brief History

Keith Oatley

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On May 15 1916, the Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton and five of his men sailed up King Haakon Bay, on the western side of South Georgia Island in the Atlantic Ocean. All six were bruised and battered, with bursting frostbite blisters covering their faces, hands and legs. Over the preceding three weeks these men had sailed their tiny lifeboat, the *James Caird*, more than 800 miles across one of the most dangerous and unpredictable seas on earth, surviving raging thirst, extreme cold and near starvation. Left behind on a barren spit of Elephant Island were twenty-two others waiting for rescue; their ship, the *Endurance*, had sunk in the Weddell Sea seven months earlier. Ahead was a grim – probably impossible – trek over the towering, frozen, razor-sharp ridges of South Georgia to the whaling station on the eastern coast, the only hope of survival. No one had ever crossed the island on foot. Their gear for the trek would be a rope and a carpenter’s adze.

As they sailed out of the cove, the sun broke through the mists. “We were a curious-looking party on that bright morning,” Shackleton wrote, “but we were feeling happy.”

Meditations on what *does* and what *should* make us happy, sad, angry, jealous, or ashamed are part of the legacy of every century and every culture that has left a written record. A book titled *Emotions: A Brief History* consequently faces a potentially overwhelming struggle to balance breadth against depth, ambition against precision. Keith Oatley’s aim is certainly ambitious: “a history of emotions in Western and other

cultures as well as the evolutionary history of emotions and the history of emotional development across an individual's lifespan," says the back cover.

To approach this vast territory, Oatley has adopted a patchwork style, mixing references and ideas from across the "sciences of humankind": psychology and psychiatry, anthropology, history, literary criticism, pop culture and more. The chapters are organised thematically ("Meaning and Ambiguity", "Emotions and the Brain", "Medicine for the Soul"), rather than chronologically or methodologically. Each one is packed with facts and anecdotes.

It is impossible to give a synopsis of the whole book here; instead, a sketch of one representative chapter, on Evolution and Culture, will have to do. Oatley begins with a brief biography of Charles Darwin and an equally brief introduction to the general theory of natural selection. (Apparently, when Thomas Huxley first read Darwin's proposal, his response was: "How extremely stupid not to have thought of that.") Oatley then introduces Darwin's theory of universal emotional expressions. Sadly, though, he leaves out my favourite details of this story. For example, a smile is a smile everywhere, and a wrinkled nose always expresses disgust: these human universals may not seem surprising. But Darwin hypothesised that more complex emotions and expressions are also human universals, like a haughty brows-raised look of contempt, or the palms-front, elbows-in, shoulders-raised gesture that means 'I will not be responsible for your folly in trying that.'

Oatley's chapter continues with an imagined "environment of evolutionary adaptedness" from which universal human emotions like love and suspicion derive: small bands of hunter-gatherers, just beginning to use fire for cooking and communal food sharing. The structure of modern emotions, Oatley proposes, can be used to make further inferences about the environment in which they evolved: one of close kin-groups living at the mercy of nature, in hostile competition against others.

In the following section on "Culture", Oatley recounts anecdotes from two societies whose emotional lives seem quite different from our own. The Utku Canadian Inuit rarely

display anger or selfishness, and instead emphasize generosity and stability. By contrast, the Yanomamö – South American aboriginals - value ruthlessness: “A weeping girl who has been struck by her brother was given a stick by her mother to hit him with. [...] She also showed the little girl how to bite the boy, and encouraged her to do it.”

How can such cultural variation be compatible with the universal evolutionary origin of human emotion? “Compare emotions to music,” suggests Oatley, “which is also universal, but with modes of expression that are culturally different. They include the Gamelan orchestras of Bali and the jazz bands of early twentieth-century New Orleans. The Utku orchestration is without a particular kind of emotion, as a brass band is without a string section.” The chapter ends with an injunction to use reflection and self-knowledge to override the hostile and suspicious aspects of our genetic emotional repertoire.

This is the third in Oatley’s series of books about emotions (the others are *Best Laid Schemes* [1992] and *Understanding Emotions* [1996]), and shares their guiding philosophy: to focus away from psychological and scientific experimentation, and look instead at ancient and modern culture, literature and art. Though himself a psychologist and capable of very elegant experimentation, Oatley casts himself against a perceived tyranny of science. “Psychologists armed with experiments and statistics have been insistent on methodological hegemony over mental life,” he wrote in the introduction to *Best Laid Schemes*. He quotes approvingly from R.G. Collingwood: “Like good inductive scientists, they have kept their eye on the facts, but (a disaster against which inductive methods afford no protection) the wrong facts.”

Oatley calls his alternative approach “pluralist”. His range of cultural reference is dazzling; the bibliography of *Emotions* is possibly the best part of the book. Within the first forty pages, Oatley has quoted from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, La Rochefoucauld, Katherine Hepburn, the epic of Gilgamesh, Sigmund Freud, the Iliad, William Wordsworth, Charles Darwin, Kate Chopin, Marcus Aurelius, and William James – among many others.

In places, the results of this virtuoso performance are surprising and felicitous. The best such moment comes at the beginning of the chapter on “Emotions and the Brain,” when Oatley tells the sad true story of Phineas Gage, set in mid-nineteenth century Vermont. Gage was the well-liked foreman of a railroad construction gang until a dynamite accident destroyed part of the frontal cortex of his brain. Although Gage survived the accident, he was, according to family and friends, “no longer Gage”: obstinate, irresponsible, and capricious, he was unable to keep his job, and later spent seven years as an exhibit in a traveling circus.

The “facts” about Phineas Gage are frequently told, but only in Oatley’s pluralist book does Gage’s tale come immediately after a discussion of Greek philosophy. As a result, Oatley can highlight the interesting parallel between Chrysippus’ Stoic philosophy of emotions and Gage’s selective deficits. According to Chrysippus, each emotion contains two movements: the first one is like a reflex, automatic and below intentional control, while the second is a conscious evaluation, a consideration of how to act upon the agitation of the first movement. Loss of emotion’s second movement may be what happened to Phineas Gage. Modern patients with similar brain damage show the same kinds of deficits: obscenity and irreverence, loss of inhibition, disastrous judgement, both personal and professional. Here, then, is the paradigm of Oatley’s pluralism: ancient Stoic philosophy, nineteenth century railroad construction, and late-twentieth century neuroscience all come together in the theory of emotion.

It doesn’t always work this well, though. The scope of Oatley’s inquiry forces him to travel at high velocity. In one chapter, he moves through “Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Systems of Therapy” in four and a half pages. Of these, one page is devoted to the seven deadly sins (a “more resonant number” than the original eight, apparently), one to the life of Spinoza, one to Freud and one to cognitive behavioural therapy. Islam is mentioned in one line. Oatley’s eyes are bigger than his stomach, as my mother used to say, but it’s the reader who ends up with trouble digesting.

Even worse, when Oatley strays too far from the topics he commands, the book slides from a brief history of emotions into a superficial (and sometimes embarrassingly amateur) history of everything. “Shakespeare,” Oatley writes in his chapter on emotional intelligence, “is considered the most important writer in English, and one can think of the Renaissance coming to its end with his death in 1616. He was a bookish person and it is known that he read Erasmus. It seems certain therefore that he read *Praise of Folly* [*sic*]. It is likely, I believe, that it was this book that took him to a turning point and enabled him to conceive his greatest plays. One can imagine him reading, or re-reading, this satirical book, with its contrasts between surface behaviour and inner substance, which includes emotions, around 1594.” And so on. You can hear the literary types wincing.

Personally, I miss the hegemonic psychologists. The problem may be that Oatley and I disagree on the place of science within his pluralist programme. While Oatley explicitly and uncontroversially proposes to “draw from several areas of understanding, including some from outside natural science,”¹ he in fact goes quite a bit further: scientific experiments appear occasionally in his book, but just as one kind of anecdote among many others.

To me, this is disappointing in a book by a psychologist. By turning his focus so resolutely away from psychological and scientific experimentation, Oatley misses the chance to show how science can inform and change our understanding of our lives, our literature, and ourselves, and so be part of a truly pluralist programme. In the past two decades, the science of emotions has brought us new answers to the old questions, some of them wonderfully counter-intuitive. They merit our attention.

The Nobel-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman, for example, now works on people’s judgements of their own well-being. His research revealed the “Peak-End Rule”: our memories of emotional experiences are determined by the intensity at the peak, the most intense moment, and the end, not by the cumulative amount of joy or sadness or pain.

¹ *Best Laid Schemes*, 1.

The counter-intuitive consequence of the “Peak-End Rule” is that the final moments of any experience matter tremendously to our eventual memory of it. In the case of negative experiences, like sadness and pain, this means that adding extra but less-intense sadness or pain to the end can actually improve the retrospective experience. For example, Kahneman studied patients undergoing (very painful) colonoscopy. At the end of the procedure, the surgeon would either remove the probe, ending the pain immediately, or leave the probe stationary in place for an extra minute, causing the patient an unnecessary minute of less intense pain. Patients who received the extra minute of low-intensity pain remembered the whole experience as less painful.

In the case of positive emotions, like joy and happiness, the lesson works in reverse: to maximise your retrospective enjoyment, it is better to forego the extended less-intense happiness at the end of an experience. Joy cut off at its peak is preserved in our memories as perfection.

Nor is it just our retrospective experiences that are affected by the counter-intuitive behaviour of emotions. Daniel Gilbert, of Harvard University, studies what he calls ‘affective forecasting’: how we predict and then interpret our emotional reactions to future events. His results are a cornucopia of small and not-so-small biases and paradoxical effects.

First of all, we are more resilient than we expect to be. Happiness following success is less intense and lasts less long than we expect, and the same is true of disappointment after failure. Writing in the New York Times after the American election in November, Gilbert noted: “By now, most of the people I know should be Canadians. At least that's what they said they'd be if President Bush won re-election. And yet, my unofficial tally suggests that the number of disgruntled Democrats who actually emigrated northward is roughly zero, plus or minus none. November saw more than its share of cursing, wailing and gnashing of teeth in some quarters, but by the middle of December the weeping had largely subsided and most of the people I know were busy buying gifts.”

Part of this resilience comes from effortful “re-evaluation” (like Chrysippus’ second movements). But this too has paradoxical consequences. Only very bad experiences appear to demand re-evaluation. The not-so-bad ones don’t, and the result is that the bad mood caused by a less-bad initial experience can last longer than after an intensely negative experience. Fortunately, the converse is also true: the positive effects of a small source of joy can last all day. And though happiness is a reaction to the successful completion of goals, it is triggered most frequently and most intensely by the completion of sub-goals, the intermediate steps along the way.

Ernest Shackleton, sailing up King Haakon Bay, was surely subject to all of these merciful paradoxes. The awful experience of the sea journey was capped by an arduous, but much less intense, five-day rest, and ‘re-evaluation’ would have dampened and softened his memories. The light and the sea offered small sources of joy, and en route to his monumental goal – the rescue and survival of twenty-nine men who lost their ship in the Antarctic – he had at least completed one more critical sub-goal, reaching South Georgia Island.

Keith Oatley is right that experiments cannot tell us every kind of fact about emotion; they certainly cannot protect us from keeping our eyes on the wrong facts. But science may still have a special role to play in the pluralist program, because experimental data offers us unique and unexpected insights into ourselves. In this one small example, the experiments help us understand that although the courage, loyalty and endurance demonstrated by Shackleton and all of his men were extraordinary, the happiness they felt on May 16 1916, watching the sun glint off the waves, was just peculiarly human.
